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Feminist research on platform economies: a conversation on current perspectives and future challenges

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Abstract. This article presents an edited transcript of a roundtable discussion originally held at the conference *Feminist Perspectives on the Platformisation of Care Work in European Cities* at the Europa-Universität Flensburg in 2025, in which the panellists discuss the ways in which a feminist perspective might help to better understand digital platform labour in Europe, current developments in feminist theorising on platform labour and new concerns arising for research and practice. The point of departure is the question of how a feminist perspective informs each scholar's research on platform labour. It continues by considering the feminised sectors of platform labour, intersectional inequalities and gendered labour market dynamics, while also being attentive to the lens of social reproduction and the transversal links between waged and unwaged labour within and outside of the household. To conclude, participants address possibilities for transforming exploitative practices and reflect on directions for future research.

The present text derives from a roundtable discussion originally held at the conference *Feminist Perspectives on the Platformisation of Care Work in European Cities* that took place at the Europa-Universität Flensburg in July 2025. The discussion was subsequently reconvened, recorded, transcribed and edited for publication. The roundtable was facilitated by sociologist Emma Dowling, with sociologist Mê-Linh Riemann, independent social researcher Olivia Blanchard and human geographers Barbara Orth and Yannick Ecker serving as discussants. The exchange examined the implications of current changes to social reproduction, the gendered and racialised dimensions of digital platform labour in food delivery services, the expansion of digital platforms in domestic labour (especially childcare, eldercare and cleaning), the experiences of migrant workers, and policymaking and regulation of digital platform labour. The conversation begins with each participant setting out the ways in which a feminist perspective informs their research. Central points of discussion include the gendered blind spots of both research and policy, and the analysis made possible by a feminist perspective. The conversation covers the effects of platformisation on feminised forms of work, such as caring and cleaning, but also how the rise of digital platforms is transforming social reproduction and domestic work in the home. Additionally, the conversation reflects on the interplay between the formalisation and informalisation of work in the context of digital platforms, and the directions and effects of regulatory policies. Despite some potential for empowerment and better working conditions, participants emphasise that only comprehensive organising and better regulation can effectively address exploitative and precarious platform labour. Moreover, many of the observations discussed reflect considerable continuity when it comes to the structures and practices of social reproduction, whether this is the gendered division of labour within households, the devaluation of reproductive labour, the reliance on a feminised

and racialised workforce or the expectation to provide care "for the love of others" (Pulignano and Domecka, 2025; see Finch and Groves, 1983). Rather than emerging from platform economies as such, these continuities point to the persistent challenge of fundamentally transforming hitherto social relations of reproduction.

Emma Dowling (ED): The focus of this roundtable discussion is to tease out how a feminist perspective helps us to better understand digital platform labour, what current developments there are in feminist theorisations of platform labour, what new concerns for research might be arising, but also what might be done to remedy – not just in theory but in practice – the problems that a feminist perspective unearths. But what exactly does a feminist perspective on platform labour entail? To help us begin unpacking our topics, I would like to suggest four central facets of a feminist perspective. First, a feminist perspective puts centre-stage the co-constitutive relationship of production and reproduction; that is, the relationship between workplaces and households in the global economy. Second, it brings into view the role of unwaged domestic and care work and low-wage paid services in capital accumulation. Third, a feminist perspective calls for an analysis of intersections between gender, race and class as well as able-bodiedness and concerns about ecology, climate change and the environment. Fourth, it is attentive to issues of social conflict, change and struggle pertaining to the changes in regimes of social reproduction and the relationship between state, market and society, with a specific focus on feminist struggles in a contemporary context. This is because methodologically, I would argue, a specifically *feminist* lens commits us to a critical analysis of existing power relations and the ways in which these are rendered natural and desirable, while at the same time concerning itself with the possibilities for transformation of these intersectional power relations as they relate to political and economic issues, and the configurations and relations of space. With this in mind, I would like to ask each of you to lay out your feminist perspective on platform labour.

