

**Title:** Anything but clean: Working conditions of domestic cleaners in the platform economy

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**Abstract:** Digital labour platforms (DLPs) are known for disrupting incumbent market structures, circumventing existing regulation, applying algorithmic management and creating both opportunities through low-threshold jobs and precarious working conditions. These governance practices are not only limited to DLPs but will have an impact on the future of work in general. The resolution of the EU's platform work directive on October 23, 2024, has brought the issue back onto the agenda of science, politics, and employee representatives. Meanwhile, research exploring job quality and worker power in platform work is still in its early stages. This is particularly true of platform mediated domestic services. Based on seven interviews with platform mediated domestic cleaners in Vienna, this article investigates working conditions of platform mediated domestic cleaners. It identifies four major sets of issues pertaining to platform mediated cleaners, with undeclared work and the platform's design of its digital infrastructure as their main causes: lack of protection and vulnerability to (sexual) violence; lack of protection and vulnerability to overexploitation; workers constantly having to renegotiate roles; and information asymmetry, data protection and arbitrary disciplining measures. The collection and sharing of information on customers and the establishment of communication channels between cleaners could be initial measures to improve their safety.

**Keywords:** Platform work, digital labour platforms, political economy, labour sociology, working conditions, care fix

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# 1 Introduction

Digital platform businesses such as Google, Facebook and Amazon are among the largest companies in the world (Fortune, 2025). Digital platforms provide and manage a digital infrastructure where suppliers and consumers of products and services interact (Evans, 2011). Digital labour platforms (DLPs) specialize in the digital intermediation of services (European Commission [EC], 2021). In the EU alone, there are now more than 500 DLPs offering a variety of services, including delivery, translation, care, passenger transport and cleaning (EC, 2021). These platforms generated revenues of €14 billion and employ over 28 million people in 2020, with this figure estimated to reach 43 million by the end of this year (EC, 2021). The platformisation of the economy describes a trend that refers not only to the growth of DLPs but also to the underlying management and governance practices that will have an impact on the future of work in general (Davis, 2016; van Doorn & Vijay, 2024). The corresponding effects on working conditions, the associated techniques of power, and the new obstacles and opportunities for worker power hence gain a relevance that extends beyond the realm of platform work.

DLPs are known for disrupting incumbent market structures, circumventing existing regulation, applying algorithmic management and creating both opportunities through low-threshold jobs as well as precarious working conditions – often accompanied by exploitation, lack of social protection and low levels of organised labour (Fairwork, 2024; Hauben et al., 2020; Killhoffer et al., 2020). Regulation of DLPs gained new momentum with the resolution of the EU’s directive on improving working conditions in platform work (EUPWD) on October 23, 2024 (Rainone & Aloisi, 2024). The EU’s decision has drawn renewed attention to the sector’s notoriously bad working conditions and put it on the agenda of policymakers, scientists, and political lobby groups, including business associations and trade unions. As member states have two years to implement the directive, national bodies – including social partners – are currently working actively on its implementation in their respective countries.

Platform workers are often exposed to weak social protection resulting from non-standard forms of employment (including bogus self-employment and undeclared work), exploitative management practices, digital surveillance and disciplining measures, and a lack of collective rights combined with impediments to worker organisation (EC, 2021; Killhoffer et al., 2020; Piasna et al., 2022b). With heterogeneity both in terms of the nature of work and the socio-economic profile of the workers, challenges vary and partly coincide with those of atypical forms of employment and general trends in the labour market. Thus, some scholars regard the

emergence of DLPs as part of a larger trend towards increasing precarity in the labour market – as an “algorithmic intensification of established modes of exploitation and control” (van Doorn 2017, p. 900; see also Crouch, 2019; Schor et al., 2020).

Although the emergence and expansion of new forms of platform work led to an increase in research interest in recent years, research exploring job quality of platform work “remains in its infancy” (Myhill et al., 2021). This is particularly true of platform mediated domestic services, which receive comparatively little attention in both politics and academia and are still predominantly performed by migrant women, often in undeclared working relationships (Altenried et al., 2021; Bor, 2021; Dowling, 2022; Keller, 2022; Strüver & Lentz, 2024; Wiesböck et al., 2023).

This research contributes to closing this gap by investigating working conditions of platform mediated domestic cleaners in Vienna. It proceeds in two steps to answer the following research questions:

1. How do workers experience their work, what challenges do they face and how do they deal with these challenges?
2. How can these observations be explained?

I address these questions from an interdisciplinary perspective that combines theoretical insights from political economy, labour sociology, feminist and critical race theory. The analysis is based on seven interviews with domestic cleaners working in Vienna via the platform [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at).

The following section introduces the interrelation between processes of precarisation and capitalist accumulation as well as the adjusted work, employment and social relations (WES) model as the theoretical frameworks for my analysis of working conditions on [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at). Section 3 introduces the economic, social and governance mechanisms underpinning the business operation of DLPs in general. In section 4, I present the specifics about [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at) and describe the processes of data selection, collection and analysis in section 5. In section 6, I present the results of my analysis: undeclared work and the platform’s design of its digital infrastructure lead to extreme vulnerability to (sexual) violence and overexploitation, workers constantly having to renegotiate roles, and information asymmetry, data protection and arbitrary disciplining measures. Section 7 concludes.

