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Platformizing care in a familistic welfare regime in crisis: migration and social reproduction in Spain

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Abstract. This article examines the platformization of care and domestic work in Spain as part of the broader crisis of familistic welfare regimes in southern Europe. It argues that digital platforms do not represent a rupture with existing care arrangements, but rather an intensification and reorganization of long-standing patterns of privatization, marketization and reliance on migrant labour. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork with platform-mediated care and domestic workers in Madrid, combined with collaborative ethnography with migrant workers' collectives, the article situates platform expansion within the structural under-provision of public care services and the transnational reorganization of reproductive labour.

Empirically, the analysis shows that platform-mediated care work in Spain is closely embedded in stepwise migratory itineraries shaped by legal insecurity, administrative borders and uneven access to rights. Platforms leverage the temporalities of the migratory process, often operating as gateways into employment while simultaneously generating specific forms of stratification structured by gendered, racialized and legal inequalities.

At the same time, the article highlights that in the Spanish context, platformization unfolds in a context marked by pre-existing traditions of collective organizing among migrant domestic and care workers. Grassroots collectives function as alternative infrastructures of social reproduction, providing mutual aid, legal advice and spaces for the politicization of shared experiences. This allows individualized platform-based trajectories to be rearticulated into collective forms of agency and contestation. The article concludes by suggesting that future research should further explore the conditions under which platform-induced isolation can be transformed into collective organization and how legal status, welfare regimes and local organizing infrastructures shape divergent outcomes of platformization in care work.

1 An introduction to the model of reproductive labour in Spain

The geographies of platform capitalism are not solely articulated through digital infrastructures, apps or algorithms but are also produced through itineraries of international mobility that unevenly reorganize who provides care, where it takes place and under what conditions life is sustained. In the Spanish case, the expansion of care and domestic work platforms is best understood when situated within the crisis of the traditional Mediterranean familistic regime model, historically grounded in the intrafamilial delegation of social reproduction and, within it, in women's availability to sustain a "double presence" across paid employment and care (Esping-Andersen, 1990; Balbo, 1994; Lewis, 2006). Rising care needs associated with ageing and the verticalization of intergenerational obligations, together with the large-scale incorporation of women into paid work, strained a model that was not compensated by a sufficient expansion of public services. The predominant response was the privatization and commodification of care through individualized and market-based solutions in a context of fragmented state intervention. The convergence of direct familial responsibility, marketization, the externalization of care, and reliance on a feminized

and migrant workforce has created particularly fertile conditions for the expansion of digital platforms in the sector.

The key contribution of this paper lies in using this framework to contribute to the growing discussion on platformization as both a continuation and an intensification of an unequal social reproduction regime (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022). Since care has historically been a terrain of invisibility, informality and private delegation, a growing body of scholarship has questioned whether digital intermediation brings genuine formalization or, in contrast, produces new forms of commodification that reproduce gendered and class-based asymmetries through renewed mechanisms of control, evaluation and availability (Rodríguez-Modroño, 2025; Lentz et al., 2026). This entails asking what continuities – but also what ruptures – the emergence and consolidation of digital platforms may bring about in the social organization of reproductive life. Taking into account the specific features of the labour realities of care and domestic work in Spain and building on previous research that has identified migration-related factors as central to the organization of care and domestic work (van Doorn and Vijay, 2024; Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2024; Yin, 2024), we focus on migration as a determining element in these labour configurations. The Spanish case operates here as a laboratory – not because it is exceptional, but because it clearly condenses the combination of familism, public under-provision and marketization, making it possible to observe what kinds of "solutions" thrive when the state does not guarantee sufficient care infrastructures.

This rearticulation of familism has relied decisively on a transnational reorganization of reproductive labour. The feminization of migratory flows and the incorporation of migrant women into care work under conditions of structural precariousness consolidated what has been described as a "migrant-in-the-family" model, as well as a new international division of reproductive labour (Anderson, 2000; Oso and Catarino, 2000; Hochschild, 2001; Benería, 2005; Bettio et al., 2006). Within this framework, migration is not an "external contribution" to the labour market but a constitutive component of its configuration. The migration regime, administrative borders and legal statuses operate as technologies for the material ordering of labour power, producing sectoral segmentations and internal hierarchies within occupations (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013; Robinson, 2021). In Spain, this takes the form of differentiated specialization by origin and gender. The relevance of Latin American migration – favoured by Spain's migration model as well as linguistic and postcolonial ties – has led to a particularly intense insertion into care work, given the shared language and cultural elements associated with caregiving. This contrasts with other sectors such as cleaning and other reproductive tasks, where a larger number of people from other regions and territories have been able to enter more easily. While cleaning has been an employment niche for many people of Latin American origin, as we also document here, the characteristics of this sector have entailed greater variability by country of origin than in personal care work (Martín-Pérez and Moreno-Fuentes, 2012; Gil Araujo and González-Fernández, 2014). Beyond identifying which groups occupy which niches, the question that concerns us is how particular categories of migrant women, with specific legal statuses, trajectories, and social and cultural resources, end up performing particular jobs and how those niches come to be stabilized as "natural", culturally appropriate or administratively possible.

In this regard, it is necessary to clarify that in the labour market for domestic tasks, the boundaries between care and tasks such as cleaning, ironing or cooking, among other reproductive tasks, are frequently blurred. As we show, the informality of the sector also entails a de-specialization of labour (Barrial Berbén et al., 2025), with care tasks and household maintenance tasks often assigned interchangeably.

