Gendering platform research
Theoretical and methodological considerations

Eleni Kampouri

Eleni Kampouri is a Senior Researcher Fellow at Hertfordshire Business School in the University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, UK.

ABSTRACT
The literature on platform labour has been growing during recent years, encompassing a wide range of themes and perspectives, including gender. Despite efforts to address gender issues in the study of platforms, however, there is still a gap in the relevant literature. This article is an attempt to address this gap by discussing some of the theoretical and methodological implications of gendering platform research. At the same time, it is an attempt to think of gender as a perspective that sheds light on the feminisation and racialisation of precarious labour more broadly and platform labour more specifically. The article explores current research strands on gender and platforms. First, it discusses how gender is and can be integrated into the collection of statistical data on platforms. Then it considers recent research on domestic and care work platforms, which constitutes an area of interest for many researchers. The concept of work-life balance in platforms is raised next and the role of reproductive and affective labour as part of platform labour. The article addresses the question of affect in platforms, especially the ways in which it can provide a valuable theoretical framework for research shedding light on the subjectivity of platform workers. Overall, the article analyses both the recent literature on the topic and possible future research directions on gender in platforms.

KEY WORDS
Platform labour, gender, feminisation, precarisation, domestic work, care, reproductive labour

Introduction
The question of gender has emerged in the study of platforms only recently and is still under-researched and under-theorised. This article is an attempt to address this gap in
the literature by discussing some of the theoretical and methodological implications of including gender as a visible dimension in platform research and at the same time by conceptualising gender as a perspective that sheds light on the feminisation and racialisation of precarious labour more broadly, and platform labour more specifically. Although it does not exhaust the subject or the potential theoretical and methodological implications of gendering platform research, its aim is to raise questions about emerging intersectional gender perspectives on platformisation, an issue that has not yet received the attention it deserves.

First, gender has been obscured in the study of platforms because this field has been influenced by the intensification of labour struggles in the male-dominated sectors of delivery and passenger transport in the global North. As the term ‘uberisation’ suggests, working conditions at Uber are often considered as a model for the disruptive impact that platforms have in all sectors (Costhek Abílio, 2017). However, the uberisation model often obscures the diversity of the platform economy and especially how different platforms operate in different national and social contexts. The model of uberisation obscures, in particular, many intersectional gendered aspects of platform labour in sectors other than delivery and passenger transport (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). Partly this is because male voices and iconic images of male workers in protests or strikes have shaped the ways in which issues and debates are methodologically framed and theorised. These are occasionally interrupted by the presence of female labour unionists, such as Maggie Dewhurst who played a leading role as chair of the Couriers and Logistics Branch during the 2016 strike organised by the Independent Workers Union of Great Britain (IWGB) in London. Although influenced by new forms of labour unionism, the literature on these sectors has become more inclusive of migrant voices (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018), but overall, female voices remain sporadic and isolated.

Second, although the struggles of platform workers in female-dominated sectors are not as intensified as in delivery or passenger transport, there have been some notable examples of labour unionism that raise interesting gendered challenges that are yet to be integrated into the theoretical and methodological debates on platform labour (Van Doorn, 2017; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018).

One such example is the National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) in the USA which has played an important role in bringing to the forefront possible ways of thinking about and strategising against precarity in and outside platforms from an intersectional gendered perspective. The NDWA uses platforms to regulate the already unregulated and informal sectors of domestic, cleaning and care work. As many of its members are migrant women, who have been facing precarity, lack of access to social protection and the threat of deportation all their lives, they have employed different strategies than the ones that prevail in the literature on platform labour. One example is ALIA, a benefits platform for ‘nannies, house cleaners and home care workers’, which facilitates employers’ benefits contributions and is intended to provide ‘portable, prorated and multi-contributor benefits’ for workers ‘who have the most difficult conditions to provide portable benefits for’ (National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2021a). Through this platform, which includes a mechanism for the distribution of benefits to migrant workers who do not have bank accounts, platform workers get the opportunity to take paid time off. The same system was used during COVID-19.
lockdowns to distribute funds raised through a Coronavirus Care Fund that NDWA set up to deal with the lack of income that many domestic and care workers faced (National Domestic Workers Alliance, 2021b).