## 2 Precarisation, accumulation and predatory inclusion

The following section provides theoretical insights into the interrelation between capitalist accumulation, on the one hand, and processes of precarisation, on the other. Furthermore, I introduce the adjusted WES model as a framework to analyse working conditions empirically. Following Butler (2009), I understand precarity as the result of a continued and systematic process, which produces and distributes protection and vulnerability within society, creating positions that differ in their exposedness to harm. This broad conception of precarity encompasses the context in which the wage-labour relationship and the worker are located. As such, it allows for a critical interpretation of job quality that extends beyond the employment relationship and establishes a causal link between a specific working experience and broader developments on the labour market.

Capitalist production uses precarised populations as capital accumulation – the use of capital to acquire more capital and the core mechanism behind capitalist production – depends on labour power. The positions produced through precarisation and the populations assigned to them are created along differentiations based on race, class, gender and ability, among others – categories that intersect and create positions differing in their degree of vulnerability as well as the kinds of violence they are exposed to (Crenshaw, 1989). The concept of *racial capitalism* emphasises the connection between capitalist accumulation and the cultural, social and political inscription of disposability into particular bodies based on the constructed category of race (Birke, 2022, Gebrial, 2024). The notion of *capitalist patriarchy* draws attention to the practices of othering that create an exploitable work force based on the degradation of bodies constructed as female or queer, and through linking these bodies to the provision of care services in particular (Harraway, 2006; Federici, 2004).

This perspective provides a framework to capture the ways in which corporations provide new opportunities to precarised populations while at the same time generating revenues based on their intensified exploitation – a practice Gebrial (2024) calls “predatory inclusion”. Predatory inclusion relies on the existence of surplus populations to whom it can offer a certain degree of security and autonomy. It also implies, however, that while some may manage to accumulate human capital and move on, the majority are kept in a state of extreme insecurity, powerlessness and vulnerability that allows companies to continue their practice of intensified exploitation.

In the scientific literature, there exists a multitude of frameworks to analyse working conditions (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017; Myhill et al., 2021; Fair Work Convention, 2016; Fairwork, 2024; ETUI, 2018). Of these frameworks, the adjusted Work, Employment and

Social Relations (WES) model used by Kilhoffer et al. (2020) in their analysis of working conditions of platform workers within the EU is the most comprehensive one as it covers four dimensions: “work”, “employment”, “social relations” and “other indicators”. These dimensions cover indicators ranging from the formal context including employment status, contracts, social protection and pay to job content, emotional demands, interactions with colleagues and the management as well as issues of undeclared work and data protection (Kilhoffer et al., 2020). The adjusted WES model forms the basis of my analysis of working conditions and is summarised in table 1.

<b>Work dimension</b>	<b>Employment dimension</b>	<b>Social relations dimension</b>	<b>Other indicators</b>
Autonomy in the allocation of tasks	Employment status	Representation	Undeclared work
Autonomy in work organisation	Determination of the employer	Participation in decision-making	Cross-border work
Surveillance, direction and performance appraisal	Contracts	Supportive management and social support	Data protection
Task complexity	Social protection	Adverse behaviour and social support	
Work intensity and speed pressure	Earnings		
Emotional demands	Working time		
Physical environment	Career opportunities		
	Training and skills		

*Table 1: Adjusted Work, Employment, Social relations (WES) model*  
*Source: Kilhoffer et al. (2020)*

The theoretical reflections laid out in this section, then, provide me with the conceptual frameworks to pursue the aims of my research to (1) provide insights into working conditions, experiences and challenges, and the way workers cope with them and (2) position my findings in a broader context and relate them back to the structural conditions they are embedded in and are part of.

### 3 The platformisation of the economy: Profiting from carelessness

Digital labour platforms can be defined as digital infrastructures that enable interactions between consumers and providers of services, and in doing so determine the rules governing

such interactions (e.g. Foodora, Uber, Helpling, Fiverr) (EC, 2021; Sarter, 2024). They create economic benefits by lowering transaction costs first and foremost through network effects (Evans, 2011; Srnicek, 2017). Platform work is defined as any work that is mediated through a digital labour platform (EUR-Lex, 2024).

Estimates on the size and prevalence of platform work are scarce and differ due to both technical challenges and lack of political will (EC, 2021; Kilhoffer et al., 2020; Sarter, 2024). Accordingly, estimates on the share of the workforce in the EU regularly performing platform work range from 2.8 percent (Piasna et al., 2022a) to 11 percent (Urzí Brancati et al., 2020). For those relying on platform work for their main income, these estimates are considerably lower and range from 0.7 percent (Piasna et al. 2022a) to 1.4 percent (Urzí Brancati et al., 2020). There is consensus among scholars, however, that both labour platforms and platform work have seen rapid growth in the past decade and will continue to grow and expand (EC, 2021; Hauben et al., 2020; Kilhoffer et al., 2020; Piasna et al. 2022b).

In addition to the expansion of platform work in Europe, platform work gains relevance as a “... quasi-laboratory space for businesses” (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021, pp. 44-45) where they can experiment with more exploitative management, organisational and legal practices. This “platformisation” (van Doorn & Vijay, 2024; see also Davis, 2016) of the economy indicates a broader trend in labour markets: the use of digital means to increase the division and outsourcing of labour (Weil, 2017), deepen workplace surveillance, data gathering and performance appraisal (Kilhoffer et al., 2020; Piasna et al. 2022b) and circumvent legal regulations (Gawer & Srnicek, 2021).