Platformization is inserted into this architecture as a specific mode of intermediation that intensifies and reorganizes pre-existing dependencies. Empirically, the article shows that digital platforms in Spain are sustained by a migratory itinerary that is rarely direct. Trajectories are composed of stages, intermediate stops and reorientations shaped by family networks, labour opportunities, regularization processes and economic conjunctures. This logic resonates with the notion of "migration infrastructures", understood as assemblages of mediations – agencies, networks, legal frameworks, informal channels – that make movement and labour-market insertion possible (Xiang and Lindquist, 2014). Xiang and Lindquist (2014) proposed this notion to shift the analytical focus away from individual migrants' decisions and from the state as the sole regulator of mobility towards the interlinked technologies, institutions and actors that facilitate and condition movement. Their main contribution has been to show that mobility is produced through layers of intermediation that channel people along specific routes and towards specific destinations. Recent scholarship has extended this lens to the gig economy. And here a new debate opens up, one that has been addressed by authors such as Altenried (2024) or van Doorn and Vijay (2024), about whether the platform should be read as a new actor within those infrastructures, capable of intervening at different moments of transit, rather than merely as a labour intermediary after arrival. Within that assemblage, the platform may appear at different points: in contexts where the sector is less platformized, its role is marginal or absent; when the itinerary culminates in Spain – one of the contexts where digital intermediation in care has expanded most strongly – the platform frequently emerges as a point of first incorporation, becoming a gateway into employment (Lam and Triandafyllidou, 2021; Floros and Galis, 2026) and, at the same time, a device that orders hierarchies through reputation, metrics, availability and evaluation (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Rather than simply describing a technological transition, the article invites questions about the temporality and geography of that transition: at

what point in the trajectory does the platform appear and with what effects on expectations, risks and margins of action?

This process must also be read in relation to the legal insecurity that shapes a significant share of these trajectories. Nationality and legal residence operate as internal borders that reorganize access to rights and bargaining power in the labour market; the requirement to "accumulate recognizable time" in order to regularize one's status pushes workers into labour pathways marked by irregularity and informality, reinforcing vulnerabilities and intensified forms of labour discipline (De Genova, 2002). We consider that thinking of precarity solely as an attribute or a frequent characteristic of this type of employment is a central analytical problem. It is necessary to understand it as a legal and political condition that structures the relationship with the platform; dependence on income; and the capacity to complain, exit or denounce. For this reason, the geographies of platformized care work are simultaneously geographies of waiting, transit and provisionality, urban spaces where the lives of others are sustained while one's own social reproduction is made precarious, a constitutive contradiction of the contemporary care crisis (Fraser, 2016).

In this context, the articulation of care networks, mutual aid and solidarity plays a structuring role. The migratory itinerary often entails the rupture or fragmentation of affective and material networks essential for survival; in response, migrant-led collectives such as Territorio Doméstico or SEDOAC have operated as alternative infrastructures of social reproduction, producing spaces of everyday support, advice, recognition and the politicization of shared experiences. The Spanish case is compelling not only due to the entanglement of platforms with its familistic care model, but also due to long-standing traditions of collective organizing that underpin migrant agency in the care sector. Here the article offers a relevant shift: if platformization tends to individualize trajectories, workers develop responses that restore the collective through mutual aid and information-sharing and at times transform those practices into repertoires of contestation. These forms of organization – which can be approached through the lens of "feminist biosyndicalism" (Territorio Doméstico, 2023) – shift the focus from the mere transnational circulation of care to the collective reappropriation of care among workers themselves, as a practice of protection, solidarity and conflict. This opens a final question: what happens when the migratory process produces isolation, but that isolation is countered through the emergence of new care networks that function simultaneously as vital support and as political infrastructure?

After framing the problem, the paper first turns to the concrete conditions under which knowledge about this field can be produced, which makes it important to ask how to access a sector organized within the private space of the household, shaped by technological opacities and by migrant trajectories marked, in many cases, by legal insecurity. From there, the article moves to the Spanish case to trace an unfinished and contradictory shift from a familistic care regime toward increasingly platform-mediated forms, emphasizing that this transition cannot be separated from public under-provision and privatization as structural responses to the care crisis. Next, the analysis focuses on the migration model that sustains reproductive labour in Spain and on how, within that framework, specific itineraries are configured in which the platform appears at different moments of stepwise migratory trajectories. The text then advances to the forms of organization and agency produced within transnational care networks, examining how ruptured ties and the isolation associated with migration can give rise – if not automatically, then recurrently – to new infrastructures of mutual aid and solidarity that sustain everyday life while also politicizing experiences of precarity. The closing returns to these connections to propose Spain as a paradigmatic case of southern Europe, where the platform does not replace the existing model but rather extends and reorganizes it. It prolongs the privatization of care; draws on migrant itineraries; and coexists – in tension – with the emergence of new care networks that function both as material support and as a basis for collective contestation.

2 Qualitative approaches to care and platformization

This article draws on the convergence of several research processes. Specifically, we draw on fieldwork and analytical developments derived from two national and European research projects examining transformations associated with the platformization of urban spaces (On Demand City and Nomadic), as well as on a predominantly ethnographic study on migrant care work and collective agency in Madrid. This articulation reflects not only a thematic overlap, but also a shared perspective on platformization as a process that simultaneously reshapes the organization of work, everyday living conditions and the resources available to sustain labour trajectories in Spain's domestic sector.

Regarding the fieldwork conducted within the On Demand City and Nomadic projects, the sample consists of interviews with 17 workers in platform-mediated domestic and care work in Madrid during 2024. The sampling strategy sought to reflect the sector's composition while ensuring some degree of variability. Given the feminization of this field, the sample includes 15 women and 2 men. This research was conducted with close attention to the realities of platform-mediated domestic work in Spain. While in recent years there may have been a modest shift in trend regarding the gender composition and proportions of this sector, the fact remains that there is a clear continuity in the higher proportion of women engaged in these activities, including when platforms mediate the work. Our fieldwork reflects this reality. Women's greater presence entails greater representation, whereas male profiles are more exceptional and harder to access; moreover, we con-

sider it necessary for studies such as this one to reflect, to some extent, this proportional distribution.

The migratory dimension is central: 15 participants come from different Latin American countries, 1 from eastern Europe and 1 from Africa. Notably, more than 95 % of responses to the initial recruitment form came from migrant workers, underscoring their strong presence in the sector and reinforcing the need to treat migration as a structuring dimension of the analysis. To capture the effects of migratory trajectories in greater depth, length of residence in Spain varies widely, from very recent arrivals – just under 4 months – to trajectories of more than 20 years. This temporal span makes it possible to observe different moments in the migratory cycle and how these shape legal status, labour-market insertion and personal networks. In administrative terms, most participants (11 out of 17) are in an irregular situation, while four hold a foreigner identification number (NIE). This composition allows us to examine legal insecurity as a key condition shaping platform-mediated care work.