NDWA strategies may be far removed from the demands for employment status that labour unions in the passenger transport platforms have been making and, for some, their strategies may not even be considered as ‘struggles’ as they rely on voluntary contributions from members and clients rather than on contributions by platforms. However, the NDWA example provides a different lens through which to view platforms, which is more nuanced, attentive and sensitive to the experiences of workers around the globe (male and female) who have no option but to work in deregulated and informal environments in which precarity has been the norm historically. Through its activities, it creates a space for the development of an activist community amongst isolated workers excluded from formal labour rights because of their gender, race and migration status and should be part of broader theoretical and methodological considerations of platform labour.

Third, as the example of the NDWA demonstrates, the lack of attention to gender in the study of platforms is linked to broader genealogies of precarity. While this question lies outside the scope of this article, it is important to note that, from the perspective of women workers from the global South, contemporary precarious working conditions in digital platforms are not new or extraordinary; for them, and their labour conditions, the Fordist paradigm of full-time employment and access to social protection was never the norm (Jarrett, 2015, 2018). Although the labour of these women is essential for the sustainability of global platforms, it is premised on the reproduction of inequalities of gender, migration and race, which are in turn internalised by platform workers, who themselves often consider their underpaid/unpaid work as natural (Casilli, 2017). From this perspective, shifting our focus towards the intersectional gendered aspects of platform work is not a question of simply including female voices or labour struggles in female-dominated sectors as they currently stand. Instead, we need to turn our gaze to the platformised, feminised sectors of the global economy and, at the same time, become more attentive to the intersectional gender inequalities that are often hidden in the all-encompassing discourses of male-dominated platform labour in the global North. In other words, research should take into account the states of dispossession and the lack of other options that push many women who carry out unpaid care work, many migrants without papers, many people of colour, lower class or caste who are not considered worthy of non-precarious jobs, to turn to platform labour in order to generate an income.

This article analyses the recent research and publications on gender in the study of platforms. It discusses the emerging debates on gender in platforms and their implications for theory and methodology and proposes possible ways in which the study of platforms can be broadened to include gender in more substantive ways. The concept of ‘platform’ is used here as a more or less neutral term without clear positive or negative connotations (Florisson & Mandl, 2018) to address different types of labour relations managed online by platforms. The platform economy includes skilled and unskilled, paid and unpaid labour in a wide array of sectors, where labour may be carried out online and/or offline, under casual, formal or informal, temporary, occasional or
permanent working arrangements. To elucidate the complexity of the platform economy, there are different types of categorisations of platforms (see Pesole et al., 2018; Forde et al., 2017; Srnicek, 2017; Huws, Spencer & Coates, 2019). For the purposes of this article, I find most useful the categorisation of Huws et al. (2019) following their distinction between (a) platforms that mediate between clients and workers to provide online services (‘online work with online management’), such as Upwork or Amazon Mechanical Turk, (b) platforms that provide ‘offline work with online management’, such as driving or delivery work carried out in public spaces managed via platforms, such as Uber and Deliveroo, and (c) service work carried out in private spaces – people’s homes or other premises – managed via platforms, such as Helpling and Taskrabbit (Huws, Spencer & Coates, 2019). This article is not concerned with platforms that are designed to provide services related to the exchange of goods, such as Amazon, eBay or Etsy.

The article consists of six sections, which discuss different aspects of recent research and publications on gender in the study of platforms. The next section discusses the integration of gender into the collection of statistical data on platforms and platform labour. Then a section discusses recent research and publications focusing on domestic and care work platforms. This is followed by an exploration of how work-life balance needs, reproductive and affective labour are discussed (or alternatively rendered invisible) in the relevant literature. Then the question of affect in platforms is addressed. The final section summarises the findings and proposes possible future research directions to study gender in platforms.

The collection of statistical data on gender inequality in platforms

During recent years, the collection of data on gender has been included in all major statistical studies on platforms, focusing especially on male-female participation rates in order to map the size and composition of this emerging sector. Most studies have found that the participation of male and female workers in platforms is relatively balanced, but there is gendered occupational/sectoral segregation that follows broader labour market patterns (Berg, 2016; Berg et al., 2018; Eurofound, 2015; Huws, Spencer & Coates, 2019). The COLLEEM survey in Europe found, in addition, that the proportion of women in platforms declines as ‘the intensity of platform work increases’ and that the women to men ratio differs from country to country (Pesole et al., 2019:22). The same study showed that gender influences the type of services provided: ‘software development’ and ‘transport’ are the most male-dominated services, while ‘translation’ and ‘on-location services’ are the most female-dominated ones (Pesole et al., 2019:4). The latest International Labour Organisation flagship report also showed that women were more likely to work in legal services, translation and writing and were under-represented in technology and data analytics (ILO, 2021).