With high fix costs and decreasing marginal costs, DLPs profit from economies of scale and scope (Nachtwey & Staab, 2020). They rely on the provision of risk affine capital (often provided by venture capital funds) to support their strategy of rapid growth through unsustainably low prices and cross-subsidisation to achieve a monopoly – a strategy that results in running on red numbers for a long time (Langley & Leyshon, 2017; Vandaele, 2024). Once in this position, however, a platform business can start generating profits either by increasing rents for users – who are now dependent on the platform – or by selling products to third parties based on the data they capture (van Doorn & Vijay, 2024).

With their strategy of rapid growth and low prices, DLPs focus their activities and ownership claims on the steps in the value chain that generate the highest returns and try to outsource other steps (Srnicek, 2017). This enables the company to maximise return on investments as costs and responsibilities accompanying ownership rights for less profitable steps in the value chain

are outsourced to other actors. The core asset of the digital platform – the one able to generate the highest rents – is the digital infrastructure (the software) and the accompanying data it generates (Srniczek, 2017). Lemonfrog AG, for example, which is the company behind [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at), operates 17 digital platforms in four countries and documents two million registered users with only 30 employees: “We focus on scalability, loading speed and APIs [Application Programming Interfaces]. Today we are able to launch a new platform in a very short time – without writing a single line of code.” (Lemonfrog, n.d.).

In terms of labour governance, the economic pressure to achieve low prices implies refraining from direct control of the work process to avoid being classified as an employer and decrease labour costs (Kellogg et al., 2020; van Doorn, 2017). DLPs that offer on-demand services deploy comprehensive algorithmic management systems, i.e. “systems which are used to take or support, through electronic means, decisions that significantly affect persons performing platform work” (EUR-Lex, 2024). This ensures that, on the one hand, they are not legally recognized as employers and, on the other hand, they can offer immediate availability of services (Gawer & Srniczek, 2021; Piasna, 2024; van Doorn, 2017). The rationale is to externalise risks and follow-up costs, primarily onto workers, but also onto public bodies, other employers and consumers (EC, 2021; Schor et al., 2020; Vandaele et al., 2024).

In summary, the specific governance mechanisms within DLPs are largely determined by economic imperatives – which is why I characterise DLPs as *structurally careless*. Digital technologies to enable easy accessibility to users and new managerial practices are combined with long-term, risk-affine capital to finance an initially unprofitable business with high fix costs. At the same time, oversupply of a precarised labour force “willing” to work under bad conditions lead to low prices, which are necessary to guarantee effective demand (see figure 1). This observation establishes a structural link between broader developments driving the labour market segmentation and commodification of labour on the one hand, and the emergence and continuing operation of DLPs on the other.

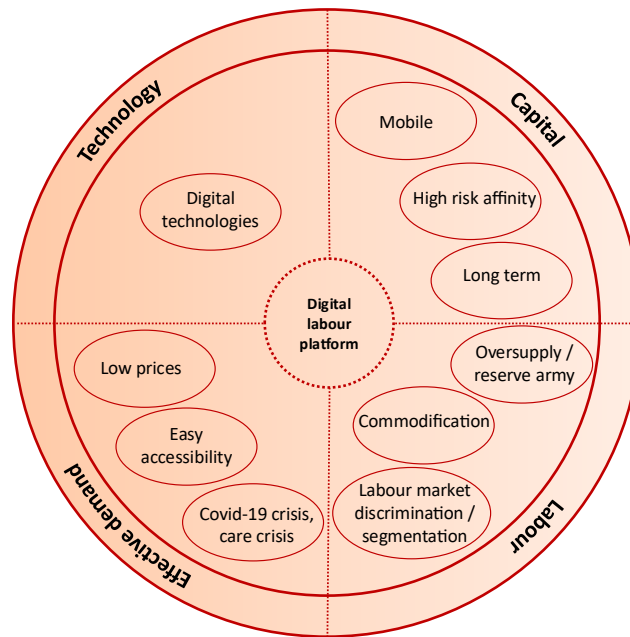


Figure 1: Material conditions for the economic viability of digital labour platforms

#### 4 A platform for cleaning: Haushaltshilfe24.at

In Austria, between 2015 and 2019, an average of 158.000 people worked in regular employment in cleaning (Schönherr & Zandonella, 2020). Due to the very common practice of undeclared labour in the industry, the actual figure is likely to be much higher (Institut für Empirische Sozialforschung, 2013). Three DLPs in Austria offer domestic services, including cleaning: extrasauber.at, betreut.at and haushaltshilfe24.at (Fairwork, 2022; Wiesböck et al., 2023, 2024). Haushaltshilfe24.at is an asset-light online marketplace financed via membership fees, which intermediates low-skilled, on-location services that legally establish an employment relationship between client and worker. They provide a digital interface where clients and workers can interact with each other directly. As payment and service provision both take place outside of the platform’s infrastructure and supervision, algorithmic management does not play as much a role as for on-demand platforms, and revenue is generated through subscription rather than transaction fees (Ticona et al., 2018). The employment relationship they establish, and their main function is displayed in figure 2.

