Doing the dirty work - working realities of platform-based domestic cleaners in Vienna

Laura Wiesböck, Mai Linh Angelique Vo, Julia Radlherr

1. Introduction

Previous studies show that gig-economy-supported work opens up new ways in which gender inequalities are (re)produced. However, so far, little attention has been paid to platform-based working realities from a gender lens. This is especially the case regarding female cleaning staff in private households, where inequalities, such as gender, migratory experience, ethnicity or socioeconomic background, intersect.

There are numerous challenges when it comes to social protection and occupational safety in this field. First, given the missing co-presence of colleagues and the lack of social control in private environments, female domestic cleaners find themselves in unprotected and isolated spaces. Furthermore, cleaning laborers face significant economic challenges, like the dependence on platforms for access to employment, or financial emergencies and existential fears, not least due to the COVID19 pandemic and its particularly severe impact on domestic employment opportunities. Lastly, serious strains like language barriers and work-related health problems (e.g. respiratory diseases, skin diseases) are prevalent.

Overall, the spatially and linguistically fragmented cleaning workers pose a challenge for trade union strategies as well as for scientific research, which is reflected in the insufficient data available to date. Against this background, the research project GigClean was developed to shed light on the working realities of gig-based female domestic workers in Vienna. Our main interest is to gain insights into the distribution of responsibilities and risks, e.g. in terms of wages or experiences with harassment. In addition to acquiring scientific knowledge, it is also the goal to develop information material for household workers regarding their own rights. Therefore, the study is accompanied by an advisory board – consisting of experts in the field of platform work, labor law and the cleaning industry –, which will discuss the empirical findings from both a legal perspective and trade union point of view.

The project is funded by the digitalization fund of the Vienna Chamber of Labor and based at the Institute for Advanced Studies with researchers from the field of sociology and social policy. The methodological design consists of 15 problem-centered interviews (PCI) with female platform-based cleaners in private households in Vienna. This article presents preliminary findings of four interviews conducted in July 2022.

The overall structure of the paper takes the form of five chapters: The first chapter provides a brief overview on the existent literature on domestic cleaning in the gig-economy. The following part is concerned with contextual facts and figures on the cleaning industry in Austria. The next section presents the data and methods used for the study. Fourth, we illustrate our preliminary findings, which we organize around three themes: (1) working on the black market (2) sexual harassment and objectification (3) power imbalances and status construction. The paper concludes with a brief summary and an outlook on potential future research questions in this field.

* Short notice: The research project started in April 2022, first data was collected only in July, so, the present paper and outcomes should be viewed as work-in-progress.
2. Domestic cleaning in the gig economy: the need for research

In recent years, the gig-economy has been on a rise. It is estimated that 1-3% of all paid work in advanced economies is mediated via digital platforms (Schwellnus et al., 2019). A study by Huws et al. (2019) on the role of platforms in 13 European countries found that between 4.7% (UK) and 28.5% (Czech Republic) of the working age population regularly use digital matchmaking firms in order to find work. In response to this development, various studies examined the working situations of platform laborers and highlighted the potentials as well as the challenges of the gig-economy.

Thus far, most studies in the field of the gig-economy focus on ride-hailers and food deliverers working for companies such as Uber or Deliveroo. The employment conditions in these fields are extensively elucidated by investigating the impact of algorithmic management (e.g. Ivanova et al., 2018; Rosenblat & Stark, 2016), by analyzing the platforms’ compliance with labor regulations (e.g. Katta et al., 2020) or by examining opportunities for worker collectivization (e.g. Tassinari & Maccarrone, 2020).

Platform-mediated care work, such as domestic cleaning services, however, has received little attention in the literature until now. Similar to other sectors of the gig-economy, the spatially and linguistically fragmentation of workers renders access to the field difficult. However, given that the care sector – in particular the cleaning sector – is highly feminized, the imbalance of the current research on different platform workers also reflects an institutional gender bias. Consequently, focusing on platform-mediated female domestic cleaners is essential since they represent a highly vulnerable and invisible group. In contrast to platform workers, who operate in public spaces (e.g. those providing transport or food delivery services), domestic cleaners work in private, isolated and unprotected spaces which increases their vulnerability (Keller & Schwiter, 2021).

