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Hidden platform subsidies: the role of social networks in concealing (too) low income on care work platforms

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Abstract. As digital labour mediation platforms became prominent in the late 2010s, they were soon associated with deteriorating labour conditions, especially for ride hailing, delivery and crowd work. Yet studies are more ambivalent about their effects on care work, i.e. domestic work and home care for children and seniors. As care work was already informal and highly precarious before, digital platforms held the promise of (partially) formalizing it. Contributing to this debate, we ask how workers make a living from platformized care work. We draw on 24 in-person interviews with workers who rely on income from providing domestic, nannying and senior care services mediated through digital platforms in Geneva. Our findings demonstrate that working via care work platforms is financially unsustainable. Our analysis highlights the omnipresence of what we call "platform subsidies", i.e. financial support provided by family or friends to sustain workers' income. We argue that these payments subsidize platforms and customers who profit from care as a low-cost, on-demand service.

1 Introduction

> When the salary is minimal, well – sometimes I can't manage [to earn] 3000 francs[1] a month. I'm at 2000, 2500, 2200, it depends, some months. I pay 1550 francs for rent, so after that I've got 600 francs left, but I've got to try and juggle the bills assuming that I don't have a hard blow in the month, if – I don't know – a fridge that breaks down – I don't know – unusual expenses for example. I had a death in my family in January, my grandfather died, well for the funeral – I used to dress well, but in the meantime, I've lost weight. I used to have nice clothes, because I used to be a secretary. Well, I had a lot of stuff, but I lost weight, so I had to buy new clothes, something nice … Well, it's an expense that's unusual, that was a drain on my budget! It's a real pain when it's like that!

Initially, Marta saw the work she acquired via a care work platform as a nice supplement to her income. As she recalls, this income was supposed to be for little extras and to afford fun things for herself and her son. After losing her primary job, however, Marta became fully dependent on her platform income. She started working as much as she could for one of the platforms that mediates domestic work in Geneva. Slowly, her finances started becoming stretched, and the little extras became a dream of the past. Her fluctuating income was often not sufficient to cover everyday expenses, let alone unexpected expenses. Marta's story is not unique, especially for platform workers in the care economy. Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to contribute to a better understanding of how workers manoeuvre around the unpredictability of their earnings through care work platforms.

For this, we conceptualize platforms as "digital infrastructures that enable two or more groups to interact" (Srnicek, 2017:30) and focus specifically on platforms that mediate care work – i.e. domestic work and home care for children and seniors. Although research on digital labour mediation

[1] To compare, CHF 4500 is considered a living wage in Switzerland (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2024). This number does not account for intra-national differences in living costs, which are higher in Geneva and Zurich than in other areas. In the most recent "Global Cost of Living Survey", Geneva was rated the third most expensive city in the world, after Zurich and Singapore and on par with New York (Economist, 2023).

platforms is growing, the bulk of it focuses on ride hailing, delivery and online gig work. Much of this research associates the rise of labour platforms with deteriorating labour conditions (Berg et al., 2018; Ticona, 2022). In many countries, the entry of ride hailing platforms has provoked taxi drivers to protest disempowering working conditions (Dubal, 2017) and reductions in their daily incomes (Kibaroğlu, 2023). Similarly, research on delivery work demonstrates how platforms have used their control over pricing algorithms to maximize value extraction and lower workers' income over time (van Doorn, 2020). In crowd work, algorithmic rating mechanisms have been found to push workers to be online at all hours, leading to overwork and exhaustion (Riemann, 2023; James, 2024).

The argument that platforms deteriorate labour conditions remains more nuanced regarding platform-mediated care work. Even before the entry of platforms, this type of work has been characterized by highly precarious working conditions (Parreñas, 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochschild, 2002; Gather et al., 2002). In this paper, we understand "precarity" as a life situation characterized by uncertainty and insecurity affecting specific groups of workers due to their marginalized position in the labour market (Waite, 2009). Precarious work typically includes very low pay, temporary and insecure employment relationships, and a lack of access to social protection (ILO, 2011). Hence, working inside private homes is the epitome of precarity. The home has long been a space where work – mostly conducted by women and racialized groups – is naturalized and devalued. Consequently, work in the domestic sphere remains marginal in terms of public visibility and is unregulated and not adequately remunerated compared to other employment fields (Blunt, 2005). Even though feminists have long problematized the precarity of work performed in the home (Fraeser et al., 2021), domestic work is still not fully covered by labour protection legislation in many countries (ILO, 2013). Furthermore, existing labour regulations are often not enforced, as the home is deemed a private space (Aulenbacher et al., 2024).