In terms of the platforms mentioned, Doméstico24 was the most frequently cited (eight mentions), followed by Milanuncios and Webel (three each); Cuideo (three); and others such as Yoopies, Topayuda, Indeed or second-hand marketplace apps such as Segunda Mano, as well as social networks (Nextdoor), which, although they are not specifically geared toward the supply and demand of services, are used for this purpose (Bargain-Darrigues and Schor, 2025). Across all cases, workers had used – or combined – platform-based jobs with other routes into employment, including informal networks, agencies or parish-based organizations, positioning platforms as one node within a wider ecosystem of labour intermediation.

One of the challenges posed by the analysis of the experiences and discourses of migrant workers in domestic sectors – and particularly in digital platforms – given the frequent irregularity of their administrative status is access to these workers in the first place. In our case, we deployed three strategies to reach them. First, we sought individuals and groups and invited participation in our study through open digital spaces (without restricted or invitation-only access) in which these workers participate. Among other purposes, these spaces are used primarily to search for employment and housing opportunities, as well as to share experiences, information and news. The two main spaces used in this regard were Facebook and Nextdoor. In the case of the former, there are thematic groups in which we were able to participate, present our research and invite people to take part. In the case of Nextdoor, unlike in other countries, one of the main forms of operation and use in Spain is the creation of thematic groups organized by geographical location. This enabled us to introduce ourselves and invite participation in the study reported here within migrant community groups – primarily from Latin American countries – in neighbourhoods such as Carabanchel and Vallecas, as well as across the city of Madrid more broadly. Following these social media posts calling for participation, we were able to establish more direct communication with those who ultimately took part after they completed a form that provided information on the profiles of prospective participants willing to participate.

Second, we obtained some contacts through associations and collectives of domestic workers. These organizations were able to facilitate contact and connect us with workers.

Finally, snowball sampling proved useful for reaching profiles that are more difficult to access. Recruitment through social networks only reaches those who use them, and contacts obtained directly through organizations carry the usual bias of a willingness to remain linked to the sector, i.e. people who want to continue working in domestic work. This constrains access to a frequent reality within platforms, since those who engage in this work on a sporadic or temporary basis often do so as an entry route into the labour market when they lack documentation or networks that would facilitate access to other jobs. Through snowball sampling, we were able to reach some individuals whom we would not have been able to access through other means.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to reconstruct individual trajectories. They proved most useful for identifying at what point of the migratory itinerary the platform appears, how workers combine platforms with other channels of intermediation and how legal status conditions the type of job they can access. The interview guide covered migratory trajectory, entry into the sector, use of platforms, working conditions and administrative situation. Discourse analysis of these interviews allowed us to identify the stepwise character of itineraries and the role of platforms as a gateway for recently arrived workers. The online form used for recruitment also worked as a brief screening questionnaire. It gathered information on origin, length of residence, administrative status and platforms used, and, although it was not designed for statistical inference, it offered a first picture of the composition of this workforce, including the overwhelming presence of migrant workers noted above, and guided the selection of interviewees. Of the three recruitment strategies, snowball sampling and neighbourhood groups on Nextdoor proved the most productive for reaching recently arrived and undocumented workers.

The research projects also included 12 interviews with platform-mediated care workers in Buenos Aires (Argentina). Although this material is not analysed here, it worked as an implicit control case that helped us distinguish which features of workers' itineraries and working conditions are attributable to platformization and which respond to the Spanish institutional context, given the marked differences between both countries in labour informality, migration regulation and the organization of care.

The article also builds on fieldwork derived from a collaborative ethnography (Katzer and Samprón, 2011) with two domestic and care workers' associations in Madrid: Territorio Doméstico and Servicio Doméstico Activo (SEDOAC). This ethnography focused on political practices and forms of

collective organization in the sector, paying particular attention to how new forms of kinship are mobilized through work and activism. The ethnographic work relies mainly on "observant participation" (Wacquant, 2019), initiated in 2021. The observation sites include organizational meetings, labour advice sessions, events, demonstrations, legal training sessions, socio-labour orientation workshops and leisure activities within both associations. This approach enables the observation of practices in natural settings, grounded in the idea that culture is most clearly expressed in what people do (Wolcott, 1993).

The collaborative ethnography addressed a different level of analysis. Observant participation in assemblies, labour advisory sessions and workshops gave access to the collective dimension that individual interviews could hardly capture, that is, how workers share information about employers and platforms, how grievances are formulated, and how they become political demands. It was also the technique that revealed the contractual practices of platforms operating as agencies, such as fixed-discontinuous contracts or live-in arrangements under nominal 40 h schedules, since these issues reached the advisory sessions through workers with regular status who were scarcely represented in the interview sample.

Working with migrant and platform-mediated workers in Spain means conducting research under conditions where administrative instability and labour precarity overlap. Irregular status produces fear, silence and caution; limits the traceability of work histories; and increases the risks associated with public exposure. This directly affects field access and data production, requiring strengthened anonymity protocols, careful interviewing practices and sustained trust-building. Under legal uncertainty, interviews elicit narratives shaped by vulnerability that condition what can be said, the time available and the possibilities for contact, thus demanding a research ethics particularly attentive to protecting identities and minimizing risk.

Beyond these issues, empirical access to domestic and care work is marked by significant methodological barriers. This is a structurally invisible sector, shaped by the fact that work takes place within private households and is increasingly mediated by digital platforms. This combination introduces specific constraints, like difficulties in establishing contact, opacity in job allocation processes, and uneven availability of observable traces regarding working conditions and employment relations. Conducting ethnographic research with domestic and care workers' collectives in Spain posed specific methodological challenges, particularly in relation to building rapport and trust over time. Gaining access to more layered, situated forms of knowledge required sustained engagement, long-term presence and a willingness to move beyond predefined frames of political articulation. Rapport was gradually built through shared time and embodied participation in everyday activities.