Despite these circumstances, a few scholars succeeded to shed light on the working conditions of domestic cleaners in the gig-economy: Bor (2021), for instance, analysed the functionality of the platform Helpling that mediates reproductive household work such as cleaning. The author highlights that rather than officially employing workers and formalizing reproductive work, the platform classifies cleaners as self-employed and thereby evades employer responsibilities This, for instance, implies that platform workers are neither insured in case of occupational accidents, nor are they entitled to paid holiday or sick leave.

Moreover, Bor suggests that Helpling creates a power imbalance between the platform, the clients, and the workers. While clients have the possibility to rate the performance of cleaners, the platform does not provide any possibility for workers to react to the assessments received or to rate the working conditions. Additionally, a study investigating the platforms Helpling and Book a Tiger in Berlin reveals information asymmetries: While clients receive detailed information about cleaners (e.g. name, gender, rating, years of experience, picture), cleaners are only informed about the location, date, time and duration of the gig itself (Gerold & Pillinger, 2021). Thereby, a certain kind of immunity for clients and the platform is created.

Furthermore, Bor (2021) and Schwitter & Keller (2020) highlight that the design of certain platforms fosters the impression that cleaners are easily available and replaceable. This, in turn, creates competition between the workers and thereby exerts pressure to keep wages low. These findings are in line with the work of van Doorn (2017) who argues that platforms do not only “bolster the immunity of platform intermediaries and clients by expanding managerial control over workers” (p. 898), but they also create a sense of fungibility and superfluity of the workforce. Bor (2021) and Keller & Schwitter (2021) thus conclude that platforms reproduce dynamics that render domestic care work such as cleaning services insecure and precarious.
Moreover, Gerold and Pillinger (2021) show that due to spatial isolation and limited time resources, the collectivization of platform cleaners proves difficult although workers express the wish for building networks. Among others, the lack of collectivization impedes the contestation of precarious working condition.

Whereas studies on platform-mediated cleaning services have been conducted in the German (Bor, 2021; Gerold & Pillinger, 2021) and Swiss (Keller & Schwiter, 2021) context, literature that sheds light on the working condition of platform-mediated domestic cleaners in Austria remains scarce. Regarding that around 6% of Austria’s working age population regularly undertakes household services via platforms, it is relevant to investigate the working realities of this group in the capital Vienna, where the density of platform worker supply is the highest (Huws et al., 2019). The Fairwork Report Austria, for instance, evaluates and rates the working conditions of different labor platforms, including the cleaning platform ExtraSauber. The report provides a valuable contribution to the cross-sectoral discussion of effective labor regulations in the platform economy (Griessler et al., 2022). The aim of this study, in contrast, is to thoroughly illustrate the working realities experienced by platform-mediated female domestic cleaners.

We consider this research group particularly important, because they represent a particularly vulnerable group where inequalities, such as gender, migratory experience, ethnicity or socioeconomic background, intersect. This goes in line with van Doorn (2017) who highlights the gendered, racialized and classed distribution of vulnerabilities associated with platform-work and thus calls for the necessity of directly approaching platform-workers in order to better understand their perspectives, needs, experiences, anxieties and aspirations.

3. Contextual Framework: The cleaning industry in Austria

Across Europe, the cleaning industry is one of the fastest growing sectors in recent decades (Aguiar & Herod, 2006: 24; EFCI, 2019; Holtgrewe, 2015). According to the European Federation of Cleaning Industries (EFCI), the cleaning sector in Europe increased more than fivefold between 1989 and 2014 (EFCI, 2017: 4). In Austria an average of 158,000 workers was officially employed in the industry from 2015 to 2019, which makes cleaners the second biggest system-relevant occupational group after supermarket cashiers (Schönherr & Zandonella, 2020: 2).