In such a context, where informality is the norm rather than the exception, platforms may lead to at least partial formalization of this kind of labour (Huws, 2019; van Doorn, 2022). For example, some of them provide insurance schemes that cover workers who get injured while at work or cause damage to customer property (Hunt and Machingura, 2016). In addition, workers note positively that platforms facilitate access to work and automatize payment (Orth, 2023). Securing earnings via a platform may provide substantial relief in an employment field in which workers often struggle to receive the promised payment for their services. In sum, although pointing to persisting precarity (Ecker et al., 2021; Strüver, 2024) – particularly with regard to low income levels and poor income security – the existing literature on platform work in the care sector draws more ambivalent conclusions than the literature on other sectors of platform work. It also identifies the considerable potential of platforms for improving working conditions in home care, depending on the platforms' design (Huws, 2019; Bansal and Aurora, 2023).

The potential to improve working conditions features most prominently in the narratives of platform entrepreneurs. In their narratives and advertising, they foreground their contributions to formalizing labour and their engagement in combatting undeclared work. They present themselves as emancipators of women and integrators of migrants. Their platform services, they argue, will increase the public recognition of care work and enable workers to earn a good income (Meyer-Habighorst et al., 2025). With this rhetoric strategy, platform entrepreneurs aim to normalize platform labour. They skilfully deflect from persistent problems and structural shortcomings, especially with regard to income security (Lentz et al., 2025).

This article takes on the task of exploring how platform workers in the care sector actually make do with the income they earn. Conceptually, we build on feminist approaches to labour studies, which emphasize that analyses of labour must widen their scope to the work lives beyond the factory gates (Dutta, 2016) and include questions of social reproduction (Bhattacharya, 2017). With this, we aim to contribute to recent debates on platform-adjacent practices, where scholars have also been calling for a greater emphasis on how people "live and make a living" through digital technologies (Richardson, 2018) and on how platform workers "lead complex, multifaceted lives" beyond platforms (van Doorn and Shapiro, 2023). This requires investigating the complexity of the relationships workers are tangled in and the role of networks outside the platform in providing value on digital platforms (Ray and Sam, 2023). Our analysis builds on 24 semi-structured interviews conducted with workers who work through platforms in the care sector in Geneva. We find that, for most of our interviewees, their work on care work platforms is insufficient as a primary source of income. We identify the key role of off-platform networks: intra- and extra-household relationships with family and friends in bolstering incomes. We show how these social relations systematically subsidize income from platform labour and are indispensable for keeping workers afloat. We argue that these off-platform relations further serve as platform subsidies that sustain value creation on platforms and subsidize the (re)production of care work as a low-cost, on-demand service.

2 Feminist approaches to labour studies

Feminist labour scholars have played a pivotal role in challenging mainstream economic and orthodox Marxist views of the economy that focused predominantly on the sphere of production (Bakker and Gill, 2003) and social relations beyond factory doors (Dutta, 2016). They have foregrounded the importance of social reproduction as "the activities necessary to maintain and reproduce life daily and intergener-

ationally at both the individual and social scale" (Winders and Smith, 2019). Importantly, social reproduction is thereby conceptualized not as a sphere separate to production but as a "set of structured practices that unfold in dialectical relation with production, with which it is mutually constitutive and in tension" (Katz, 2001:711). In other words, employing the analytical lens of social reproduction means sifting through the entanglements of production and reproduction in contemporary capitalism (Mitchell et al., 2003).

These entanglements are continuously shifting. Currently, reproductive tasks are increasingly being commodified (Schwiter and Steiner, 2020) and expanded spatially, with care chains stretching across the globe (Hochschild, 2000; Lutz, 2002). Drawing on Murphy (2015), Haubner (2024) thus suggests conceptualizing them as "reproductive relations" that exist in a variety of historical and spatial formations and that might feature stronger or weaker links to value production in a Marxist sense. Focusing on these reproductive relations entails analysing how specific groups of workers sustain themselves under the unequal conditions of capitalist societies (Haubner, 2024).