Combining both approaches was decisive because each compensated for the blind spots of the other. Recruitment through social networks and snowball sampling reached recently arrived and undocumented workers who use platforms sporadically and rarely attend the collectives, whereas the ethnography reached workers with longer trajectories and organizational experience. The interviews thus documented the individualizing effects of platformization, and the ethnography showed how those experiences are collectively reworked. The two strands met at specific moments of the research. The collectives facilitated part of the interview contacts, and in June 2024 the research team organized a workshop on domestic work and digital platforms with activists from Territorio Doméstico, where preliminary interview findings were discussed with organized workers. Following the framework of the Madrid school of critical qualitative research (Conde, 2009; García Ferrando et al., 2015), the authors held several joint analysis sessions in which the results of the discourse analysis and of the ethnographic interpretation were contrasted. This process defined the object of the present article.

The main challenges concerned access and trust. Irregular status generated fear of exposure and reluctance to be recorded, and the work itself takes place in private households where direct observation is hardly possible. We responded by diversifying recruitment channels, relying on the collectives as trusted intermediaries and adapting the time and place of interviews to workers' schedules. In the ethnography, trust was built through continuous presence since 2021 and participation in the everyday activities of both associations, which gave access to more situated forms of knowledge. A further risk was that the ethnography would overrepresent organized workers and the interviews isolated ones. The joint analysis sessions were the space in which this asymmetry was made explicit and taken into account in the interpretation.

The originality of this toolkit lies in its capacity to observe platformization from both ends of the process we analyse. Studies of platform-mediated care have tended to rely on interviews with individual workers or on the analysis of platform business models, while research on domestic workers' organizing has rarely addressed digital intermediation. By combining recruitment through the digital spaces that workers themselves use to find jobs and housing with long-term observant participation in their collectives, we were able to follow how isolated, platform-mediated trajectories and collective infrastructures of social reproduction intersect, which is the central argument of this article.

We understand platforms not merely as a novel, technologized labour formula, but as a broader socio-economic *dispositif* (Agamben, 2014; Rouvroy and Berns, 2013) that reconfigures how work, consumption and productive relations are organized. Accordingly, our methodological strategy is grounded in an interdisciplinary approach at the intersection of labour sociology, urban geography and critical care stud-

ies. The research adopts intersectionality as an analytical sensibility. This approach makes it possible to analyse how inequality materializes through axes such as gender, race, class or migratory status, understood as interrelated systems of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990).

3 The platformization of the familistic care regime

To situate the emergence of digital care and domestic work platforms in Spain, it is necessary to place them within the broader transformation of southern European welfare regimes and, more specifically, within the structural crisis of the familistic model of care. Spain has traditionally been classified as a paradigmatic case of the Mediterranean or familistic welfare regime, in which primary responsibility for social reproduction – childcare, eldercare, dependency and domestic work – has been historically delegated to families and, within them, predominantly to women (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Public intervention in the provision of care services has remained limited and fragmented.

Over recent decades, a combination of demographic, social and economic transformations has progressively undermined the material foundations of this model. Population ageing, increased life expectancy and persistently low fertility rates have intensified care needs, producing a verticalization of family obligations across generations (Bengtson et al., 1996). At the same time, the large-scale incorporation of women into paid employment has eroded the male-breadwinner–female-caregiver arrangement that implicitly sustained the familistic regime (Lewis, 2006). The resulting tension between paid employment and care responsibilities has exposed the fragility of a system that relies on women's availability for a "double presence" in both productive and reproductive spheres (Balbo, 1994). Rather than being compensated through a redistribution of care work within households or a significant expansion of public services, this erosion has been managed through private and market-based strategies. As a result, households have increasingly been forced to devise individualized solutions to reconcile work and care, reinforcing the privatization of social reproduction in a context of weak state intervention.

In Spain, as in other southern European countries, this process has been closely linked to the feminization of migration flows and the incorporation of migrant women into domestic and care labour under conditions of structural precariousness. This arrangement, often described as the "migrant-in-the-family" model (Bettio et al., 2006), allows households to sustain everyday welfare through the employment of migrant care workers, frequently in informal or semi-formal arrangements, while leaving intact the gendered division of labour within families (Anderson, 2000; Oso and Catarino, 2000).

This model has not only enabled the reproduction of familistic care arrangements under new conditions, but also the incorporation of a significant share of migrant women workers into highly precarious segments of the labour market, marked by unstable employment relations, limited access to rights, and non-standard or non-formalized contractual ties. Within European migration regimes – and particularly in Spain – this has resulted in a marked hierarchization and sectoralization of work. This hierarchization operates both across sectors (not only through the racialization of care, but also other sectors such as agriculture, hospitality, construction or logistics) and within sectors, through sub-chains of tasks, categories and hiring regimes in which migrant status functions as a practical criterion of allocation. In the care sector, this segmentation is especially pronounced. For instance, women from eastern Europe have consolidated as a key labour force in cleaning activities, while Latin American migrants – particularly from Central America – have been disproportionately incorporated into care work, including childcare and eldercare (Gil Araujo and González-Fernández, 2014).

Beyond postcolonial ties, linguistic proximity and cultural affinities, the Spanish care model has favoured migration from Latin America to fill structural care gaps (Martín-Pérez and Moreno-Fuentes, 2012). Communication between caregiver and care recipient requires a shared language and a broadly shared style of care in which cultural proximity plays a significant role. As reflected in workers' narratives, linguistic adaptation and the modulation of accent emerge as everyday strategies to navigate expectations to "fit" and belong within Spanish households, revealing how cultural labour becomes an implicit requirement of care work. These forms of cultural adaptation are often experienced ambivalently by workers themselves:

> It's something we have to do. Sometimes, when you are in Peru, you don't understand why people change their accent … it seems they want to seem like Spanish. We have criticized that a lot … "Oh, you're changing your accent already …". But once we are here we understand that, unfortunately, if you don't adapt … It's not because you want to be Spanish, or you want to deny your roots, but because unfortunately … Now we understand that it's not that my grandmother wanted to be Spanish … It's that she had to find a way to fit in here. (Silvia, worker on a domestic platform and granddaughter of a care worker in Spain)

Importantly, these cultural and linguistic ties are not merely interpersonal but are also increasingly mobilized as economic resources within the care market. Platforms and other intermediaries capitalize on cultural proximity as a mechanism to facilitate matching, accelerate trust-building and sustain customer satisfaction, even in contexts of deprofessionalization and intensified workloads. In this sense, cultural affinity becomes a functional asset within a labour market already structured by racialized and gendered hierarchies.