It is important to note that the cleaning industry is divided into formal and informal segments. Research on the formal segment shows that domestic cleaning is characterized by low wages, unfavourable contracts, like temporary and part-time employment, unusual working hours, low job quality due to hard physical labor and high workload, limited chances for advancement and future prospects, and health risks such as respiratory issues caused by chemicals (Eichmann et al., 2014; Eurofound, 2014; Sardadvar, 2019; Schönherr & Zandonella, 2020). When it comes to income, in 2020 the average hourly wage under collective agreements in monument, facade, and building cleaning in Austria lied between €9.23 and €11.26 (vida & WKO, 2019). The monthly pay of cleaners lied at 1.107 euro after tax and is comparatively low, in contrast to other service occupations such as delivery services and drivers, who earn a monthly income of 1.836 euro (Schönherr & Zandonella, 2020).

Concerning labor hours, cleaners are often faced with working times that are either very early or late in the day. As Sardadvar (2019) points out, these atypical work schedules are partly responsible for the invisibility and lack of recognition of cleaning work. Regarding employment models, 65 percent of workers in the formal cleaning sector were working on a part-time basis in 2016 (EFCI, 2020). The figure is high compared to the number of part-time
employees in the entire market-oriented economy in Austria, which lies at 25 percent (Ruhland et al., 2016). When looking at the socio-economic composition of workers we see a comparably large proportion of women with migratory experience. In 2015, the ratio of women in the formalized sector of the cleaning industry amounted to 71 percent (Ruhland et al., 2016: 4). A similar high share of 62 percent have not been born in Austria. In comparison to the overall service sector excluding cleaning work, only 21 percent of workers are born outside of Austria (Stadler, 2020).

In contrast, little is known about the informal cleaning sector, especially when the work takes place in private households. Informal labor leaves cleaners in a vulnerable position, since undeclared employment is attached to severe challenges, such as the lack of protection against dismissal, illness, or the lack of access to labour insurance and pensions (Stadler, 2020: 32). Although there is no representative or extensive scientific research on undeclared work, estimates provide insights into the informal cleaning industry. Assessments from various sources conclude, that the informal cleaning sector is of substantial size (Hartl & Kreimer, 2004). According to the Austrian professor of economics Friedrich Schneider, in 2019 a total of 900 million euros was generated by undeclared cleaning work (Die Presse, 2019). This goes in line with a study by the market analysis institute Branchenradar, which concludes that one in seven Austrian households has employed a domestic helper in 2018 and 97 percent of them were hired through informal employment (Der Standard, 2022). Analyses from the Austrian Chamber of Labour support the high estimate and assess most domestic cleaners to work illegally (Stadler, 2020: 6).

To curb undeclared work, in 2006 the service check (“Dienstleistungsscheck”) was introduced in Austria, which serves as a tool for private households to officially pay temporary domestic helpers. By using the service check, cleaners will be legally registered and insured against accidents. However, up until now this option remains unpopular for both clients and cleaners. On the one hand, as Friedrich Schneider illustrates, cleaners are confronted with long waiting periods for payment (Die Presse, 2019). On the other hand, informal domestic employment is widely accepted by Austrians. According to the 2014 Eurobarometer survey, only 63 percent of Austrians find undeclared work in private households not acceptable (Eurobarometer, 2014: 114). In comparison, the European average on perception of informal work as unacceptable lies at 67 percent.