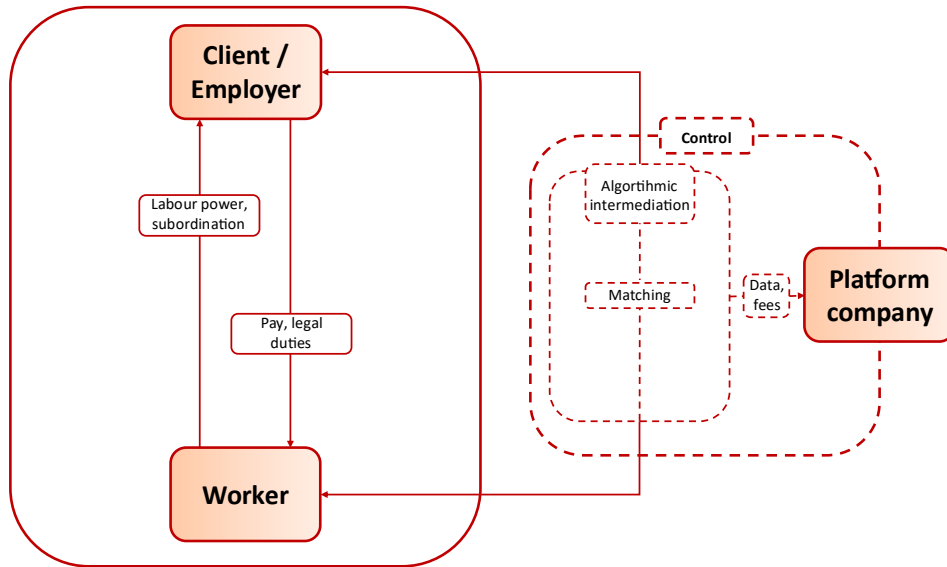


Figure 2: Platform work as standard employment with the client as employer

## 5 Methods and data

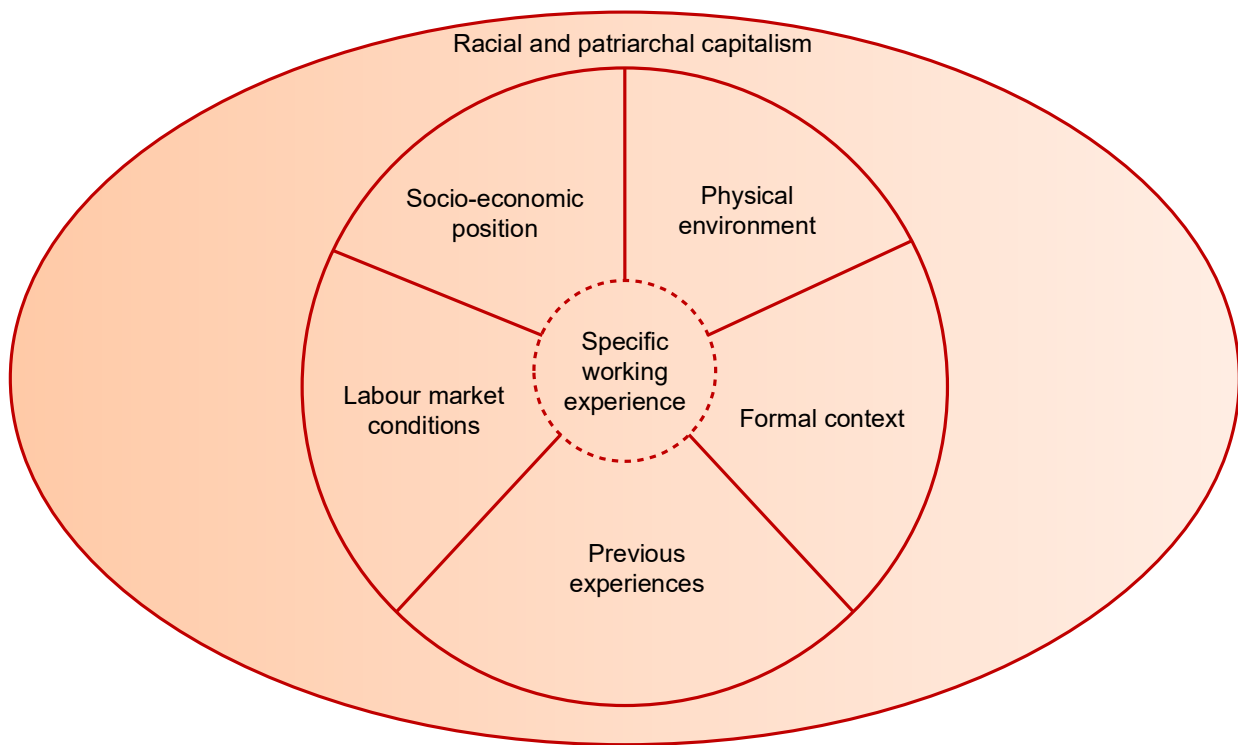
The analysis is based on seven semi-structured interviews with workers. To access the field of platform mediated domestic cleaners, I used a similar strategy to Wiesböck et. al (2023, 2024). I contacted workers via [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at) and asked if they were willing to participate as interview partners in my research project. Interviews were about one hour, and I offered a compensation of €25. All interviews were anonymised to protect the worker's identity. I used purposive sampling and snowball sampling as sampling strategies to select interview partners (Przyborski & Wohlrab-Sahr, 2021; Robinson, 2014). For the data analysis, I used qualitative content analysis (QCA) (Kuckartz, 2019). Based on theoretical considerations, code development was strongly concept-driven (“deductive”) but also included data-driven (“inductive”) codes.