In this paper, we draw on these strands of social reproduction theory that investigate the complex networks of human relations that make up the lives of workers in and beyond their workplaces (Bhattacharya, 2017; Ferguson, 2020). Such "(re)production networks" (Doutch, 2022) sustain workers through diverse ethics of care. Among other things, they play a key role in mitigating financial risks (Shah and Lerche, 2020). Hence, social reproduction theory serves as our lens for understanding relations and processes of labour and care under capitalism (Bhattacharya, 2017; Haubner, 2024).

The role of off-platform social networks in subsidizing workers' reproductive practices

Previous accounts of platform capitalism have highlighted the dependence of platforms on venture capital and its role in sustaining platforms and defining the terms and conditions of labour (van Doorn and Badger, 2020; van Doorn and Chen, 2021). As highlighted by Ray and Sam (2023), the interest in networks within the platform economy literature has largely focused on "on-platform" networks and their role in creating economic value for platforms, through either network effects, enabling efficiency or sustaining different operations (see Cohen, 2017; Kenney and Zysman, 2016). Concurrently, burgeoning scholarship has started to examine the role of off-platform social networks in platform-mediated work. Such scholarship examines platform dependencies beyond financial markets, including the importance of social networks in sustaining workers outside the platform ecosystem. Moreover, different accounts investigate the role of these social networks in further sustaining the platform itself.

For instance, Yao et al. (2021) problematize the "individualizing" nature of gig work in the context of ridesharing and delivery work. They find that during the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic in particular, social media groups were important for many workers for accessing information, advice and emotional support that were lacking on platforms. However, they contend that the work competition fostered on platforms limits the extent of solidarity and collective organizing. Similarly, Wood et al. (2019) explore what they call "network embeddedness", i.e. the degree to which crowd work is shaped by interpersonal networks of trust generated through micro-level interactions (Wood et al., 2019:938). They have found that gig workers in Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa heavily rely on "re-outsourcing" and the help of their personal contacts, such as family or local community members, to complete tasks and find work opportunities. This in turn enables workers to mitigate negative effects of the commodification of their labour, maintain good client–worker relationships, and build trust in a very competitive work environment where there is considerable physical distance between workers located in low-income countries and clients located in high-income countries.

In the same vein, Posada (2022) investigates the working conditions of Venezuelan platform data workers who use platform-mediated labour for accessing wages in US dollars. The findings suggest that many workers' livelihoods are tied to the support of their family and community networks. Family members relieve household members of domestic work, which is mostly provided by women in the household, to enable them to be more present on platforms. In addition, family members provide financial support by bolstering earnings and sending remittances to workers. This family support is particularly important for workers during times when they cannot work, for example due to illness. Beyond the family, Posada (2022) highlights the importance of pooling resources among local communities to ensure platform workers' reliable access to everyday necessities such as electricity, and internet networks.

In their research on Indian ride hailing and food delivery workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, Ray and Sam (2023) demonstrate the importance of intra-household relations and other social networks in providing both monetary and non-monetary support to workers and shaping the face of gig work during the pandemic. For instance, household members were important in providing mentorship and active networking that were crucial for platforms to recruit new workers. Thus, in the absence of institutional support, intra-household relations and other social networks that workers could leverage were important not only for workers' livelihoods, but also for sustaining platform-based service work. Based on this, Ray and Sam (2023) conclude that social networks play an important role not only for the reproduction of workers but also for the production of value for the platforms.

Overall, existing scholarship on platform-mediated work that investigates the role of social networks highlights the insufficiency of platform work and income for sustaining workers' everyday needs and reproductive practices over time.

They emphasize the importance of emotional and also financial support from off-platform networks for mitigating the precarity of platform work. However, most of these studies explore ride hailing, delivery or crowd work. For this reason, there is a need to gain more knowledge about platform workers in the care sector.

3 Research context

To better understand how platform workers in the care sector sustain themselves with the platform income they earn, we conducted interviews with workers in the city of Geneva, Switzerland. Geneva hosts the headquarters of many international organizations, whose personnel heavily relies on domestic services. With a migrant population of above 65 % (Swiss Federal Statistical Office, 2023), Geneva is simultaneously a hub for the entry of migrant workers. As such, it often serves as the testing ground for new platform companies. In consequence, there exists a wide range of care work platforms. Some of them function as on-demand platforms, with the platform company serving as employer and determining the working conditions including wages. Others are set up as marketplace platforms, where the platform matches workers with customers who define the conditions of their work agreement themselves.