The crisis of the familistic model has thus not led to its dismantling, but rather to its rearticulation through market mechanisms that displace care responsibilities onto migrant women and low-paid workers. Care remains largely a private matter, increasingly organized through commodified and unequal relations shaped by class, gender and migration status. Within this configuration, digital platforms have proliferated alongside pre-existing market arrangements, such as informal hiring and private agencies, gradually imposing themselves as a growing mode of labour management in the sector (Celebi and Kemmerling, 2026).

The Spanish familistic welfare regime has been particularly conducive to this expansion. Persistent deficits in public care provision, the individualized resolution of care needs at the household level, and a labour force already structured by informality and racialized hierarchies have created especially favourable conditions for the growth of platform-based intermediation (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022). Rather than disrupting existing arrangements, platforms capitalize on these structural features by offering flexible, on-demand solutions that align with household expectations while deepening long-standing inequalities. As a result, the expansion of platform-mediated domestic and care work in Spain has been especially pronounced and displays high levels of racialization, mirroring patterns identified in other European contexts such as Germany and Switzerland (Strüver et al., 2026; Ettarfi and Schwiter, 2025).

These dynamics have important implications. Platformization does not resolve informality but reorganizes it, fragmenting work into short-term tasks, intensifying dependency on precarious income streams, and widening the gap between formal rights and their practical enforcement. In this sense, platforms operate as infrastructures that mediate access to work while consolidating unequal conditions of incorporation (Barrial Berbén et al., 2025; Santamarina et al., 2026). The following section examines how platformization intersects with different temporalities and spatialities of the migratory process and how these are shaped by existing labour and administrative legislation.

4 Care and domestic work trajectories: between law, borders and platforms

This enduring reliance on families, combined with limited public provision and the expansion of market-based solutions, frames the legal landscape in which care work is regulated. It shapes both the possibilities and limits of formal protections; the allocation of responsibilities between state, market and households; and the gendered and migratory hierarchies of labour (Ettarfi and Schwiter, 2025). The legislative framework governing care and domestic work in Spain reflects both the scope and the constraints of state intervention within a historically familistic care regime. The 2006 Law on the Promotion of Personal Autonomy and Care for Dependent Persons (*Ley de Promoción de la Autonomía Personal y Atención a las personas en situación de dependencia*, Law 39/2006) sought to establish a universal entitlement to long-term care and to rebalance responsibilities between families and the state. However, its implementation has been partial and uneven, with monetary benefits often prioritized over in-kind services and significant gaps in service provision persisting over time (Comas D'Argemir, 2015). Within this context, the Royal Decree Law 16/2022 marks a significant shift in the legal regulation of domestic work in Spain when compared to the previous frameworks established in 1985 and 2011. The 1985 regulation instituted a special employment regime that formally recognized domestic work but justified a markedly lower level of protection on the basis of the private, non-productive nature of household employment. While the 2011 reform sought to modernize this regime and partially align it with general labour law standards, it largely preserved its exceptional character, maintaining exclusions from unemployment protection, occupational risk prevention and full employment stability.

By contrast, the 16/2022 reform introduces a substantial expansion of rights aimed at correcting forms of indirect discrimination that disproportionately affected women workers. Its most notable innovations include the extension of unemployment protection, the inclusion of domestic workers within the scope of the Wage Guarantee Fund (FOGASA), the formal incorporation of occupational health and safety protections, and the elimination of unilateral withdrawal by employers, replaced by a system of objectively justified termination adapted to the domestic context (Quintero Lima, 2022). These changes signal a move away from the logic of exceptionality that characterized earlier regulations and towards a framework grounded in equality and non-discrimination. At the same time, the reform reveals important limitations. Several of its provisions, particularly those related to occupational risk prevention, remain dependent on further regulatory development, generating uncertainty regarding their practical implementation. Moreover, by placing new and complex obligations on individual household employers without corresponding expansions in public care provision, the law operates within a welfare context that continues to rely heavily on privatized and family-based care arrangements, leaving unresolved the structural tensions embedded in the regulation of domestic work within a familistic care regime.

Among the effects of platformization, we identify two factors that hinder compliance with these pieces of legislation, which aim to improve conditions in the domestic work sector and to promote a more rights-based model of care. First, although some platforms operating as agencies require certain levels of training and certifications in many cases platforms that function as marketplaces constitute a deregulated space in which the platform neither intervenes nor monitors the quality or regulation of work, leading to a deprofessionalization of skills. In this respect, beyond a potential decline in

service quality, this also puts job quality at risk, since it is an informal market operating outside the reach of oversight and labour inspections of these companies. This translates into arbitrariness on the part of end clients in complying with the legislation, which often results in informal, low-quality work. This argument is also supported by recent work carried out in the context of platformized labour in Spain. During the review process of this article, the work of colleagues Paula Rodríguez-Modroño and Ángela Medina-Calvo (2026) was published, who, through the analysis of different platform models, reached similar findings.

Furthermore, despite these legal advances – many of them the result of sustained mobilization by migrant domestic workers' collectives – their effective implementation remains highly limited and deeply mediated by bordering processes. In Spain, nationality operates as a legal border that reorganizes both incorporation into the labour market and access to rights, encompassing not only labour protections but also broader entitlements associated with citizenship. The most common pathway is nationality by residence, which requires legal and continuous residence immediately prior to application: 10 years as a general rule and 5 years in the case of bilateral agreements, such as those applying to several Latin American countries. Crucially, this period of continuous residence is itself conditional upon demonstrating a minimum of 6 months per year of contributions to the social security system – effectively presupposing access to formal employment. Juana, a Colombian worker on a domestic platform, illustrates how the platform itself produces the impossibility of meeting these criteria:

> Regarding immigration matters, in order to apply for social integration status, I had to have contributed for at least 6 months here in Spain. So since this was not possible on the platform, I had to keep looking for another jobs so I could get that paperwork. (Juana, from Colombia, worker on a domestic work platform)

In practice, these requirements function as a powerful stratifying mechanism. The need to regularize legal status in order to secure residence permits channels many migrants into an initial labour pathway marked by irregularity and informality. Paradoxically, this very condition becomes an obstacle to accumulating "recognizable" time for legal purposes, even as the imperative to secure income for daily subsistence – and, in many cases, to sustain transnational households through remittances – keeps large segments of the migrant population positioned within conditions of heightened vulnerability and atypical or fragmented contracting arrangements. This dynamic has long characterized domestic and care work. Entry into the sector frequently occurs through informal arrangements, and only in some cases – often following the consolidation of long-term relationships with employing households, in which affective ties are interwoven – have workers been able to formalize their legal and employment status. As a result, the pervasive informality and the highly privatized management of employment relations in this sector significantly undermine the practical enforceability of legal protections, rendering many of these rights only partially applicable in practice.