With sexual violence being a major issue in the cleaners' work experiences, talking about such issues in an interview setting was a major challenge. Being perceived as a white male researcher might have led some workers to a different presentation of their experience or restraint in sharing certain experiences, particularly regarding experiences of sexual violence. Another limitation results from difficulties in communication due to language barriers which may have led to misunderstanding in some instances. Third, the fast-changing circumstances in platform labour further limit the temporal validity of the results.

## 6 Coping with extreme vulnerability: Working conditions in platform mediated cleaning

This sections presents the findings of my research on how workers experience their work, the problems, risks and challenges they face and the ways they deal with these challenges. Furthermore, I explain these findings based on the socio-economic positioning of the workers, the physical and formal context in which the work takes place, workers' previous experiences on the labour market, and broader labour market conditions (see figure 3).

The socio-economic position of the worker contains indicators such as gender, care obligations, education, employment status, age and whether a second income exists. The physical environment denotes physical and spatial factors that characterise the work process. The formal context captures the rights and duties pertaining to the worker due to their legal status (both in terms of employment and migration) and contractual relations, as well as their scope of action resulting from the platform's infrastructure. Another explanatory variable for working experience I take into consideration are previous experiences on the labour market, including the job history, previous working experiences as well as length and depth of experience with the platform. Finally, labour market conditions concern the availability of alternative jobs and the relationship between the supply of and demand for labour power. All these factors are located in the broader context of a racially and patriarchally structured capitalism which includes internalised racist and sexist attitudes among clients.



*Figure 3: Causal model for specific working experience*

### The sample

My sample of interviewed workers comprises seven workers who are between 22 and 40 years old (see table 2). All workers declare themselves as women who migrated from non-EU countries (Sri Lanka, India, Nepal and Serbia) to Vienna. The tasks they perform via the platform include cleaning and doing laundry, with some also doing ironing, cooking, washing dishes, babysitting and gardening.

Five of the seven workers are students, two are part-time employees, one is a full-time employee and one is unemployed. However, all the workers interviewed work illegally via the platform, some in addition to their regular employment. Working times at [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at) range between one hour and 35 to 45 hours per week. The workers in my sample have high levels of education: six hold university degrees and two have completed vocational training. Three workers have children. In terms of work experience with the platform, two interviewees work via the platform for many years (five and twelve years, respectively) and have worked for more than a hundred households. The rest of the sample started working via the platform a few months ago and worked for between one and ten clients so far.

Name	Age	Citizenship	Gender	Education	Care obligations	Employment status	Undeclared work via platform	Hourly pay in euros	In Vienna since	Working experience with platform	Second income
Pooja	26	India	Female	Bachelors degree	None	Student, part-time employee	Yes	~15	6 years	5 years, >100 households	No
Sandamali	40	Sri Lanka	Female	Masters degree	None	Student	Yes	12-15	Few months	Few months, 9-10 households	Yes
Nirosha	34	Sri Lanka	Female	Bachelors degree, completed vocational training	3 children	Unemployed	Yes	12-15	Few months	Few months, 6-7 households	Yes
Tharushi	30	Sri Lanka	Female	Bachelors degree	None	Student	Yes	~12	Few months	Few months, 1 household	Yes
Chamari	34	Sri Lanka	Female	Masters degree	1 child	Student	Yes	15-20	Few months	Few months, 6 households	Yes
Jelena	36	Serbia	Female	Completed vocational training	3 children	Full-time employee	Yes	~20	14 years	12 years, >100 households	Yes
Parshavi	22	Nepal	Female	Bachelors degree	None	Student, part-time employee	Yes	10-12	Few months	Few months, 3 households	Yes

*Table 2: Sample*

*Note: All names have been pseudonymised*

The four workers from Sri Lanka all receive financial support by family or spouses. Two workers have a second job outside the platform and only one of the interviewed workers depends on the income generated via the platform alone.

### Lack of protection and vulnerability to (sexual) violence

Both the physical and formal context in which workers operate expose them to enormous risks. Most of the work is done illegally – i.e., with almost no institutional protection – and often takes place alone in the private homes of often completely unknown clients with no protection provided by the platform either. All interviewees report regular sexual harassment both online and on site, as well as other dangerous and traumatic situations that they must deal with individually.

Of the reports of negative customer experiences, *sexual violence* by male clients was mentioned the most, including digital and on-location sexual harassment. This also includes the understanding among some men that they are not just paying for a specific service, but that they are acquiring the whole person along with a whole range of care services (often including sexual services):

Some men think they can just treat women like things. They just throw it into your face and then you have to deal with it (Pooja).

I'm now getting lots of messages from men – disaster! ... For example, a man wrote to me such ... terrible messages. I told him no. Then I blocked him immediately, but he created a new account. But there's a completely different name in the message! (Jelena, own translation)

Workers often do not know who their clients are and what kind of situation they are putting themselves in, as they have little information about the customers' households and no way of verifying the information they provide: "When I'm going, I don't know who are in there and I'm going a bit nervous" (Chamari). Many workers reported men sexually harassing them in their homes, which can lead to trauma and high levels of stress, anxiety and fear: "This was really traumatising, and I was hesitant to use the website again. But you have to survive, right? You have to earn money" (Pooja).