Olivia Blanchard (OB): A feminist perspective informs my work in three ways. First, in the questions I ask. I started researching platform labour in Spain in 2019 when much of the academic and public debate there centred on highly masculinised sectors, such as ride hailing and delivery, although research was emerging in other countries on platform work in highly feminised sectors, such as beauty services, cleaning and home care (Hunt and Machingura, 2016; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). I was a researcher at a Barcelona-based think tank, and Spain had one of the highest numbers of platform labourers in Europe (Pesole et al., 2018). Our literature review revealed a significant knowledge gap regarding cleaning and home care platforms in Spain. This led me to focus on home care platforms (Digital Future Society, 2020, 2021). I was interested in critically analysing the platforms' narratives regarding their ambition to "formalise" and "professionalise" home care work. I was curious about the extent to which this was marketing rhetoric but also how platforms might have a positive impact – especially considering how this type of work has historically been feminised and racialised, devalued and rendered invisible, while also being characterised by high levels of informality and precarity.

A second way in which a feminist perspective informs my work is where I view platform labour in terms of gendered labour market dynamics. Gathering data on the home care platform founders' profiles, I realised they fit the typical profile of a tech start-up entrepreneur. They were mostly male, between 30 and 45 years old, had a business background and no prior professional experience or connections with the care sector. This made me reflect on the gendered segregation and gendered power dynamics of the sector. Men are the founders, CEOs and investors of these platform companies, while women make up most of the workforce. Nevertheless, globally, they continue to be underrepresented in the tech sector at large: only 19 % of ICT positions in Europe are occupied by women (Eurostat, 2025).

Third, I place platform labour within the wider context of technology production, remembering that we are talking about apps and platforms powered by algorithms and AI technologies, which have incredibly high costs both in terms of natural resources and human labour. A feminist perspective asks us to be attentive to all the assistive and reproductive labour that is rendered invisible as labour across capitalist economies society day in and day out; when it comes to environmental concerns, a feminist perspective can help us attend to the ways in which the very same disregard is applied to ecological resources in capitalist economies (Mies, 1986; Federici, 2004). Hence, where AI is often portrayed as something immaterial (think of the term "the cloud"), we should not disregard the vast swathes of invisible human labour involved in training and developing these technologies, as well as the immense dependency on water, the extraction of resources.

Barbara Orth (BO): As a feminist researcher, I have been particularly interested in the platformisation of domestic and care labour. When I began my research on migration and the gig economy at the Free University Berlin, most other studies were about the USA (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; Ticona et al., 2018), a context which is not comparable to Europe because in the USA social reproduction is even more privatised, and the welfare state is almost non-existent. As a result, the market for platformising care is entirely different. Also, the literature on platform labour had by and large considered the experiences of the predominantly male workforce in ride hailing and food delivery. Unsurprisingly, women's perspectives were missing from that (since then, there have been gender perspectives on ride hailing and delivery work; see, for example, Grau-Sarabia and Fuster-Morell, 2021; Milkman et al., 2021; Zhou, 2022).

In addition, I think there are two broader questions that follow from a feminist perspective. First, feminist scholarship urges us not to simply look at the realm of production

to understand workers' lives. Therefore, I was interested in researching how these new technologies influence workers' lives beyond the platform, and how this type of work restructures other areas and aspects of their lives. I wanted to understand what kind of life-world emerged in, from, through and against platform labour. The work of social reproduction – from cleaning to food production – is indeed being platformised, but it is also interesting to ask: who makes food for the delivery worker? How do they balance their highly precarious work and long working hours with their own social reproduction needs? At the outset in 2020, policy-makers, activists and researchers had pointed to the large number of migrants working in the platform economy – but no one had yet theorised it. Since then, there has been some excellent theorisation, from Moritz Altenried's (2022) notion of a "digital factory" to Dalia Gebrial's (2024) work on racial capitalism and platform labour. As discussed in the literature, platform companies externalise much of their running costs such as equipment (smartphones, bicycles, cleaning materials) as well as employer responsibilities (social security etc.) to their workers. This avoidance makes the lean business model possible for companies. A readily accessible and hyperflexible pool of workers is equally important to the very functioning of platform capitalism. However, platform companies do not shoulder the cost of reproducing this workforce. Moreover, the cost of migration is shouldered entirely by the migrants. My contribution to this debate is to show that the very cost of migration, i.e. the material, educational and emotional resources migration requires, should be considered another form of externalising costs by platform companies. Lastly, I think a feminist perspective on platform labour also and importantly entails reading and citing feminist scholarship and actively encouraging junior scholars to look at these questions.