The effective enforcement of these legislative advances is further complicated by the growing platformization of the sector. Platforms' "on demand" models have enabled what some authors have called a "reserve army" (Woodcock and Graham, 2020), drawing on Marx's expression when referring to what was later conceptualized as a surplus population. This population is not fully incorporated, with full rights, into the protections of the welfare state and the country's labour structure, with the attendant erosion of rights.

In fact, in our interviews, we have observed that the expansion of platforms in Spain is not primarily fed by an already-settled migrant workforce, but rather by migrant populations that have arrived recently. In all cases, these are workers whose employment is largely mediated through platforms:

> I come from Colombia – about a year ago, like a year and 2 months. [. . .] So I came as a tourist, and I didn't have documentation, no work or study visa that would allow me to work. (Juana, worker on domestic platform)

> I'm Venezuelan and I've been here for 2 years, exactly 2 years in June. [. . .] I found out about the platform because most Venezuelans always stay in touch. (María, worker on domestic and delivery platforms)

> We've already been here 2 years, we're about to complete [2 years] here. (Carlos and Alicia, from Salvador, who work on a domestic work platform)

In all of the cases discussed above, workers do not effectively benefit from the existing legal frameworks, and platform-mediated arrangements make it harder for them to meet the requirements for residence and regularization. Spanish immigration law ties regularization through *arraigo* (a residence permit granted on the basis of demonstrated social, labour or family ties in Spain) to a prior period of stay in the country combined with labour criteria, either a documented employment history, as in the *arraigo laboral* Juana refers to, or one or more employment contracts of at least 20 hours per week with a salary in line with the minimum wage, which is the core condition of the *arraigo sociolaboral* introduced by Royal Decree 1155/2024.[1] Platforms that operate primarily as intermediaries between households and workers obstruct both routes. By framing themselves as mere

[1] *Real Decreto 1155/2024, de 19 de noviembre, por el que se aprueba el Reglamento de la Ley Orgánica 4/2000, de 11 de enero, sobre derechos y libertades de los extranjeros en España y su integración social.*

facilitators of contact rather than employers, they neither hire workers nor register them with social security, so the hours worked through them leave no administrative trace that can later be presented as proof of employment. They also fragment labour into short services distributed across numerous households, which makes it unlikely that any single household offers a contract with the required hours and duration. Since 2023 each household has been directly responsible for registering and paying contributions for domestic workers regardless of the hours worked, and this fragmentation multiplies the relationships in which informality may persist. In traditional informal labour markets, longer and more stable ties with employing households occasionally led employers to sign the contract that enabled regularization. The platformized model depersonalizes employment relations and undermines the relational and temporal continuities on which those pathways depended. Platforms that act as agencies and offer formal contracts, for their part, usually require a valid residence and work permit, which leaves them out of reach for those who most need a contract in order to regularize.

Moreover, the system draws on stepped migration itineraries, in which the trajectory rarely takes the form of a direct movement from the country of origin to Spain. In many accounts, a sequential migration process unfolds in stages, with intermediate periods and reorientations shaped by family networks, labour opportunities, regularization processes and economic conjunctures. A typical case recounted by migrants on several occasions in the interviews was that, in their migration process from countries such as Venezuela or Colombia to Spain, they spent periods of between a few months and a few years in countries such as Argentina or Chile, where they worked in the domestic work sector or in other precarious sectors, very commonly through platforms. Eventually reaching Spain was conceived as a kind of culmination of the migration process. We have not encountered experiences in which these migration processes passed through other European countries, nor aspirations to do so in the future.

What is relevant, according to the interviews, is that the platform "entry point" is not a constant, but the sector is. This depended on the degree of platformization of the sector in each country and on the worker's position within her trajectory. In contexts where care work retains more traditional or informalized forms of intermediation, the platform may be absent or play only a marginal role. However, when the itinerary culminates in Spain – where the sector displays a high degree of platformization – the platform appears for many workers as a point of first incorporation. From an infrastructural perspective, this suggests that platforms operate as one of the devices through which recently arrived Latin American women, often without residence permits, are channelled towards the most fragmented segments of domestic and care work.

Beyond these intermediary platforms that function as "entry points" and limit their role to matching workers and households, other platforms exercise greater control over the labour process and formally require legal documentation (Rodríguez-Modroño and Medina-Calvo, 2026; Santamarina et al., 2026). These platforms seek to compete with traditional employment agencies, which themselves are increasingly incorporating platformized and digitalized management technologies. While such platforms formally integrate workers into contractual arrangements, ethnographic research and interviews reveal that they do so through employment models that escape current legislation. The widespread use of fixed-discontinuous contracts, combined with fragmented working time and unstable schedules, undermines access to unemployment protection and erodes employment continuity. Moreover, these platforms often contribute to the further devaluation of care labour by depressing wage standards and continuing to offer live-in care under nominally full-time contracts – frequently capped at 40 h per week – despite the extended availability and intensified workloads these arrangements entail.

In this way, the platform becomes embedded in the migrant itinerary as a pathway into the care labour market, but also as a technology that orders hierarchies. By enabling partial access to income while not guaranteeing rights and protection symmetrically, it intensifies pre-existing segmentations in a sector already structured by gender, origin and administrative status (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). As a result, platformization does not resolve the structural vulnerabilities of the sector but rather reworks historically embedded forms of exploitation through new contractual and digital formats, exposing the limits of recent legal reforms in a field still shaped by privatization, informality and familistic responsibility.