Moreover, there is a rising interest in collecting data on gender equality in platforms, especially gender pay gaps and the representation of women in the labour force. One study, which collected data from an anonymous ‘global platform’, found that female platform workers worked longer hours and their hourly rates were on average two-thirds of those of their male counterparts (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2017). According to the ILO, however, at the national level and in on-location platforms, a gender pay gap
is observed, but at the global level there is no gender difference in hourly earnings, indicating that differences between North and South may be more significant. (ILO, 2021:191). These findings suggest that intersectional gender perspectives should be further explored in statistical data collection when studying the rise of platforms in global labour markets.

Intersectional gender inequalities, however, are rarely explored through the collection of broad statistical data on different sectors, as most of these studies include data disaggregated by age and occasionally by educational level, but no intersectional variables, such as class, ethnicity, race or migrant status. A notable exception is a study combining qualitative and quantitative research conducted in South Africa and Kenya focusing on the domestic and cleaning sectors, which includes variables on age and educational level as well as race, ethnicity, class, place of residence and household status (Hunt et al., 2019). The study brings to the forefront important intersectional gender inequalities in platform work, including how race, social class and the place of residence impact on gig work opportunities, working hours, earnings and flexibility. Moreover, the study includes time-use survey type questions that make it possible to analyse issues related to paid and unpaid care as motives to join platforms and as determinants of working conditions in platforms and of the unionisation of platform workers. Finally, by combining qualitative interviews with quantitative data, this analysis develops understandings about strategies that platform workers use to achieve work-life balance and sheds light on the constraints platforms and clients impose on care givers.

Indeed, data collection on gender in platforms should do much more than simply include female-male participation rates. The inclusion of intersectional gender indicators that break down the categories of male and female into more specific social groups is very important for supporting analyses of precarious work, double discrimination, vulnerability to labour exploitation and gender-based violence and harassment in workplaces (European Parliament, 2020). Apart from age and educational level, these data should also include race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and social class. Exploring gender and intersectional data on platforms at the global level may shed light on transnational gender inequalities and the ways in which they are linked to colonial histories and legacies. In this context, it would also be interesting to explore gender inequalities in different types of platforms, i.e. ‘online work with online management and ‘offline work with online management’, as well as in different sectors – work carried out in public spaces managed via platforms and service work carried out in private spaces managed via platforms (Huws, Spencer & Coates, 2019). Moreover, the statistical study of gender equality in platforms should consider not only the representation of women in decision-making and wage gaps but also work-life balance issues that may be explored through a combination of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Conducting time-use surveys and incorporating questions about unpaid care work in data collection is vital to understand how gender inequalities are formed in the private/public spaces of platform labour. At the same time, the interpretation of such surveys may be enhanced by conducting selected qualitative interviews with female and male platform workers on work-life balance issues.
The platformisation of domestic and care work

Research on platform labour in female-dominated sectors, most notably in domestic work and care, has increased in recent years, demonstrating the gender bias of the uberisation model. This is a strand of recent research on gender in platforms that is exclusively concerned with ‘offline work with online management’ carried out mostly in private spaces. Analysis of labour relations in these sectors has brought forward research findings that challenge the assumption that platformisation is disrupting the world of work across sectors. Ticona and Mateescu (2018) have shown in their study of work in the platform Care.com that, in already informalised sectors, in which precarisation is the norm, platforms contribute to the formalisation of employment. Although such platforms provide care workers with the means to count their working hours, check their payments, calculate their taxes and even report and protect themselves from abusive employers, this formalisation of their work renders care workers subject to new forms of social media visibility and algorithmic control that impose completely different challenges than the ones that platform workers in other sectors face (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). Similarly, a more recent study of domestic labour platforms in New York and Berlin (Handy and Helpling, respectively) reveals the emergence of new types of ‘selective formalisation’ of labour. On the one hand, platformisation formalises some aspects of working relations (formal agreements, payments, working hours), while, on the other, it reproduces many aspects of the informality that are commonplace in domestic work, including uncertainty about the requirements and the rules that employers impose and about the tasks that need to be completed for each gig, independent worker status and lack of access to social protections (Van Doorn, 2020).