*Dismissive* and sometimes *disrespectful behaviour* by clients was also reported by all interviewees. For example, some workers experienced customers not showing up at the arranged time, writing bad reviews despite previous cancellation of the appointment by the worker, not paying overtime although the task was too extensive for the given time, or treating workers like inferiors or servants. Emotional strain also results from other forms of harmful behaviour by clients. When entering private homes, workers are sometimes faced with highly intimate situations, involving a high level of exposure to their clients. Many workers,

particularly more experienced ones, report having encountered situations where they were confronted with perceived mental illness or exposed to their clients' mood swings: "I thought about jumping out of the window. I was so scared ... I forgot my bag. I left everything behind. I left immediately ... Then I imagined that she would come after me" (Jelena, own translation). Workers also reported facing physical strain during work due to a *lack of skill* in handling chemicals (and not understanding German manuals) and cleaning dangerous areas such as balconies and windows, as well as carrying heavy weights.

These findings are in line with previous research on platform labour, which has found that health and safety risks of certain tasks are aggravated if performed through DLPs because of limited training and instructions on health and safety, absence of an organisational structure, poorer protection and insurance coverage as well as algorithmic control (Fairwork, 2022; Hauben et al., 2020; Kilhoffer et al., 2020). Racist, classist and sexist discrimination, harassment and violence have been found to pose particularly high and severe strains for domestic platform workers, who are generally more vulnerable due to the high prevalence of undeclared work and the subsequent lack of any labour protection (Hauben et al., 2020; Wiesböck et al., 2023).

### Lack of protection and vulnerability to overexploitation

Vulnerability to overexploitation results primarily from the formal context, which is characterized by a lack of institutional protection and standardisation. Since undeclared work accounts for most of the work on the platform among the workers interviewed, social protection is virtually non-existent for most of them. Only those who have a second job enjoy social protection through that employment. Due to the often illegal nature of the employment relationship, there are no standards regarding occupational safety, working time restrictions, pay, holidays, etc. This is consistent with the findings of other studies, which found that platform workers in the EU generally have less access to social protection (EC, 2021) and that DLPs are often free-riding on social protection of their workers being provided through an employment relationship outside the platform (Schor et al., 2020).

This lack of standards and protection results in *fluctuating* and *low incomes*, with hourly wages often depending on the willingness of clients or being a matter of spontaneous negotiations on site. Although workers can specify the hourly rate for their services on the website, they often accept jobs that pay less: "It depends on how much they want to give us. 11, 12, some people give 10. Depending on the person" (Parshavi).

There is some discrepancy in workers' vulnerability to low pay depending on two factors, however: the time the worker already works via the platform (more experience means less

vulnerability) and their dependence on the income (less dependence means less vulnerability). But even experienced workers earn rather low wages, with the highest hourly wage in my sample being 20 euros per hour (without social security coverage). And this figure still does not reflect the real salary. All workers report high, unpaid search costs, long unpaid commuting times, and wage theft. This tendency has also been identified in the literature on platform work in the EU. Compared to their non-platform counterparts, in addition to the service they are paid for, platform workers have been found to engage in “constant customer care and public relations” (Kilhoffer et al., 2020, p. 62). Low pay and low income security, too, have been found to be general characteristics of platform work (Eurofound, 2018; Fairwork, 2022; Hauben et al., 2020; Kilhoffer et al., 2020).

All the newcomers reported struggling with finding enough work and having to deal with *irregular and fluctuating working times* that sometimes change at the will of the client. At least for newcomers who depend on the income generated via the platform, we can speak of a “fissured” working day that consists of constantly checking and writing messages, flexibly reacting to the demands of clients and shifting appointments accordingly, and commuting between different work locations in the city area, without a clear boundary between working hours and leisure time. Again, this is consistent with previous finding (Hauben et al., 2020; Piasna, 2024; Weil, 2017). As with pay, the reliability and regularity of working hours and the proportion of paid working hours in relation to total working hours seems to improve over time. The more experienced workers also reported a higher degree of flexibility. In these cases, the platform has provided them access to customers that they now interact with entirely outside of the platform’s infrastructure: “I can do my trading, sports and studies whenever I want” (Pooja). The majority of the interviewed workers (five out of seven) reported speed pressure being an issue during their work. *High work intensity and speed pressure* result from having to commute between places and from clients making unrealistic and misleading offers that plan too little time for too large areas. All workers also report instances of *wage theft*, either because clients simply did not pay them (because of some supposed mistake they made), clients not paying for overtime or workers having to leave the place because they feel in danger.

Thus, the formal context, being characterized by a lack of institutional protection and standardisation, the socio-economic position of the workers, who often do not feel in a position to negotiate with clients, as well as high inter-worker competition for jobs make them vulnerable to overexploitation.

## Renegotiating roles

In her autoethnographic fieldwork on a digital platform for cleaners, Keller (2022) found that unclear task definitions and sudden demands for additional services on site lead to domestic workers having to constantly renegotiate power relations between themselves, customers and the platform. This is consistent with the findings from my study. All of the interviewed workers complain about false or *misleading job descriptions*. When clients post a job offer on the platform, the platform does not install any measures to ensure or incentivise truthfulness, or provide mechanisms to sanction false description. This leads to workers being in the awkward position of either not finishing a task, or working more hours, which are often unpaid.