A comparatively new development in the Austrian cleaning industry is the growth of the gig-economy. Digital matchmaking firms can give potential clients the impression of facilitating a formalization of the domestic cleaning sector. Upon closer inspection, the platform-mediated cleaning landscape is rather diverse. While there are digital intermediary firms that create legal employment relations between clients and cleaners, this can increase wage pressure on cleaners due to competition with colleagues working on the black market. Multiple matchmaking firms function mainly as mediators between clients and cleaners without formalizing the labour relation. As a result, working conditions in the informal domestic cleaning sector may be further compromised through platform-mediated work. To explore these realities is the focus of our paper. For this purpose we will take a closer look at experiences of platform-based cleaners in the informal job market segment in Vienna.
4. Data and Methods

The sample design consists of 15 problem-centered interviews (Witzel, 2000) that are being conducted between July and November 2022. Participants are selected by purposive sampling (Patton, 2014; Robinson, 2014) based on heterogeneity in terms of age, country of origin and type of platform. All interviewees are offered an incentive of 20 euro in cash.

The call for participation was distributed in 14 languages (German, English, Czech, Slovakian, Hungarian, Polish, Bosnian, Croatian, Serbian, Romanian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian, Turkish, Arabic) via associations and supermarkets as well as on social media such as Facebook and Instagram. Given the low response through these channels, the project team registered on the cleaning service platform haushaltshilfe24 and directly messaged potential interview partners with the request for an anonymous interview. This has resulted in a higher response rate.

The interviews cover important points of the social and economic process of domestic cleaning in the gig-economy. The guideline is divided into thematic modules and compiled questions on working conditions, the professional biography and financial situation, experiences with clients and the platform, health, social networks and support systems, among others. Even though the interviews are thematically structured, interviewees are encouraged to set their own narrative about significant events in their professional life as a domestic cleaner.

Participants are given the opportunity to do the interview in their first language. For non-German interviews, the project team collaborates with Native speakers with a background in social science (Enzenhofer/Resch 2011). All interviewers are being briefed regarding the research topic, the guideline, and the interview technique. We decided to cooperate with native speakers – instead of solely conducting the interviews in German or working with a simultaneous speaker – for several reasons. First, the language barrier might lead to less usable data. When interviewees lack appropriate proficiency, it may be disempowering and carry the risk of compromising quality and validity of data (Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022: 14). And second, “enabling trust with participants is the foundation for ensuring truthfulness in the data and study findings” (Burkett/Morris 2015: 109). This is particularly important when it comes to the interviewee’s personal involvement in illegal work. However, as with any empirical study, there are limitations concerning the dataset and methodology. For example, in our specific approach, the need for translation might result in misrepresented or deculturalized data (Schembri & Jahić Jašić, 2022: 14).

All interviews were recorded, transcribed and personally identifiable information was altered or respectively replaced with pseudonyms. The interviews are analyzed according to the qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012, 2014) applying a mixed deductive-inductive approach. The coding was carried out with the software MAXQDA by the project team. The aim of the analysis is to develop thematic codes and compare passages with similar topics spread throughout interviews. The passages are then tied together, leading to the final step of the analysis: the conceptualization and theoretical generalization of the material.

In total, four interviews were conducted in July 2022. Interviewees were recruited via the website haushaltshilfe24, by directly contacting them through the messenger function. At the time of the interviews, respondents were aged 23, 33, 56 and 60. All domestic cleaners under study work on the black market, three of them are parents. Participants’ first languages are German, Polish and Hungarian. The relevant interview passages in this paper have been translated into English by the authors. In the following chapter, preliminary results are presented.
5. Domestic Cleaning in the Gig-Economy: First Insights

5.1. Working on the black market

Illegal informal labor in the domestic field is often considered a short-term financial gain for both the suppliers and customers since no taxes are paid (Larsen, 2012). Time-pressing economic necessities or bad working experiences made in the past can add to the cleaner’s preference to work informally, as described in the following passage:

“Some people have the idea to make monthly transfers to my bank my account, but I said no, otherwise I would not do this job. I depend on this immediate money. I can handle my money better this way, I can pay for my stuff easier. Plus, nobody has to see from where and what money comes onto my account. And also, I don't have much trust. I have worked in the catering industry long enough and I always had to run after my money, and I do not like it.” (Anna, 33 years, IV 4: 332-338)

The interviewee additionally remarked that she must pay off debts which accentuates the lack of time to wait for her earnings. Getting remunerated immediately can be beneficial in certain life circumstances. At the same time, however, informal compensation leaves workers in uncertainty regarding the amount of their upcoming income. As pointed out, there is no fixed wage structure and therefore no predictability regarding the monthly disposable budget:

“One person needs someone once, another person needs someone every now and then, and another person needs someone every week, it’s very different, so there is no constant, no regular constant income, or constant work, right?” (Karla, 23 years, IV 3: 338-342).