Mê-Linh Riemann (MR): I have been researching platform labour for several years now: first at KU Leuven in Belgium, where I focused on the role (and prevalence) of unpaid labour in different sectors (eldercare, creative industries, the gig economy) and, second, in my current position at the Europa-Universität Flensburg, where I have conducted research on food delivery riders in Hamburg. At KU Leuven, we uncovered many forms of unpaid labour in the care sector (both in elderly care homes, and on senior and childcare platforms), which are directly linked to gendered expectations of performing care "for the love of others" (Pulignano and Domecka, 2025): an ideal worker norm, which undermined the carers' agency and negotiating power. Despite low wages, these (mostly female) workers invested much unpaid time, energy and emotional labour to ensure that the care recipients were "well taken care of". They did so out of "human decency" rather than financial incentives (Pulignano et al., 2024). The nature of care work made it very difficult to strike or refuse services, as vulnerable lives were at risk. Workers who did insist on their rights and refused, for example, to do unpaid overtime, were frequently stigmatised as "immoral" by supervisors and clients' families (Pulignano et al., 2025). My current research is a bit different. In casual conversations, people are sometimes surprised that I study food delivery platforms from a feminist perspective, given that the workforce is predominantly male. I have always thought that this is a rather narrow view. A feminist perspective does not only mean focussing on "women's work" in a literal sense. It also means being sensitised to wider intersectional inequalities that result, say, from someone's migration or visa status, their class background, abilities or age (Milkman et al., 2021; Van Doorn and Vijay, 2024). If you are 20, you will experience being a rider very differently to when you are 50. I study food delivery labour from a biographical perspective (Riemann et al., 2023). I think about the conditions under which people enter this sector, which are shaped by intersectional inequalities. Important to me too is to consider the gendered expectations of men. For example, in Hamburg, many workers are from Ghana. These young men are under pressure to conform to a masculine "provider" role for their families in Ghana (Teye et al., 2023). In my research, the topic of remittances came up repeatedly. One interviewee even referred to the "black tax", which is a colloquial term for remittances. In addition, I have also interviewed a few female riders. These narratives were particularly rich in shedding light on gendered obstacles such as safety concerns (e.g. having to deliver meals to (clients of) sex workers in the red-light district), feeling disrespected by male colleagues and a heightened sense of vulnerability in traffic (especially at night). Whilst there have been some important contributions (Bingqian, 2024), the experiences of female riders are still understudied. Finally, I would like to mention that we consider food delivery services as a form of outsourced reproductive labour, as it "replaces" domestic tasks such as cooking and grocery shopping. Classifying food delivery apps as "care" platforms is a bit unusual, because the latter is mostly associated with cleaning and childcare services. At its core, however, food delivery is also about "sustaining lives", which is why there are more similarities to other types of care platforms (e.g. childcare) than one might expect at first sight.

Yannick Ecker (YE): My research on social reproduction and the logistical city at the University of Halle focuses on the externalisation of housework in Germany through delivery services for groceries and prepared meals, i.e. on outsourced reproductive labour. Consequently, there are three ways in which a feminist perspective informs my research: first, in the analysis of a crisis of social reproduction (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2017) and the unequal effects of shifts within the social division of labour; second, through a transversal perspective that recognises both unwaged forms of household labour and waged forms of externalised service labour, as well as the interrelations between the two (e.g. Mitchell et al., 2004; Huws, 2019; Haubner, 2024); third, in the focus on the household as a workplace and the ways in which the household mediates the crisis of social reproduction in social and spatial terms. This takes us beyond a sole

focus on paid platform labour alone towards understanding how existing "reproductive models" (Winker, 2015) might be undergoing reorganisation.

ED: All of you have emphasised that a central concern of feminist critiques has been to highlight the gendered and racialised exploitations of unwaged and low-wage reproductive and caring labour in capitalist economies, including within households. With digital platforms, to what extent are we seeing changes or continuities regarding the problems that feminist analyses have already identified?

YE: One continuity we find is that digitalised delivery services often reinforce gendered inequalities within households because they displace rather than pose the question of how this labour might be undertaken otherwise. A further continuity that is evident in the externalisation of reproductive labour through delivery services is the feminisation and devaluation of the tasks involved. Delivery services reinforce an existing bifurcation, namely the separation of the physically demanding from the affective components of labour. In grocery delivery services, the work of consumption and transportation is commodified and takes place in public, while the "mental load" of thinking about what to order and who will eat remains privatised in the household as a feminised task. Hence, the relief brought by the service is asymmetrical. There is a clear continuity with the existing gendered division of labour; there is not much of a disruption or renegotiation.