*Relationships of trust* with their clients are characteristic of domestic work. Such relationships have led one worker in my sample to refrain from negotiating higher pay. Intimate relationships are also reported to complicate setting strict boundaries to working time and the kinds of tasks performed. *Lack of instructions and training* is also reported by the participants in my sample to be a source of renegotiating one's role with regard to the customer, at least at the start of working via the platform. The platform does not provide any trainings – anyone with a work permit can register and start working as soon as they find a job. Little to no access to co-sponsored training and skill development opportunities and limited career opportunities are also a general observation within the platform economy in the EU (EC, 2021; Kilhoffer et al., 2020; Piasna, 2024). DLPs avoid such measures to not complicate their role as non-employer.

On a more general level, cultural differences, loneliness, and feeling overwhelmed by the new environment characterise the *migration experience* of some workers.

In summary, services lack standardisation and an institutional setup that guarantees truthfulness of job description. Combined with the physical environment, which is often characterised by relationships of trust, this leads to workers having to renegotiate their roles with regard to themselves, the clients and the platform. Finding oneself overwhelmed with the new environment and sometimes in a precarious socio-economic position, such renegotiations generally reinforce the tendency toward overexploitation of platform workers.

## Information asymmetry, data protection and arbitrary disciplining measures

Four out of seven interviewed workers, and particularly the two more experienced ones in my sample, complained that *unfair customer ratings* were an issue for their work on the platform. Customers can rate workers after having chatted with them, even if the worker has not performed any task. Customers have the power to exchange information about workers and to significantly influence their prospects of future jobs, while workers are isolated and have no

possibility to share information on customers, which leads to an extremely unequal distribution of both information and power: “You can do nothing. They have the power to review us and we have no power to review them. It is... Einbahnstraße [one-way street]” (Pooja).

The resulting *information asymmetry* clearly benefits the client, who enjoys anonymity even in cases of harmful behaviour, and disadvantages the worker, who can only access information about their clients that is provided by the clients themselves. Asymmetric access to information is reinforced by high inter-worker competition and the resulting need for workers to make personal information openly accessible to everyone to increase their chances of getting a job. Thus, although none of the interviewees regard it as such, *data protection* is an issue for the workers in my sample.

The causes for information asymmetries, invasion of privacy and arbitrary disciplining measures by clients are thus, firstly, the rules of the platform, which allow clients to review workers and not vice-versa. Secondly, there is a lack of protection of customers ensuring against theft and damage that necessitates workers to disclose private information to customers to build trust. And, lastly, labour oversupply creates pressure to share personal information to outcompete other workers.

### Coping mechanisms

It has become evident that platform workers on haushaltshilfe<sup>24</sup> lack most of the institutionalised safeguards that protect labour from commodification and workers from overexploitation and violence. Neither state institutions nor organised labour or “good governance” by the platform are in place to protect them. Faced with such vulnerability, workers find their own ways to deal with these challenges and, in some cases, improve their safety and working conditions.

Regarding individual protective measures against (sexual) violence and harmful behaviour, the most common forms are *exiting* and *ignoring*. Exiting is achieved by leaving the place, blocking people on the website and on the phone, or deleting the account after having received bad reviews and creating a new one:

I just said, I'm sorry, but if you hit dogs, I don't want to go in. And he gave me bad review on the [platform]. So, I can only delete profile. Because I've had such a bad experience when someone writes, ah, she's no good, she won't come to work – delete it immediately is the only option for me. It's bad for me, but not for him (Jelena, own translation).

The inexperienced workers in my sample reported that they did not even know they could block a person and resorted to just not answering to them. Some workers with friends also working

on the platform reported *working together* on their first job at a stranger's house. Others *informed relatives or friends* about the place and time of their job or *stopped texting with single men* altogether and only considering offers by women, couples and families. One worker stated that she *exchanges identification documents* with new clients before visiting them to counteract information asymmetries. She also *visits them before starting a work relationship* to check whether she feels safe in the household. The experienced workers report of constantly learning from each negative experiencing and adapting their behaviour to protect themselves: “I have so much experience, now I know how to do these things. In the beginning I made many mistakes” (Pooja).

Concerning overexploitation, the more experienced workers learned to *set thresholds* on distance, size of the area and payment to prevent low pay and overtime. They *communicate strict boundaries* on working times and availability to their clients to ensure at least some separation between work and leisure time. To a certain extent, my sample also reveals a difference in how experienced and less experienced workers deal with excessive exploitation. While the experienced workers have developed a certain *strictness* and clear ideas about what their tasks are and what constitutes “justified” demands, at least some of the less experienced workers tend to *blame themselves*:

Because of my attitude and my ego. Especially Sri Lankans ... I love that people. But my ego is something disturbing me (Sandamali).

It's my fault, it's my fault to spend one and a half hour to do my job. Yeah, I think so, that's my fault.

Next time I'm trying to finish my work within one hour (Tharushi).

Some workers report coping with lack of instructions, training and skills by *observing co-workers*, *asking co-workers* from the same migrant community for tips and instructions, or *educating themselves* through YouTube videos and ChatGPT. Generally, those interviewees who know other people working on the platform as well *share experiences* with them: “We discuss every day, every minute. We share everything” (Sandamali). Some workers also reported *lying about their work experience* to increase their chances of getting a job, thus using the lack of accountability towards the platform to their advantage.