This statement has to be seen in the context of the general conditions in the on-demand economy. While standard employment contracts usually provide stability, gig work is characterized by a “deterioration of workers’ planning agency” (Bieber & Moggia, 2021: 287). It implies more short-term and variable forms of employment and overall, more flexibility and a greater personal risk for workers (ebd.). This unpredictability of earnings is further reinforced by wage degradation. The logic of the platforms, namely the visible oversupply of workers, enhances reserve army mechanisms and therewith wage pressure and underpayment. The following passages reflect the struggle over the consciousness of being a disposable worker:

“There are many of us, but I don't know how well you know the website, there are an awful lot of people […] It is terrible how many people there are, all sorts of nationalities. And the problem is that I see people taking jobs for nine, ten euros.” (Valeria, 56 years, IV 2: 523-533)

“I could take more, I've already gotten more [than ten euros] from several people, but I deliberately don't do it, because generally people just scroll further and look for someone for less money.” (Anna, 33 years, IV 4: 342-348)

By encompassing a large pool of work force, platforms increase competitive relations among laborers (Vallas & Schor, 2020). As van Doorn (2017: 904) puts it: “The on-demand economy thrives off a ‘surplus population’ of underemployed gig workers whose fungibility and superfluity is orchestrated through digital platform architectures”. These conditions enable clients to dismiss and easily replace workers at any time. The pressure of being permanently substituted by another workforce not only unfolds through the aim of clients to keep the costs down. According to Anna, it is also exerted in case of illness or non-immediate reply to messages and requests:

“If you cancel once, if you are sick, there are people who do not like it. Then they immediately look for someone else.” (Anna, 33 years, IV 4: 693-694)

“The clients, they sometimes write to 10, 15 people and take those who answer the fastest. If they [the workers] do not fit after all, they simply take others.” (Anna, 33 years, IV 4: 804-805)
Reserve army mechanisms are closely linked to an imbalance of power shifting in favor of clients and platforms. Both parties profit from devolving the full costs and risks of employment onto workers including lost revenue, liability for physical harm, damage to equipment and property, insurance between paid engagements or financial malfeasance by customers (Vallas & Schor, 2020: 168). This leaves the already marginalized group of household workers even more vulnerable. Given the uneven distribution of power, female cleaners are at high risk of being exposed to abuse and unwanted sexual advances, as illustrated in the following chapter.

5.2. Sexual Harassment and Objectification

Numerous studies have revealed that domestic workers frequently experience sexual harassment (Figueiredo et al., 2018; Ribeiro Corossacz, 2019). This is also reflected in the experiences of the participants in our sample. In particular the two younger domestic cleaners under study openly spoke about frequent occurrences with unwanted sexual comments and gestures in both the digital space and on site.

“I came to this Internet platform. I did that for a while, and it worked. But often strange guys find me. Like, for example, there are people who really take advantage of the fact that you need money. that you are dependent on these 10, 20 euros. And then they write something like if you maybe could clean naked.” (Anna, 33 years, IV 4: 14-23)

“[The client mentioned that] He has something like remote work on Monday, so I can come earlier. I say no problem. And he started texting me about masturbation and things like that, so that, just, I blocked him immediately and wanted to do something with it, but generally I do not know what to do with someone like that.” (Karla, 23 years, IV 3: 296-300).