ED: The continuities you describe are certainly striking; what shifts is perhaps that the negotiation of the task becomes a logistical one. That would be another way that negotiation might take place; it is not about who does the reproductive labour but who organises the services.

YE: Yes, we are seeing a logistification of housework. This can have different effects on different social groups. I am thinking, for example, of interviews I did with older adults. As older persons came to rely on delivery services due to reduced mobility, they also experienced an impoverishment of their social life because grocery shopping was reduced to logistical provision. At the level of waged retail labour, there is a mirror image. Digitalisation and delivery services remove the affective components from these spaces of work (Ecker and Strüver, 2023). Where retail labour becomes logistical service work, a devaluation occurs. One union representative I interviewed said that all you are left with is an "in-store logistician" who organises commissioning and delivery; there is no longer a salesperson (in terms of job description and pay grade). It is the same dynamic of separation that reproduces this devaluation of labour in both waged and unwaged work.

ED: This is something that I have also come across in my research on the care sector: all too often, the affective, caring components of the labour performed are siphoned off despite how integral they in fact are. Many a time this is due to time pressures and the introduction of efficiency logics, but it also has to do with a hierarchisation of value regarding tasks deemed necessary and those considered less essential (Dowling, 2021). I would now like to bring in another – albeit quite different – point relating to digital platforms and hierarchies. Digital platforms seem to be marketed as technologies for democratisation. There is the idea that with these platforms some people will be providing the services, and others will be getting the services and paying for them. There is the suggestion of an equal playing field where everybody is simply part of these digital platforms. Yet the reality is quite different. Is this a continuity, in which wealthier households buy their way out of reproductive labour and putting that onto others?

MR: I suspect that class differences play a larger role when it comes to, say, hiring a cleaner versus ordering a pizza. The latter seems like a more affordable, low-stake transaction. The riders I interviewed told me that all kinds of people use delivery services. It is not necessarily particularly wealthy people and for the most part it is students or young professionals living in urban centres. Some riders even commented on the positive contribution they thought they made to society when delivering food to single mothers or to people with disabilities. Yet there is an ambiguity because they might also deliver alcohol to someone who is clearly an alcoholic or spirits to someone who may well be underage. What I found quite interesting is how interviewees' interactions with clients differed depending on the neighbourhoods. A common theme was lower (or no) tips in affluent districts, while poorer customers – who were often fellow migrants – turned out to be the most generous ones.

BO: I think there are also interesting aspects pertaining to class differences when you look at the workers themselves and compare them to non-platform workers. When I started my research, I expected to find the typical care worker demographic on the platforms, which in the German context is working-class women between 50 and 60 years old, predominantly from central and eastern European countries. What I found instead were multilingual young people in their twenties and thirties with university degrees. In other words, we are seeing how the highly precarious working conditions in domestic work that have always existed for working-class women and women of colour now affecting more middle-class people. Workers can cope with this downward social mobility because platform labour is branded as temporary, as something that is kind of cool (see Orth, 2025). So, in terms of the composition of the workforce on these platforms, we are seeing something new or different from other low-wage work. I think this has to do with the technologies involved.

In contrast to cleaners or care workers who are hired via agencies, platform workers need other, additional competencies. Interpersonal competencies are necessary to be able to connect with clients and be given the job in the first place. These are the kinds of competencies we associate with feminised emotional labour, and they are competencies that so often are not recognised as skilled labour. You also need to be able to take good photos for your profile; you need to have

the language skills to be able to communicate with a client because there is no agency to manage client relationships. Certainly, many workers do have these skills, yet many care workers and cleaners who do this work off platforms do not. I think this makes domestic work on platforms quite distinct. A lot of the literature argues that platform labour is particularly accessible for migrants and people who have no other options on the job market. While that may be true as a rider or as an Uber driver, it is not so in more relational kinds of services where you need both the relational and digital skills to market yourself. This is probably also why there are fewer workers above a certain age offering their services on the platforms (see also Orth, 2024).

ED: So, once again we see how necessary labour is rendered invisible or not considered part of a formal skillset or job description, which is something that a feminist perspective calls attention to.

MR: This digitalised system creates new vulnerabilities too. Platforms subject workers to ratings, which means their services are evaluated by clients through stars and comments. My impression is that many clients underestimate the impact such ratings have on the workers' ability to secure gigs in the future. A bad review can be detrimental for their livelihoods (Riemann et al., 2023). "Algorithmic insecurity" (Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2021) is the term used to describe the ways in which workers are at the mercy of client ratings. This has become pervasive in cleaning and childcare precisely because care work is more personalised than food delivery.