Moreover, Hunt and Samman (2019, 2020), who have studied platform-mediated domestic work in South Africa, have reached the conclusion that, despite some immediate benefits that digital platforms offer, there are very few differences between traditional and platform-based domestic and care workers in terms of working and living conditions. Although there have been some efforts to regulate domestic and care work in South Africa, they contend that most domestic and care workers in both platforms and traditional informal sectors are poor young African black women, and many of them are migrants without papers. Despite recent efforts to introduce legislation and policies for the regulation of these sectors, most of them continue to be subjected to intersecting inequalities and marginalisation, which can be understood in the historical context of slavery and servitude (Hunt & Samman, 2020).

\textit{Platform models maintain the patterns of everyday abuse found elsewhere in the domestic work sector. These models are premised on an ability to navigate regulatory contexts to provide clients with readily available, flexible labour without longer-term commitment, therefore sidestepping employer obligations to provide labour rights and protections. As a result, on-demand companies reinforce the undervalued and largely unprotected labour of marginalised women domestic workers.} (Hunt & Samman, 2019:102)
As the examples of gendered research above illustrate, shifting our gaze from riders and drivers to domestic and care workers has broader methodological and theoretical implications for the study of platform labour than simply adding and stirring female-dominated platforms into the mix of platforms under investigation. While doing platform work may seem gender neutral, the offline spaces where the actual work is carried out and the employment status and working conditions are not. Domestic and care labour take place mostly in private homes or at the working spaces of the employers, which are hidden from the public eye. Workers are usually isolated from colleagues and dispersed in private locations across urban (and rural) spaces. Work carried out in these private spaces is commonly categorised as feminine and is correspondingly unappreciated, devalued and unrecognised. Neither commodification nor digitalisation have proven sufficient to ‘disturb’ gender inequalities and alter the lack of appreciation and devaluation of domestic and care work, as this type of labour is perceived to be in a continuum with unpaid domestic and care work that women traditionally perform (Hunt & Samman, 2020). Finally, there is no ‘before’ and ‘after’ in these sectors as the widespread informality and precarity is usually regulated by states through special or exceptional legal arrangements and rules that apply to both domestic and care sectors and to platform labour (Todolí-Signes, 2017).

Although unpaid domestic and care labour has been historically the responsibility of women of all colours, in the global North this labour is often delegated to migrant women and men of colour who are considered to be more fit by nature not only to do the ‘dirty work’ but also the caring required for the reproduction of society (Anderson, 2000). The problematisation of the intersectional aspects of care and domestic work brings to the forefront, on the one hand, the interdependencies between working women in the global North and working women in the global South and, on the other, the creation of global care chains (Anthias & Lazaridis, 2000; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Parreñas, 2001; Kofman, 2012). This implies that the private spaces where domestic and care work are carried out are also transnational spaces, in which different traditions, interests and care needs intersect. From this perspective, the emergence of domestic and care platforms cannot be considered as a radical disruption but should rather be theorised as part of gendered, colonial and racist legacies and power relations that selectively distribute paid and unpaid work as well as care across the private and public domains (Gutierrez-Rodriguez, 2014). Rather than disrupting working conditions in these sectors – in which Fordism never really made a difference – platformisation has added a supplementary layer of feminisation and racialisation. This configuration of power relations is very different from accounts of power in male-dominated platforms, which are characterised by the strong presence and visibility of workers in public spaces and by male-dominated histories of failed Fordism and labour unionism.