For a minority of care workers employed by temporary staffing agencies, working conditions are regulated in the collective bargaining agreement on staff leasing (Swissstaffing, 2025). All other workers in the home care economy are not covered by a collective labour agreement. Their working conditions are defined by cantonal authorities via a standard employment contract that determines minimum wages for workers employed in households. According to this contract, workers must be paid based on their work experience. Minimum wages start at CHF 24.48 per hour for workers without experience, rise to CHF 24.75 per hour for workers with 4 or more years of experience, and rise to CHF 25 per hour for workers with some form of skills certification for care work (Canton of Geneva, 2025). Despite the fact that minimum wages for workers employed in households apply in all of the Swiss cantons, their concrete implementation remains a challenge (Lempen and Salem, 2017). As the work takes place inside private households, there are no labour inspections on site. In addition, with a very high share of migrant workers within the sector, many workers are unaware of minimum wages or are in too vulnerable a situation to claim them. Thus, actual wages may often be much below the minimum wage level.

However, determining the actual wages that workers in the care sector get paid remains challenging (Flückiger et al., 2009). As workers in the home care economy are still largely in informal employment relationships, only a small share of them appear in income statistics. In consequence, there is scant reliable knowledge on incomes in the home care sector in general. The entry of care work platforms has not changed this. Research across different countries including Switzerland shows that many platforms do not enforce wage compliance with regulatory requirements (Ettarfi, 2024a; Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022; Ticona et al., 2018; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; van Doorn, 2021).

4 Methodology

The findings presented in this paper are based on 24 semi-structured interviews carried out with platform workers in the care sector in Geneva. The interviews took place between April 2022 and October 2023. Four workers were interviewed across time to get a better understanding of their everyday working lives and working trajectories, both within and beyond their work through care work platforms.

Initial field access was facilitated through a labour union in Geneva, which led to three interviews. Most of the interviewees, however, were recruited through an advertisement on a Geneva-specific online platform that works similarly to Craigslist. The latter method was inspired by previous studies on care work platforms (see Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; van Doorn, 2021). Only two participants were found through the snowballing method. This strategy was revealed to be unsuccessful as most interviewees had little contact with other workers on care work platforms.

The sample analysed for this paper consists of 19 women who use different types of platforms to access work, with most of them relying on home care as their main source of income. They perform a variety of home care tasks, including cleaning, laundry, ironing clothes, and caring for children and seniors. They typically accept work in the city of Geneva and its surroundings. The study sample did not actively exclude male workers. However, the all-female sample reflects the pronounced feminization of home care labour (ILO, 2025).

Fifteen of the workers interviewed had a migrant background. However, most had already been established in Geneva for several years at the time of the interview. One participant was from a neighbouring town across the border in France. Others came from Algeria, Bolivia, Brazil, Columbia, Italy, Peru, Portugal and Tunisia, which correspond to the typical regions of origin of home care workers in Geneva – i.e. Southern Europe, North Africa and Latin America. Ten interviewees had children, with three being either single mothers or the main financial providers for their children following a divorce or separation. With one exception, these children needed financial support because they were in education, unemployed or back in their home country.

With the interviews, we wanted to gain a better understanding of platform labour in the care sector. Thus, the interview guide was not focused on how they generated income through platform labour. Instead, it included ques-

tions related to understanding interviewees' work experiences and migration trajectories before they worked via platforms, first experiences contracting work through different platforms, everyday working experiences, relationships with platforms and platform customers, and working conditions including wages. The interviews were transcribed in their original language (French) to avoid the risk of losing meaning and speech nuances. This was particularly important as most participants were not native French speakers. The transcripts were then coded and analysed following a thematic text analysis according to Kuckartz (2014).

5 Findings: the role of off-platform social networks in subsidizing platform income

In setting up our sample, we deliberately chose workers who use platforms not as just a side income but to make a living. When analysing the interviews, we were struck by how often the interviewees referred to the need to bolster their income by other means. When we focused our analysis on this aspect, we realized that hardly any of them were able to cover their living costs without (at least temporarily) accessing other funds. The vignettes below illustrate different aspects of these financial subsidies.