5 Organization and agency within transnational care networks

The slogan "without us, the world does not move" (*sin nosotras no se mueve el mundo*), mobilized by Territorio Doméstico – a grassroots collective of migrant domestic and care workers based in Madrid since 2001 – articulates a feminist claim to visibility and political agency that foregrounds the centrality of care and domestic labour to the reproduction of contemporary societies across uneven geographies. A social reproduction perspective – understood as encompassing the ensemble of activities, relations and infrastructures through which life is sustained on a daily and generational basis – foregrounds the co-constitutive relationship between the productive and reproductive spheres (Mitchell et al., 2004; Hopkins, 2015). The agency invoked in "moving the world" unfolds across multiple spatial scales and acquires a distinctly transnational character, insofar as migrant domestic workers are embedded within global care chains that connect households, labour markets and welfare regimes across borders (Hochschild, 2001).

> When we say "without us, the world does not move", we are ultimately referring to care work. Care belongs to everyone: we all need it, we all depend on it, and we must all take responsibility for it. That is why we say that life must be placed at the centre. When we say "without us, the world does not move", we also ask ourselves what kind of world we want to set in motion, because we want to move a different world – one in which care is at the centre and in which everyone gives and receives care. (Activist from Territorio Doméstico, in a workshop on domestic work and digital platforms organized by the authors, Madrid, June 2024)

Despite their central transnational role in sustaining life across borders, migrant domestic workers are embedded within exclusionary migration regimes and racialized labour markets that actively undermine their own social reproduction (Bhattacharyya, 2018). The discussion above addresses how they frequently experience precarious legal statuses, limited access to social protection, and systematic exclusions from rights and care infrastructures. This produces a constitutive contradiction at the heart of the "care crisis" (Fraser, 2016), whereby those essential to sustaining life are deprived of the material, legal and affective conditions necessary to live.

It is within this contradiction that collectives such as Territorio Doméstico and Servicio Doméstico Activo (SEDOAC) – an association of domestic workers founded in Madrid in 2012 that is focused on legal support, labour rights advocacy and collective empowerment – have emerged, among others. In contexts marked by profound care deficits, closely tied to the structural conditions of the domestic work sector and the exclusions produced by immigration law, these collectives operate as alternative infrastructures of social reproduction. While the migratory process itself often entails the disruption, fragmentation or spatial dislocation of the social and affective support networks fundamental to everyday survival and wellbeing, these collectives weave relational infrastructures that enable these women to navigate, mitigate and collectively confront such conditions. They provide spaces of mutual aid, everyday support, protection and recognition while simultaneously politicizing shared experiences of precarity, racialization and exclusion. Their mode of organizing, described as "feminist biosyndicalism", places care at the centre of political struggle and foregrounds the intersection of labour, feminist, migrant, antiracist and other struggles. These forms of biosyndicalism expand conventional understandings of global care chains, which have traditionally emphasized asymmetric relations of care circulation – often framed through narratives of emotional displacement, double workloads, and remittance-based connections between households in countries of origin and destination. Instead, they reveal how care not only sustains worlds across borders but is also actively reclaimed and reorganized among workers themselves through situated collective practices of self-care, solidarity and political organization that enable them to confront conditions of structural exclusion (Hooks, 2012). In the words of an activist from Territorio Doméstico, speaking during a workshop we organized on domestic work and platforms:

> When we come together in assembly – usually on the second Sunday of each month – we support one another by listening. We share our different stories because we come from different parts of the world. We share our experiences, our joys and our sorrows. In many cases, family members pass away, and it is hard – you have nowhere to cry or to speak about what has happened to you. That is when we are there, holding each other up.
>
> But it is not only about sadness; it is also about joy: celebrating when a child has a birthday, finishes secondary school, receives their first residence permit [NIE] or obtains citizenship. *Acompañar* [being with] – or, as we say, *acuerpar* [embodying] – means being together and sharing all of this. Each of us carries a story that we bring and share. It is our story. We do not forget our roots, who we are or where we come from.

This quote illustrates how care and mutual support constitute the very foundation of these collectives' organization and how their forms of action are often inscribed in migrants' own trajectories, shaped by experiences of mobility, transit and settlement, as well as by political knowledge and cultures forged in countries of origin and transformed through the migratory process. Building on this ethnographic engagement, the analysis developed in this section also reflects an inductive shift in the research process itself. Platformization did not initially appear as a central analytical concern. Rather, its significance emerged progressively through sustained participation in assemblies, advisory sessions and everyday conversations, where digital platforms increasingly became a matter of tension and strategic debate. It was within these situated encounters that platforms came to be framed not merely as labour intermediaries, but as restructuring forces generating new ambiguities, contractual insecurities and collective grievances within an already organized sector.

Many of the women involved – predominantly from Latin America – bring with them prior experiences of labour, feminist and community organizing that are neither simply transferred nor abandoned, but reworked through their own mobilities and encounters in the destination context. In this sense, political agency is spatially produced through movement and connection across space, rather than anchored to a single place, giving rise to relational geographies of solidarity that emerge through routes, encounters and shared struggles (Featherstone, 2012). Diasporic political cultures

are shaped through transnational circulations of experience and struggle, producing forms of political subjectivity that exceed national frames while remaining grounded in lived histories of racialized exclusion (Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 1990). These transnational trajectories have not only shaped domestic workers' organizing in Madrid but have also played a significant role in reconfiguring feminist politics and migrant activism in the city over the past decades, as domestic workers collectives have played a pivotal role shaping these movements.

It is through this spatial dimension and these trajectories of struggle that the emergence of such collectives in Spain can be explained. The organization of domestic and care work in Spain has been historically shaped by postcolonial relations with Latin America, alongside a long-standing pattern of feminized migration into the care sector since the 1990s. As a result, the consolidation of migrant domestic workers' collectives in Spain appears relatively distinctive when compared to other European contexts, where similar forms of sustained collective organization have been less visible. This specificity of the Spanish context means that the arrival of digital platforms has unfolded within a sector where collective infrastructures and forms of organizing around domestic labour struggles were already in place and where many of the legal advances and processes of rights recognition discussed in the previous section have been, to a significant extent, the outcome of sustained claims, mobilizations and advocacy led by these collectives over the past 2 decades.