ED: So, the proliferation of gigs (and therefore employers) via the digital platform actually makes workers more vulnerable rather than less so, precisely because of the ways in which the technical affordances of digital platforms allow for more intense surveillance and performance measurement. Regarding vulnerability, one of the long-standing characteristics of domestic work is informality or semi-informality, often leaving workers very vulnerable to exploitation and lack of labour protection. This is precisely because private households are not formal workplaces or public institutions in the same way that offices and factories or schools and hospitals are. Limited access can make it difficult to ensure labour or quality standards. One issue that has already been mentioned is how platforms seek to formalise labour that was previously carried out in informal settings or not even considered work. However, these processes of formalisation often actually foster precarity. What exactly is happening here?

OB: In home care, there are different business models. Digital placement agencies operate in a similar way to traditional agencies. In Spain, for example, they do the matching, and most of them also do the contractual paperwork on behalf of the family, registering the carer as a domestic worker under the Social Security's Special System for Domestic Employees. It could be said that these platforms are contributing to the formalisation of working relationships that might otherwise remain in the informal economy. However, care workers are still employed as domestic workers under the Social Security's Special System, rather than as professional care workers under the Social Security's General Regime (and therefore do not have the same rights). Platforms with an on-demand model do not appear to be contributing at all in a positive way to formalising the working relationships as they only do the matching. And even when there is a formal contract, care workers continue to experience the same precarious working conditions that characterise the sector.

It is hugely important to incorporate a feminist perspective when seeking to understand the potential for digital platforms to contribute to the professionalisation of home care and domestic work. Several factors, including gender, class and race, have determined how, when and which activities do become professionalised; and the process of professionalisation entails training, official certification and recognition of skills development. Caring has long been a feminised responsibility in the private sphere of the home rather than a profession (Moreno-Colom et al., 2017). Although the Law for the Promotion of the Autonomy and Care of People in a Situation of Dependency (LAPAD), passed in 2006 in Spain, signalled a landmark moment, recognising the universal right to care, the state's efforts to professionalise home care and domestic work have been fraught with challenges. When I asked platform founders about their ambition to professionalise this work, there was little consensus on the meaning of professionalisation or how to make it happen. When I asked about training, they said they did not provide any and were quick to add that the carers accepted on their platforms were "already" professionals. Indeed, providing training may render them liable to be regarded as employers, rather than intermediaries. I concluded that there was no positive impact in this regard. All in all, the structural, gender-based inequalities found in the traditional labour market are not really being addressed by these companies.

In many ways, platform labour represents a continuum with the hitherto labour market dynamics, albeit with some exceptions – Ariela Micha and colleagues found that female drivers and riders in the Argentinian city of Buenos Aires appreciated the platforms' impersonal recruitment mechanisms, which they perceived to help reduce the risk of direct discrimination (Micha et al., 2022). Yet, once in, women faced the same structural inequalities they experienced in the labour market offline: women worked fewer hours and earned less than their male counterparts, mainly due to differences in access to cars, motorbikes and driving licences; a gendered digital divide; the burden of unwaged care work; and, finally, the gendered dimensions of public space and perceptions of safety. Compared to men, women were more likely to do deliveries by bike (rather than motorbike), less likely able to work evenings and weekends due to caring responsibilities, less likely to work at night, and more likely to cancel rides and deliveries to areas they considered unsafe. If women are accessing less work because of childcare responsibilities, they are also not able to work in the most productive or lucrative times of the day, which in turn affects

their income. Platforms have tried to address the issue of gender-based violence, and there are numerous cases of platforms incorporating tech-based solutions as safety measures to protect women workers (Fairwork, 2023). In Argentina, Uber created the "Uber Ellas/Uber She" feature so that female drivers can filter and select female clients only. In India, the food delivery platform Swiggy installed a measure that automatically prevented women workers from using the platform after six in the evening (Fairwork, 2023). However, some argue this is a case of techno-solutionism (i.e. a tech-based fix to a complex social problem) that does little to address root causes and negatively impacts women's earnings (Fairwork, 2023).

ED: I wonder whether visibility on the digital platform makes a particular kind of formalisation of this work necessary because it displaces the social networks and word-of-mouth connections. In the past, someone might have recommended their cleaner to a neighbour or friend in ways that were completely informal and invisible. Is it the case that the platform forces someone into visibility that makes formalisation necessary, which, however, stops short of proper employment?