Sexual harassment can be understood as a demonstration of power. Many working women will face unwelcome sexual remarks or physical contact at some point in their jobs (McLaughlin et al., 2017). A significant share of victims chooses not to report assaults to the police because they are afraid of not being believed and of the stigma associated with victims of sexual crimes, which adds to feelings of shame, humiliation, guilt, and self-blame (Landström et al., 2016; Perilloux et al., 2014). For domestic cleaners in the informal sector, it is even harder to act against abusive behavior, as they are not formally equipped to take such action. At the same time inequalities, like gender, class, and dependency on income from unregulated work, put them at greater risk of facing harassment. In turn, regular requests for sexual favors, or expressive behavior of a sexual nature can put a strain on domestic workers:

“I go there, and he asked me if I might clean naked. I said, 'no chance', but I was already on my way. I went to the meeting place because I thought, ‘okay, he cannot be serious about that’. And then he came, we walked for three minutes in the direction of the house. I made sure, ‘okay, I'm taller than him, he can't do anything to me’, okay. And then he suddenly gave me ten euros and said, 'Thanks for coming, I'll pay you ten euros for the time, but you are not my type after all’. And now I think to myself, okay, that was kind of weird that he paid me after all, but now, what if I had gone into the apartment? Because maybe I was naive and I thought to myself, 'okay, he can't be serious', but what if he was? Often, I get bad thoughts.” (Anna, 33 years, IV 4: 741-752)

The passage reflects the informal expectation that domestic workers are supposed to ‘deliver’ appealing looks and erotic capital in their bodily presence. As Warhurst et al. (2009) highlights, job seekers are often not only discriminated against based on their gender and race, but also on their appearance: While people who are perceived to have the ‘right’ look face higher chances of employment, those perceived as physically less attractive are disadvantaged. First insights from our study indicate, that being perceived as attractive from clients can lead to both higher chances for gigs and experiences of harmful behavior and assaults. Overall, objectification, and the practice of customers to look for attractive women on the platform have been recurrent themes:
“Thank God, I have found good clients, but there are also people who are only looking for pictures and not for a cleaning lady.” (Anna, 33 years, Interview 4: 78-79)

“I think I uploaded a photo, […] and sometimes men are different, and they write to me that I'm pretty, or that I'm too pretty to work as a cleaner. […] Sometimes someone thinks "ah well, let’s take her because she's well-groomed", you know, that is how they assess it, right? And in the end, they only get to see someone who does not wear any make-up (laughs). (Karla, 23 years, IV 3: 414-418)

Overall, the handling of encroaching behavior from customers varies from (internalized) victim-blaming (“I was naïve”), to blocking, avoidance and self-assurance of one’s own physical strength (“I am taller than him”). Potential and actual security threats against the particularly vulnerable group of domestic workers are consequently related to a prevalent fear before the first visit to a household:

“When I have someone new, a new male client and not a female client, I still feel scared. So, it's okay, but it's still like, it's not clear how it is going to be because, I have the trauma from the time before, and in general, it's also not known what it's going to be like in the flat” (Karla, 23 years, IV 3: 334-338).

Given that cleaners work in a highly feminized occupation and carry the responsibility for their safety in the hazardous environment of their workplaces themselves, they take several precautionary measures to protect themselves, as reflected in the following passages:

“There are also dangers. And entering a family’s home also involves, especially the first time when you go there and see who opens the door. That is why, that is why you're afraid. The first time, I'm always afraid, the first time that, it happened before that I wrote down for my husband (laughs) - ridiculous, but I wrote down the address, everything, so he knows where I'm going. (Valeria, 56 years, IV 2: 1252-1255)

“So [before going to new clients] I always feel like I'm working for the CIA (laughs) and cross-examine them (laughs). Somehow, I try to ask questions, I expect an answer. As soon as something is strange, then, well sometimes I just feel too scared.” (Anna, 33 years, IV 4: 207-209)