Nadine had to put her studies on hold after personal setbacks. At the time of the interview, she was working as a nanny through care work platforms. Despite limiting her expenses, her platform wages do not always cover them. Therefore, from time to time Nadine also withdraws money from savings left after her mother's death to compensate for her low income. The possibility of drawing from her small inheritance shields Nadine from having to accept gigs that offer particularly bad conditions or extremely low wages:

> Well, I was lucky. Or it was unlucky, because my mom died. She had some savings set aside. So that's where I draw from. So, I'm not a millionaire. I try to do the best I can. I try to limit my expenses as much as possible. I try to pay as many bills as I can from the fruits of my labour. But then, if I need to dip into the little savings I've got, there's not much else I can do. Then, fortunately, I have these savings because, if I didn't have them, well, I think I'd have to work a lot more, accepting anything and everything.

Similarly, Marta tried to sustain herself and her son, who was around 18 years old, by mainly relying on cleaning via care work platforms. However, after a shoulder injury, Marta found herself unable to work. She struggled with accessing any form of work compensation or social support, leaving her completely stranded without any institutional support. Left with limited options, she turned to her parents for some money left by her grandfather for emergency situations:

> We're paid by the hour … it's stressful! Because I tell myself, for example, let's say my oven breaks down, or my freezer, or whatever, and it's expensive … I'm lucky that my grandparents, well, my grandfather who died here, before he died, he gave a sum of money to each of his children so that if one of his grandchildren had a financial problem, well, an emergency, well, the parents could release a sum of money to help. And well, once or twice when I had my shoulder problem and everything, I was really happy that there was this fund so that it could pay my rent. But, at forty-something I don't like asking my parents … I really don't like it. I try to manage on my own, but I don't like it. I know it's there, so on the one hand I tell myself that if I have to ask, I'll ask, but sometimes I think of the other ladies, the other people who get paid, who have hourly jobs like me and who aren't lucky enough to have a safety net just in case!

Marta's case illustrates the precarity stemming from the hourly payment model prevalent in platform labour. Furthermore, it shows how family relations serve as the safety net for platform workers. As they typically lack access to social protection through their platform work (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022), they need to rely on such off-platform support networks in times they cannot work. In our sample, it is parents, grandparents, siblings or even children who step in.

Veronica started working on domestic cleaning platforms after years spent cleaning homes in the informal economy. At the time when she arrived in Geneva from Bolivia, doing domestic work was one of her few options of earning an income. However, even though Veronica could now access a partially formalized employment relationship on the platform, she still had to rely on her husband. For her, the financial help from her husband was crucial during the COVID-19 pandemic, when she could not work and only a few employers agreed to continue paying her during the lockdown. In addition, her husband jumps in when Veronica struggles with money during holiday periods:

> I have the right to public holidays, but that means that the month I'm on vacation, the week, the 15 d, I get no pay. Some people don't go on vacation because of that … They take one week, two weeks, otherwise they don't have any money … I have to go to my country to see my family. So … I have no salary, I know I have no salary for the month I am there, and I know that … Luckily, my husband, he's nice to me and helps, he helps me. And sometimes, he goes with me … Sometimes he goes with me on vacation, and sometimes he doesn't! Because he's paying for the ticket and all that, I've got no salary, it's expensive, it's expensive. So, we say, you go, I'll stay at home and that way we or-

> ganize for the money … It's too expensive for both of us.

In our sample, a total of seven interviewees mentioned how their incomes are routinely bolstered by their spouses or partners, including non-cohabiting partners. While the interviewees are typically able to cover some of their own expenses, for example for health insurance, phone bills and transportation, they rely heavily on a spouse or partner to cover the rest of the household expenses. Strategies of co-sharing incomes also facilitate sending remittances back home to support other relatives and children. For Arlette, for example, her income from cleaning via one of the care work platforms was important to gain a form of autonomy while looking for another job and supporting her financially dependent children. But this was still only possible with the help of her spouse:

> My husband helps me, he helps me a bit and we've always agreed that as long as I don't have a permanent job that he'll help me. There are always things, but when you have to pay 500 francs for insurance, it gets a bit tough. So, it's not just that. I have two children. I've got a daughter here who's 26, she manages but … she just arrived in March and she's still having trouble finding work, too. And my son … he's still at uni. He still has a year to finish university. So, I'm responsible for him. I also have to send him his monthly university fee. So, I help him pay for his room and board … It's tough!

In addition to direct financial support, spouses and partners provide various forms of non-monetary support that indirectly subsidize platform income. For example, some of our interviewees struggle to cover the cost of public transport tickets to get to their customers' households. In this situation, one worker relies on her husband driving her and picking her up from work whenever possible to reduce spending on public transport tickets.