OB: I think there could be a potential positive aspect of exactly what you just said, namely the potential of platforms to trace and register the hours, the earnings, to trace who's doing what for what price. If you want to make visible all the work that is currently undeclared, this could be a tool. However, in some cases, the negotiations and payment occur outside the app. Going back to the potential of the tool, it also depends on the intention with which it has been designed. The case of the Colombian cleaning app Hogaru is interesting. The founders started off with an on-demand model but then switched to directly employing the cleaners. They also developed another app, called HogaruAporta, that can be used by anybody in Colombia. HogaruAporta facilitates the formalisation of the working relationship and the payment of salaries and social security contributions of domestic workers.

BO: I have spoken to cleaners in Germany who work both on and off platforms. Many cleaners who start out on a platform then take their clients off it. Platform companies are aware of this, and cleaners are highly penalised if they are found out. Cleaners I spoke with told me that the app is like an address book. Even though the pay is not great, it is much easier to sign up to a platform and work on the app for a few weeks to find new clients than [to] put up a notice in a supermarket. In this sense, the platform really does what it says it does, namely connect people. On the platform, there is also less risk of wage theft, which is prevalent in cleaning work because clients do not stick to agreements or cleaners experience sexual abuse and end up not being paid. At least on the platform, any wage theft that might happen would be documented.

I also want to say something about leveraging technology for good. Colleagues and I recently looked at a cleaning cooperative in Zurich called Autonomia. Autonomia is not a platform in the sense that it has venture capital funding and sophisticated algorithms. Autonomia uses technology to make the work of matching cleaners and clients easier. Many cleaners prefer to communicate directly with clients, which agencies do not always allow. Autonomia cleaners can message the clients and do the scheduling directly through an online tool. They can also file their bills directly through digital tools. In these ways, the technology is helpful and empowering (see Bronowicka et al., 2026). The problem is not the platform model or the technology; the problem is how technology is used in a capitalist economy to further profit making.

ED: I think it is striking how much of the research that we are discussing here maps new developments that have to do with the specificities of platform economies and digitalisation, and yet at the same time many of the findings point to structural continuities when it comes to gendered divisions of labour within households, the devaluation of reproductive labour, the reliance on a feminised and racialised workforce, or the expectation to provide care out of a sense of responsibility for or personal attachment to others. Aside from offering tools for analysis, a feminist perspective also entails asking where the possibilities for intervention and change are. Beyond individualised and marketised "fixes" to the care crisis (Dowling, 2021, 2022) that do little to transform structural conditions and perpetuate the overall status quo, what might strategies for intervention and change look like?

YE: Regarding platform research more generally, I think we are starting to leave behind the problems of "platform exceptionalism" (Schaupp and Woodcock, 2025). By that, I mean moving away from a narrow focus on platform technologies towards an analysis of the societal conditions underpinning platform models. For example, I look forward to seeing more research projects seeking to [understand] delivery work not in isolation but in the broader context of the restaurant and food retailing industry. I think moving away from platform exceptionalism can also inform conversations about interventions and change. Some necessary changes might not have much to do with the technological aspects at all, such as reductions in working time, higher minimum wages or more inclusive migration regimes. Such demands have much more to do with creating more equitable societal and gendered divisions of labour and with removing the enabling conditions for precarious platform labour.

BO: It is also necessary to broaden what we mean by platform labour. So much of the labour required to make platforms function is rendered invisible. For example, who services the bicycles that the riders use? I also think life course studies would be helpful to see how platform labour is experienced over time. From the few cases I have looked at, it seems that people like platform labour in the beginning and then over time the drawbacks become more palpable. More longitudinal studies would help to understand what happens when workers get older and have done this work

for a long time. Do they end up with gaps in their pension schemes? This is of course a circumstance that has been true for women for a long time. In the EU, I think it would be worthwhile to look at how the EU directive on platform labour affects the domestic sector, if at all. I am not a legal scholar, but from my understanding, there are open questions surrounding what constitutes work and what constitutes employment. I also think that the regulation of platforms and paths to improving workers' lives cannot only hinge on labour law, because labour law is always based on standard employment. There are currently some interesting initiatives by labour unions that try to go beyond traditional organising and take a more holistic approach. Proposals include taxing each gig to publicly funding infrastructures such as toilets and charging stations or mandating restaurants to let riders use their bathrooms. Such initiatives do not consider the employment contract in isolation but consider the surrounding infrastructures important for improving working conditions. I also think there need to be more long-term migration pathways and more recognition of the existing qualifications of migrant workers.