Altogether, these accounts reflect the symbolic and material violence that cleaners encounter on a daily basis as they perform their jobs (Zulfiqar & Prasad, 2022) as well as their lack of power to formally fight abusive behavior. Not only are they economically dependent on their gigs to an existential degree. There are also no legal opportunities to combat assaults within an illegal employment relationship. These circumstances provide sexual harassers the assurance that there is no risk of accountability and may lead employees to complying with sexual demands as an unavoidable aspect of their profession as domestic workers. In general, migrant domestic workers with irregular terms of employment are more likely than others to continue working under abusive employers, primarily due to their fear of the employers reporting them (Gallotti, 2015). In the interviews conducted so far, however, it is notable that such threats may leave cleaners demonstratively unimpressed, as described in the following chapter.

5.3. Power imbalances and status constructions

Subordination, power imbalances, proximity to and direct reliance on the employer are common characteristics of the relationship between domestic workers and their employers (UN Women, 2020: 19). This rigid hierarchy in the work relationship is also manifested in dehumanizing behaviors towards cleaners:

“So, for me it is already a positive experience when people are nice and treat you as a human being. Yes, because […] there is this type of people who are looking for a cleaning lady, but actually they want a slave for everything. Well, and then you feel so humiliated.” (Anna, 33 years, IV 4: 149-152)

Furthermore, as being a temporary, dispensable worker emerges from the contractual nature of the job and labor-related risks solely lie with the flexible labor force of workers, domestic cleaners are put on call for gigs that could be canceled at the last minute:
“I came, yes. So it wasn't that I didn't have any contact with him, but that he texted me "ah sorry I'm in a restaurant with a friend, come to here at this place, I'll give you the keys". That was a unique situation. […] I had a situation where I drove to someone's house and the person texted me "Sorry, I changed my mind". So, I had a situation like that. (Karla, 23 years, IV 3: 768-772)

Given cost-of-living pressures, a short notice cancellation can have severe effects for cleaners, in particular the loss of time and hourly pay. While in many regulated job settings a cancellation fee and/or a reimbursement of actual costs (e.g. public transport ticket) is required to compensate for the financial loss, no remuneration options are offered to workers in the informal sector. In the present case, the unreliable conduct and power demonstration from the client was considered as an unacceptable devaluation of Karla’s time:

“I just didn't text back that person and blocked them. Because why. If somebody does not value my time and nothing, then there is no reason to have contact with them.” (Karla, 23 years, IV 3: 774-776).

This sort of agency and status construction in an unprotected and partially degrading working environment could also be found in other interviews. Cleaners are generally confronted with contradictions between self-views, occupational strains and external ascriptions. Reclaiming power by keeping up social boundaries was mentioned as a common approach by the interviewees, especially in case of unreliable behavior or menaces from the clients. Furthermore, the self-reference of being one’s own boss provides a sense of independence:

“I don't have a boss, I work for myself, and I don't let people take advantage of me in any way.” (Anna, 33 years old, IV 4: 192-193)

The refusal of a powerless role becomes particularly evident, when house cleaners are threatened to be reported for working illegally, an action that can be seen as an institutionalized and pervasive form of violence aiming to establish and keep a hierarchy (Coble, 2020: 54). Anna stated that she was confronted with this situation and did not accept the demonstration of power as such. According to her narration, not only did she signal indifference, but she also made devaluing remarks about the client’s use of time:

“People usually do not want to do that [report incidences with clients], because you work unregistered. And I was also threatened - something happened to me, I could not go to the appointment in the morning and the woman, without asking me, said, 'I will report you'. I just took it easy and said, 'Yeah, if you don't have anything better to do, report me.'” (Anna, 33 years, IV 4: 449-452).