This has, in turn, enabled forms of individual agency – identified in some of the international literature on platform-mediated domestic work (Ettarfi, 2024; Villarroel-Valdés et al., 2025; Mondon-Navazo and Murgia, 2026) – to be channelled into, or to converge with, collective forms of organization and resistance. Practices such as the creation of mutual support networks through digital media, the circulation of practical knowledge about employers and platforms, strategies to bypass platform intermediation, and the sharing of legal and labour-related information have not remained confined to individualized coping mechanisms. One illustrative example can be found in the labour advisory initiative Acuerpar Derechos (embodying rights), developed within the Observatorio Jeanneth Beltrán and linked to Territorio Doméstico, where a call was made to domestic workers engaged in digital platforms to collectively identify and render visible the shared challenges shaping platformized labour. These included widespread informality, the use of fixed-discontinuous contractual arrangements that facilitate unjustified dismissals, and the persistence of ambiguous employment relationships that blur the boundaries between formal employment and self-employment. Through these encounters, it became evident that platforms with a growing presence in the market, such as Cuideo or Qida, were deploying contractual arrangements that contravened International Labour Organization Convention No. 189, which establishes the principle of equal labour conditions for domestic work in relation to other sectors. This not only revealed systematic breaches of existing labour regulations but also provided the basis for the articulation of collective strategies aimed at contesting platform practices and advancing rights within and beyond the sector. Indeed, these advisory sessions became a catalyst for broader cross-sectoral encounters. Building on the issues identified, meetings were held with migrant women working in other platformized sectors – such as food delivery (riders) and sex work – to collectively discuss the gendered and racialized implications of platformization.

Overall, care constitutes a key site of agency for migrant domestic workers. Pre-existing forms of collective organization, rooted in the long-standing trajectories of struggle of Latin American women in Madrid, have enabled the translation of the conflicts generated by platformization into collective grievances and political contestation. Unlike sectors such as food delivery, where platformization has preceded and structured worker mobilization, domestic work represents a case in which platforms have entered an already mobilized sector. These experiences contribute to the still limited body of research on collective mobilization among workers in digital platform economies, particularly in feminized and migrant-dominated sectors.

6 Conclusions

The platformization of care and domestic work in Spain is particularly revealing for understanding paradigmatic dynamics of platform capitalism since it is a case in which migration is clearly integrated into the social organization of care in southern Europe and where platformization has been intense and far-reaching. In this article we approach platform-mediated care as a growing and expanding phenomenon linked to the structural crisis of the Mediterranean familistic regime and to the prolonged under-provision of public care infrastructures, i.e. a progressive deterioration of European welfare models. In this context, care needs are not met through collective or public provision; instead, what has deepened is the privatization and individualization of care as a response to work–life reconciliation pressures.

In the care sector, platformization unfolds as a continuation of a prior model, which in recent decades has relied on the outsourcing and commodification of domestic and care work sustained by feminized migrant labour under informal or semi-formal labour regimes. Platforms have expanded and accelerated the care labour market and have consolidated as a device for the direct or indirect ordering and control of work. This has enabled the coexistence and continuity of the previous informal labour market while simultaneously drawing on the conditions of migratory vulnerability of a workforce exposed to pressing income needs and finding in platforms a viable and accessible employment niche.

In this regard, we argue that one of the article's key contributions is to show that these transformations are inseparable

from international mobility and Spain's migration regime. Entry into platform-mediated care is not merely a process of labour-market insertion after arrival; rather, it is often embedded in stepwise migratory itineraries. Platforms may appear at different moments along these trajectories depending on the degree of care platformization in each country. However, the high penetration of digital intermediation in care in Spain means that, for many workers, this is the point at which platform work becomes a decisive gateway to income. Platformization has thus become a crucial component of migration infrastructures. In the Spanish case, we can observe how platforms operate as bordering regimes that reorganize the value and governability of labour power through internal legal frontiers.

At the same time, the findings underscore that platform-mediated care must be situated within a broader contradiction of social reproduction. Those who sustain household wellbeing on a daily basis often face legal insecurity, limited access to social protection and restricted bargaining capacity. This condition is constitutive of both the affordability of privatized care and the functioning of platform intermediation itself. The Spanish paradigm is therefore grounded in marketization under conditions of unequal citizenship, where the deterioration of public provision is partially compensated by the availability of precarious migrant labour. Platformization adapts long-standing forms of informality, devaluation and unequal responsibility allocation to digital infrastructures. This helps explain why platforms have been able to consolidate so rapidly in Spain while also revealing the limits of regulatory advances enacted in a welfare context that continues to rely heavily on individualized and market-based solutions to care.

Yet the platformization of care does not unfold in a social vacuum. Although migratory trajectories often entail the rupture or weakening of support and care networks – producing isolation as a material condition of settlement – this loss can also become the ground upon which new networks are built. In the Spanish context, collectives and associations such as Territorio Doméstico and SEDOAC operate as substitutes and sources of intra-group care and social reproduction, weaving mutual supports that mitigate precarity while also politicizing shared experiences of exclusion and exploitation. This suggests that care is not only an object of commodification, but also a basis for solidarity and organization.

When migration dismantles care networks and produces isolation, a key future research agenda is to identify the conditions under which such isolation becomes an infrastructure for politicization and mutual aid and when it is instead absorbed by platform-induced logics of individualization. Future research should comparatively examine how legal status, income dependence, reputation and availability systems and the presence of grassroots and trade-union organizations interact in the recomposition of social ties. In particular, it will be crucial to observe the everyday mechanisms – information circulation, advisory practices, the configuration of entrepreneurial subjectivities and digital mediations – through which dispersed experiences are converted into effective networks or through which competition among workers is reinforced.

Data availability. The data are stored in the repositories of the universities with which the authors are affiliated. They can be accessed upon request to the author(s) of this article. The transcripts of these interviews and fieldwork have been anonymized in order to ensure the safety of, and to uphold the commitment made to, the participants in this study. The ethical guidelines and regulations of the respective institutions have been followed.

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