However, relying on a partner or spouse can also create a financial burden that the other person might not always be able to carry. Yasmine, for instance, lives across the French border and is struggling with her platform income. At the time of the interview, her husband is unemployed and mainly relies on unemployment benefits. In consequence, they have been finding themselves running low on money recently.

Beyond family members, spouses and partners, interviewees also rely on the help of friends and neighbours. Alicia, who is a single mother, struggled with finding employment upon arriving in Geneva form Portugal. Her availability was also limited, as she could not access a daycare facility for her young child. Due to her limited income, Alicia relied on the support of a friend who was aware of her dire financial situation. Her friend agreed to share her flat with Alicia and her child without asking them to contribute to the rent:

> Because now I live with a friend. And she doesn't ask me for anything. She doesn't ask for anything because she knows I have a child. She said, when she came here to Switzerland, it was complicated for her. There were people who supported her, and she knows that I'm really looking for a permit to find a small studio for me and my son. She doesn't ask for anything. Even if I offer her something, she says no, that it wouldn't be honest of her if she took something, knowing that I'm raising my son alone, and that I don't have a permit yet, and that I'm trying to find a place for me and my son.

In the case of Marta, her neighbours helped out during the 3 months she could not work following her shoulder injury:

> I was off work for 3 months … So, for 3 months I didn't get a salary. Luckily, I've got family who helped me pay my rent and so on. Because I don't know how I would have managed. I've got a great network with my neighbours, so since I was off work, we'd have breakfast together. We're in a building with people from the south and where people help each other out a lot. I mean, I have Italian neighbours, Portuguese … and I have Turkish neighbours. We all help each other in this building. It's a good thing, and my neighbours told me you don't have a salary, and every morning we have breakfast together. That was great.

The interviews include many such narratives in which friends and neighbours offer to cover rent, share meals or engage in carpooling to pick up cheaper groceries from neighbouring French towns whenever money gets tight. In sum, our findings demonstrate that nearly all interviewees in our sample remain dependent on such indirect financial subsidies from their off-platform networks.

6 Discussion: hidden platform subsidies – from subsidizing platform income to subsidizing care work as a platform service

As our findings have shown, platform workers in the care sector in Geneva need to systematically rely on financial subsidies from family members, spouses, partners, friends or neighbours. Such financial support is especially prevalent in times of crisis, for instance, when they are unable to work or when unexpected or urgent expenses occur. Apart from direct monetary support, workers also access financial help indirectly, for example by staying with a friend and not paying rent or by sharing meals or groceries with neighbours. As such direct or indirect contributions to the living costs of platform workers often remain hidden, they conceal the key fact that working via care work platforms does not add up to a living wage.

Our findings thus support the argument in the existing literature that platform workers require off-platform social relations as a safety net (Posada, 2022). As van Doorn and Shapiro (2023:18) argue, they represent a "multifarious social infrastructure" that "remains underappreciated … until something breaks or puts extraordinary pressure on the ties that hold things together". In general, intra-household relations and wider family serve as important "economic institutions" and are critical for sustaining workers' reproductive practices and providing both financial and emotional support during crisis and economic hardship (Mies, 2022). Neighbourhoods can also foster strong reciprocal relationships that provide access to monetary resources (Ray and Sam, 2023).

From the perspective of worker agency, acquiring financial subsidies from social relations is a key strategy to patch holes in unpredictable income streams. As such, it can be read as another strategy of resilience in a context in which more collective and confrontational practices of resistance are unavailable (Ettarfi, 2024b). However, such strategy remains highly ambivalent: first, not all workers can draw on such social networks. Furthermore, accepting help from others can lead to financial dependence and power asymmetries. Particularly for women, it might keep them in subordinate roles within relationships and limit their abilities to terminate them. In addition, the need to subsidize the platform income through relying on more personal and intimate relations can limit how much freedom one can exercise over household decisions. The latter could be further exacerbated for female workers with a vulnerable residency status.

Regarding care work, our findings thus challenge the prevalent narratives of platform entrepreneurs, who claim that their workers would earn a good income (Lentz et al., 2025). Workers' experiences show that, on the contrary, platform revenues do not add up to a sustainable income over time. Furthermore, our findings add to the debate of whether platforms make care work more sustainable. The entry of platforms in a sector that was largely informal and highly precarious even before might indeed bring some advantages for workers, for example with regard to accessing work and getting paid at all. But our study demonstrates that doing care work via platforms doesn't pay a living.