As there are no official labor contracts, not only the pressure of being substituted as a workforce is constantly present, but also the threat of being reported to the police. When it comes to such incidences the interviewees claim to put emphasis on the pursuit of a sense of pride and negotiation of power, rather than reacting with submissive behavior or fear:

“I went for months [to the said private household] and then all of a sudden, I got a text from the man, from the family member, that I stole, that he can't find something from his daughter […] a gold necklace and, that I stole that. […]. And that was a very, very nasty, text message, but I do not remember the text specifically. But I know that he accused me in a very ugly manner, and I could not even defend myself […]. He called me a thief and said that they will go to the police. […] I could not help myself but say "ok, then go to the police, report me and I will say that you employed me illegally and that you didn't declare my work. And, that I worked illegally at your place.” (Valeria, 56 years, IV 2: 384-410)

The passage reflects another theme, that was present throughout the interviews: cleaners under study were ascribed the a predisposition for theft, which manifests in their fear of accusation as well as actual experiences with it. This can be seen as a practice of degradation to enable the maintenance of a hierarchy and adds to the overall oppressive realities that domestic workers face. Regardless of the positive self-definitions illustrated in this chapter, the interviewees altogether portray experiences with behavior from clients that intentionally or unintentionally targets to damage their personal autonomy, bodily integrity and dignity.
6. Conclusion and Outlook

This paper aims to shed light on the working realities of gig-based female domestic cleaners in Vienna. In terms of conditions and experiences with working on the black market the study offers insights into reserve army mechanisms that are being reinforced by the (visual) logic of the digital platform. Such dynamics lead to wage degradation, the pressure to respond quickly to requests and the reality of being permanently replaced in case a gig must be cancelled by the worker, e.g. due to illness. The interviews also provide evidence that informal payment enables domestic cleaners to cover time-pressing economic necessities. At the same time however, it leaves domestic workers in a precarious position in multiple ways.

First, the actual amount of disposable income at the end of the month is unpredictable. Furthermore, when female home cleaners are not declared anywhere, it is more difficult for them to conduct an economically independent life due to the lack of reimbursement from insurance in case of illness, unemployment, or retirement. In addition, there is no protection when it comes to work-related accidents and injuries. Lastly, it is notable that progression and upward mobility in this informal labor market sector is not possible.

In addition to vulnerabilities linked to working on the black market, respondents highlight various incidents of sexual harassment and objectification in both the digital space and on site. The participants' experiences of having to put up with violence, abusive behavior, and humiliation at their workplace are recurring themes. Because of the privacy of the domestic work setting, it is extremely difficult to expose and remove subordination and exploitation from this labor market segment. The scale of the problem should not be underestimated, given that according to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2015) one in 25 women workers all over the world is a domestic worker or household helper. This calls for social policy actions and the broadening of social protection nets for the vulnerable group of female house cleaners.

The interviews further reveal severe power imbalances between domestic cleaners and clients. For instance, workers are subject to short notice cancellations by clients, resulting in financial losses. At the same time, however, it becomes evident that the cleaners under study manage to reclaim agency by setting social boundaries. Rather than remaining in a submissive role, cleaners appear to construct a sense of independence, pride and power by demonstratively showing not to be intimidated by threats of being reported as illegal worker.

It is important to note that it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine the full picture of the social reality regarding the working realities of domestic cleaners in the Viennese gig economy. Furthermore, no universal claims can be made from this study. However, the qualitative survey provides explorative insights into collective experiences, orientations, and agencies of workers in this field.

Clearly, further research will be required to address remaining questions. For future studies it would be interesting to delve deeper into experiences of home cleaners during lockdowns. The COVID-19 pandemic has been accompanied by various challenges particularly for women. In the scientific discourse, multiple burdens of middle-class women were discussed, as the externalization of reproductive activities was no longer possible. In addition, so-called "system maintainers" were brought into media focus, e.g. low-wage workers in the health or trade sectors who were exposed to higher workloads and greater health risks. The living realities of cleaning workers in private households during lockdowns, on the other hand, were hardly discussed, even though this group was both economically affected by the elimination of the externalization of domestic labor and performing "system-relevant" activities. Therefore, there
is a need for retrospective research regarding the social realities of the informal workforce of home cleaners during that time.
7. Bibliography