In methodological terms, this shift of focus to platforms in which work is organised online but carried out in the private spaces of the employers, mostly by female and migrant workers, raises serious challenges of accessibility for researchers, as the workers themselves are not easy to identify and approach. Domestic and care workers’ unions may provide useful starting points for exploring the field, but they do not guarantee the recruitment of participants who use platforms to find clients. Most importantly, seeking participants who self-identify as ‘platform workers’ connected to a specific platform, like
Uber drivers or Deliveroo riders, may prove to be futile, as labour categories in this sector tend to be fluid and most domestic and care workers move frequently from the cleaning to the domestic sector and from there to child and elderly care, using different formal and informal networks and arrangements to find clients and negotiate more profitable payments and working conditions (NDWA, 2020). Search for clients usually takes place on multiple platforms simultaneously and it also involves social media platforms, such as Facebook. This fluidity gives rise to flexible personal and professional subjectivities of domestic and care workers, especially migrants, whose collective and personal strategies of navigating through different types of platforms provide for them a variety of opportunities to work decently (Kambouri, Walsh & Huws, 2021).

Although the struggles of domestic and care workers’ unions have intensified in recent decades, bringing visibility to gender, race and class in labour movements, the issue of platform-mediated work remains in most parts of the world outside major labour union agendas. There are, however, some notable exceptions, which may provide a starting point for researchers to access domestic and care platform workers who are involved in labour unionism. I have already mentioned the example of NDWA, but there are also others, such as the 2018 case in Denmark of collective representation and bargaining that led to the first collective agreement covering platform workers in Europe between the platform Hilfr.dk and the labour union 3F. The agreement was celebrated because it demonstrated that collective bargaining in the platform economy is possible, without necessarily challenging the rights of workers who wish to remain self-employed (De Stefano, 2018). The agreement proved that, in deregulated sectors, platformised labour relations open up opportunities to establish labour rights where they do not exist, including the rights to an hourly minimum wage, payment of unemployment benefits in case of sickness, paid vacation leave, working time protection, protection against dismissal and data protection (De Stefano, 2018). The agreement applied to all workers who had completed 100 hours of work on the platform, but those who wanted could opt out and remain freelancers with minimum fees. In 2020, the agreement was ‘materially undermined because of a flawed application of antitrust legislation’ when the Danish Competition and Consumer authority challenged those minimum fees as a breach of competition law (Contouris & De Stefano 2020). However, this story points to the challenges of labour demands in precarious feminised and racialised sectors. In order to study them, researchers will have to go beyond the current focus on specific platforms and sectors which are male-dominated and explore in particular the participation of non-male workers in the platform labour union movements.

Other starting places to access the field are migrant communities, as well as associations, groups and organisations that provide support and services to migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. The relevant literature has shown that platforms in general offer women and migrants a means to overcome sexist and racist barriers that they encounter in their attempts to access labour markets (Graham, Hjorth & Lehdonvirta, 2017; ILO 2021). There are several factors that need to be taken into account in this context. First, for many women and undocumented migrants, connecting with clients through word of mouth is often easier and safer than registering on platforms that require personal data (Kambouri, Walsh & Huws, 2021). When conducting research in this
framework, researchers should take into account the condition of ‘deportability’ (DeGenova, 2002) that shapes the everyday lives of informal migrant domestic and care workers and renders them more vulnerable than other categories of workers to potential identification, policing and deportation. When conducting research of this type, it is very important to ensure that the data collected are subject to the appropriate data protection protocols and sensitive data about gender and migration status are protected (NDWA, 2020). Second, issues related to language and translation should be considered, as, in many cases, workers in these sectors have not developed linguistic skills that enable them to be interviewed. Adequate translation should be offered to potential interviewees if necessary. If questionnaires are used, researchers should make sure that they are available in the languages of the groups most represented in these sectors.

Studying feminised and racialised sectors has always involved an extra level of difficulty because of isolation and invisibility, but feminist research has managed to overcome these obstacles, mostly by utilising informal networks, where especially migrant women tend to feel safer to talk about their experiences. One of the most effective ways to access the field is through the use of social media platforms like Facebook, LinkedIn or WhatsApp, which usually provide a richer source of access and information about platform-mediated paid domestic and care work and offer opportunities for researchers to explore online interactions between workers and clients as well as recruit potential interviewees and conduct online surveys. The fact that the field is more accessible through social media demonstrates that even online labour in these sectors is not as gender neutral as is commonly assumed. One example of how social media can be used in feminist action research is that of the labs carried out by NDWA in cooperation with academics, which developed La Alianza, a ‘data set on domestic work, through Facebook chatbot conversations with a subscriber list of more than 200,000 Spanish-speaking house cleaners, nannies and homecare workers’ (NDWA, 2020). La Alianza has proven to be a valuable source of large-scale information, including regular surveys, and a collection of quotes. This was done during the COVID period, when it had become extremely hard to reach out to domestic workers because of lockdown restrictions. First, this was because Facebook chat is a familiar, easy-to-use tool of communication for migrant domestic workers and second, because a relationship of trust with the NDWA had been cultivated over the years (NDWA, 2020). As small labour unions representing migrant workers, especially in the domestic and care sectors, are usually underfunded, forging collaborations between them and academics to develop action research may become a very fruitful way to organise research that benefits both these organisations, who need data to put pressure on governments and international bodies, and researchers, who need access to the field. Collecting data through such collective labour union tools should, however, be clearly indicated in all activities to make sure that participants are aware that they are taking part in research. This should be done in languages that they understand and with full data protection.