Clearly, none of these coping mechanisms comes close to guaranteeing safety against violence, overexploitation and unfair treatment, and there are clear limits to their effectiveness. All in all, the platform's design creates an extremely uneven playing field, with potential clients in a far more powerful position than workers, who are often dependent on the work due to external life circumstances. While workers must reveal a great deal about themselves to increase their chances of getting jobs and are constantly exposed to sometimes unfair customer reviews

without any effective means to challenge them, clients hardly have to disclose any personal information and can behave violently, unfairly, and arbitrarily toward workers without fear of negative consequences.

### Job satisfaction under conditions of labour market discrimination

Overall, every worker judges the platform positively. Most of them value the platform for it providing easy access to jobs – an experience that none of them has made on the labour market where they face a lot of barriers: “But it is very good that the platform exists. I have also a lot of good experiences. I would say 70% is good, 30% is bad” (Pooja). One worker also mentions the compatibility of children and work as a positive aspect about the platform. These overall positive evaluations notwithstanding, only one of the interviewed workers plans to keep working via the platform in the longer term. How can these overall positive evaluation be explained?

Despite the differences in their respective profiles, there are commonalities among all the workers interviewed. All of them face discrimination on the labour market due to immigration law. The language barrier is very often cited as a reason for failure in the labour market. Six of the seven workers interviewed do not speak German and report that knowledge of German is often required or desirable. Many also mention pending or lack of recognition of education, training, and work experience abroad. All the Sri Lankan workers are highly educated and already have many years of experience in high-skilled jobs, some of them having held high positions in government agencies. Still, being a migrant from a non-EU country, they cannot find jobs in Vienna. In addition, non-EU students are legally only allowed to work a maximum of 20 hours per week, which limits their choice of professions and is usually not enough to cover their living expenses in Vienna. One worker also reports labour market discrimination because she has three children. Seen in this light, the platform’s low threshold to finding work and the possibility to earn more than a part-time salary through undeclared work appear particularly attractive and, in many cases, necessary.

In addition to labour market discrimination, experiences in previous jobs also play a major role in how workers evaluate their work on the platform. The two experienced workers both have made experiences of sexual harassment, exploitation, low earnings and bad working conditions in previous jobs: “I feel like it’s everywhere, men taking advantage of women being alone in this country ... Bad things happen everywhere” (Pooja).

## 7 Conclusion

Judging from the experiences of the workers in my sample, processes of racialisation play an important role in creating the workforce on [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at). They manifest in exclusionary immigration policies that limit non-EU citizens' access to the labour market and entitlements to social services. Due to their origin, these policies force migrant workers into precarious, often illegal employment. The DLP takes advantage of this situation of extreme vulnerability and dependence by providing relatively easy access to jobs. Working on the platform, however, is characterised by processes of feminisation. Being made extremely vulnerable to overexploitation and (sexual) violence characterises the cleaners' work reality – due to both general living conditions, discrimination on the labour market and the platform's design that prioritises the safety of clients over those of workers. Evidenced by the fact that all female workers report being constantly asked for sexual services by male customers, this vulnerability is also due to a societal conception of femininity that constructs women as caregivers and the female body as a sexual resource. The platform does nothing to prevent this sexualisation of cleaners.

I would therefore conclude that [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at) can be said to engage in predatory inclusion, as they generate profit by taking advantage of precarised populations and do not provide protection or opportunities for workers to accumulate human capital. Thus, workers either look for protection and career development outside the platform, or they risk severe harm, poverty in old age and poverty in the event of occupational disability, as they are not entitled to public social services. This is coherent with the findings of a study on two cleaning platforms (including [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at)) by Wiesböck et al. (2023). It seems that domestic services mediated via [haushaltshilfe24.at](https://www.haushaltshilfe24.at) are part of a care fix as we can witness a relocation of care gaps onto the providers of such services. This is not sustainable in the long run, as it exposes care service providers to risks pertaining to health, (old age) poverty, harm and trauma, all due to a lack of protection.

A promising first step to improve the safety of the workers could be to use digital means to enable the collection and sharing of information on customers and establish a communication channel between cleaners. This would not only enable workers to make initial contact with each other but also counteract the information imbalance between clients and workers. This imbalance is one of the main causes of the constant threat of (sexual) violence to which cleaning workers are exposed. If they could exchange information about clients, this would at least be a first step toward enabling them to better protect themselves. The implementation of the

EUPWD, which must be completed in all EU member states by fall 2026, requires DLPs to implement such communication channels for workers. However, it is likely that the EUPWD will not apply to platforms such as haushaltshilfe24.at. This is due to the legal definition of DLPs that underlies the directive, which considers “the organisation of work” a criterion for DLPs (EUR-Lex, 2024). Although the formulation remains ambiguous, marketplace DLPs with a low degree of algorithmic management, such as haushaltshilfe24.at, do not organise work to the same extent as DLPs for delivery or transport. Thus, it is the task of trade unions and other labour organisations to initiate, enable and support organising efforts in digitally mediated domestic work. Points of entry could be possibly existing communities in the workforce built around cultural commonalities that were also observed in this study – such communities have proven and continue to be important points of entry for worker organisation in comparable sectors as well.

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