ED: On the point of taking a broader approach to union organising, I was reminded of Jane McAlevey's (2016) writing and the notion of "whole-worker organising", which connects labour struggles at the point of production with social reproduction in the sense of being attentive to the problems and issues but also the connections and support structures that exist beyond the workplace. Regarding public space and infrastructures, in our research on the working and employment conditions of bus drivers in Austria, we also encountered a similar problem. Bus drivers are not platform workers, but their workplace is also public space, and they too face problems with adequate access to facilities such as toilets or break rooms. Here, disputes between public authorities and private bus companies are ongoing regarding the responsibility for ensuring [that] these necessary infrastructures exist (Dowling et al., 2024). No doubt regulation is important when it comes to such issues but also more generally in terms of working conditions and employment. What are regulatory efforts able to achieve?

OB: In Spain, the Royal Decree-Law 9/2021, the so-called "Riders' Law", provides an interesting case. It was pioneering in Europe at the time, first, because it established that delivery platforms should classify couriers as employees, rather than as freelance workers; second, because it obliges employers (of all companies, not only platforms) to provide workers' representatives with relevant information on the algorithmic and artificial intelligence systems they use that affect working conditions and access to employment. Originally, the Riders' Law was to apply to platforms across all sectors, including cleaning and home care. Then the focus was narrowed down to riders only. For me, that speaks to the lack of a gender perspective in public policy when regulating these new phenomena. The application of the Riders' Law has not been easy. Platform company reactions have been mixed: Deliveroo decided to close its operations in Spain. Glovo initially challenged the new law by continuing to operate with freelance workers (resulting in millions of euros' worth of fines) until July 2025, when the company finally decided to contract directly 14 000 riders and hire many others through subcontractors. Uber Eats hires workers through subcontractors and, until recently, also relied on self-employed riders. The only platform that has publicly supported the law is Just Eat, whose model was not based on employing self-employed workers. On an international level, the EU Platform Directive (adopted in 2024) was inspired by national laws such as the Spanish Riders' Law. Member states have until December 2026 to incorporate the directive into national legislation. The directive establishes a presumption of employment relationship if there are indications of platform direction and control (e.g. setting pay, performance monitoring), and it also sets clearer and stronger rules and protections around algorithmic management and data rights. However, although an important advancement, in its application, the directive gives broad discretion to national legislators, especially regarding procedures and criteria to determine workers' employment status. So, we will have to wait and see how theory turns into practice on the ground.

MR: As a final thought, I think we should consider the future of platform economies. Many platform workers I spoke to voiced concerns that the platforms they worked for might not exist 6 months hence. Platform representatives I spoke to were also often vague about the long-term profitability of the business (Alvarez-Palau et al., 2022). Maybe in 20 years' time, we will think back to the 2020s when we used to see these food delivery riders in the cityscape all the time. Yet the shape of current platform economies might not be sustainable in the longer term. "Platform economy" has become an umbrella term for all kinds of work arrangements and business models, which is why it makes more sense to speak of platform economies in the plural. Future configurations will be dependent on the services offered, and the specificities of national and legal contexts.

ED: Questions of sustainability are indeed key, both in social but also in ecological terms. Our conversation has shown that feminist perspectives have important contributions to make in this regard. A feminist perspective prompts us to not only consider the home and public space as workplaces, where platform labour traverses waged and unwaged work. A feminist perspective reminds us to be attentive to the intersectional inequalities and power differentials that stratify both labour processes and labour markets. A feminist perspective also sensitises us to forms of labour and resource extraction that are repeatedly rendered invisible and calls for a broader view on platforms and whose labour is constitutive to their functioning, what is even considered work, as well as what kind of labour is valued and what is not. In addition, our discussion has also highlighted the importance of thinking beyond the mere technological dimensions of platforms and of situating digital platforms and platform labour within

the broader context of capitalist valorisation, production *and* social reproduction. It is not only a question of how digital platforms influence work and employment but also how lives are shaped beyond the workplace. Hopefully such analyses can contribute to the development of effective interventions, be this in labour organising or policy advocacy. A key theme throughout our conversation has been continuity and change. What the research discussed here shows is that the feminist question of how to envision and bring about a more fundamental transformation of social reproduction is still an urgent and pertinent one.

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