In introducing our conceptual lens of social reproduction theory, we emphasized the need to focus on reproductive relations (Haubner, 2024) as a lens to understand how people make a living and to conceptualize production and reproduction as always already entangled (Katz, 2001). Thus, we need to think through the ways in which workers' (re)productive networks are interwoven with their (re)productive work via platforms. Starting from the perspective of production, scholars have argued that platforms outsource the costs of social protection and living wages to the family and friends of their workers (Ray and Sam, 2023). In the absence of much social protection, most work-related risks are redefined as a personal and private matter, relegated to the individuals and their social relations to manage.

Starting from the perspective of reproduction, moreover, allows us to conceptualize the financial support rendered by family and friends as "platform subsidies". Firstly, this financial support can be seen as subsidizing platform companies because it enables their workers to remain on the platform despite the inadequacy of the income they receive from it. In other words, the companies profit from workers who must rely on social relationships to complement their wages. Secondly, this financial support subsidizes platform customers in that it maintains the supply of care services at costs that are too low to sustain workers' livelihoods. The external financial support that is vital for workers to stay afloat also keeps labour costs cheaper for households who have the means to hire a care worker.

In sum, the "platform subsidies" that help workers mitigate insufficient platform income also end up facilitating the continuing operation of platforms that are based on the exploitation of workers in low-wage sectors. They also help sustain households that buy care services. The social relations that are required to systematically subsidize platform incomes typically remain hidden. The platform subsidies serve to conceal the low incomes of female workers in the care sector.

7 Conclusions: what is to be done?

In conclusion, resources from workers' social relations serve as "platform subsidies" because labour platforms in the care sector do not provide living wages to platform workers. The minimum wage stipulations that Geneva has introduced for the care sector are often not implemented in practice. Marketplace platforms in particular do not typically inform their customers about minimum wage stipulations, and they also do not enforce gigs advertised on their marketplaces to comply with them. Thus, many ads of workers offering work and of customers seeking workers state illegally low wages. Requiring marketplace platforms to make sure that their ads are compliant with minimum wage regulations would be a first small step to improving their implementation in practice. Such a policy would be in line with current efforts in other sectors to force digital platforms to ensure that their platform content is compliant with the law.

Secondly, many care workers – both on and off platforms – are in positions that are too precarious for these care workers to claim decent wages. Here, a low-threshold and free legal consultation and support service might help improve matters. As the city with the highest share of migrants in the country, Geneva already offers various publicly and privately funded support institutions that provide help to precarious workers in emergency situations. However, their mandates do not typically include the legal advocacy necessary to claim wages due for services rendered. This would contribute to balancing the scales between workers and employers, be they platforms or households. In the border city of Basel, for example, such

support offered by a union has allowed workers to claim substantial additional money from underpaying customers after their employment relationships were terminated (Chau et al., 2018). As these cases were widely discussed in the news at the time, they also contributed to making customers more wary of offering jobs below minimum wage.

Thirdly, unlike for electricians, plumbers and other masculinized service providers who do work inside private homes, travel time for care work typically remains unpaid. In consequence, the hours that care workers actually get paid hardly ever add up to full-time employment (Knoll et al., 2012). If employed by on-demand platforms, workers should by law be paid for transfer times between gigs. However, also here, implementation in practice remains patchy at best.

We agree that the platformization of care work might bring advantages to the sector: the visibility of platforms poses a great opportunity to problematize and politicize the insufficient earnings in the care sector, both on- and off-platform. Here, alternative platforms – such as the Zurich-based cleaning cooperative Autonomía for example (Staubli, 2025) – might serve as role models for how platforms can offer decent work. Geneva poses an ideal ground for such debates. As much as it serves as a testing ground for new platform services, it is home to a local population and strong NGOs committed to supporting the city's migrant workers. They have the means to rally sufficient public pressure on regulators to improve the situation in the home as a place of work.

Data availability. The interview data cannot be made available because, despite careful anonymization, the research participants could potentially be identified, and the participants did not consent to the release of their non-anonymized data.

Author contributions. KE collected and analyzed the data. Both authors contributed equally to the design and writing of the paper.

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