Overall, there is considerable potential for research on domestic and care work platforms to develop further in different cultural and historical contexts. This research should include a comparative element in relation to studies of traditional care and domestic work that is being carried out in parallel to platform-mediated work, in order
to identify how digitalisation impacts these sectors and assess whether the disruption thesis that prevails in the uberisation model can be applied there. Moreover, it is worth opening the question of platformisation of feminised and racialised sectors in post-colonial contexts and seeking linkages between past forms of slavery and servitude in the global North and global South respectively and current domestic and care work in platforms that has the potential to perpetuate patterns of sexism and racism.

Reproductive labour and work-life balance in platforms
Many large platforms have recently developed social responsibility campaigns promoting work-life balance and equal pay. Dedicated sections of their websites boast of the opportunities they offer to women and to people with disabilities, as well as to ethnic and racial minorities. On the occasion of International Women’s Day, large platforms frequently post human-interest stories of some of their women employees of different colours as proof of their gender and racial diversity (Deliveroo, 2021; Wolt, 2021). Some platforms have also developed concrete programmes for the inclusion of women in their top positions and have initiated groups, communities and networks of women in tech (Upwork, 2021). Their websites emphasise that they provide valuable access to flexible forms of work. For example, in an article titled ‘Airbnb supports the reproductive rights of women’ published in 2021, the company boasts about providing unemployed women with a source of income and empowering them in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic:

With more than 55 percent of Hosts who identify as women, Airbnb is a platform that provides economic empowerment for millions of women. In just the past year, amidst a record-setting departure of women from the workforce due to the COVID-19 pandemic, new women Hosts have collectively earned more than $1 billion through Airbnb – and we are committed to continuing to deploy our platform to facilitate economic equality for women Hosts. (Airbnb, 2021)

Although there are no specific business strategies promoting these goals, Airbnb claims that it gives hosts bereavement paid leave and that it lobbies for the adoption of a national policy for parental paid leave in the US (Airbnb, 2021). These social responsibility campaigns provide platforms with a façade of moral rightness regarding gender equality, which often appeals to sensitive customers. Although platforms ensure that workers are hyper-flexible and lack access to full employment rights, flexibility is portrayed as providing benefits for both workers and platforms that contribute to gender equality. As Uber’s female Bo Young Lee Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer puts it in the 2021 Uber diversity report, for example: ‘Opportunity is not a fixed pie, as many think. If women get paid equally, it is not that men get paid less. When we create flexibility programs for caregivers and people with disabilities, everyone benefits from that flexibility’ (Uber, 2021:3).

This type of platform discourse requires theoretical unpacking, however. Historically, reproductive labour has been linked mostly to women, as they are the ones who have been culturally constructed as naturally destined to perform care and domestic work. Against this naturalisation of the gendered division of labour, feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s challenged the feminisation of reproductive labour.
first by demanding the remuneration of domestic and care work through ‘wages for housework’, and then by asking for public care structures and for the renegotiation of the gendered division of labour within households (Weeks, 2011; Huws, 2019). Although the demands of these feminist movements were never fully realised, they played a considerable role in transforming welfare states as providers of public and free-of-charge care services. In this context, institutionalised feminisms introduced the notion of ‘work-life balance’, which aims at mainstreaming child and elderly care, maternity and paternity leaves, tax exemptions and benefits for unpaid carers into welfare regimes. Work-life balance policies have been an effective mechanism for addressing welfare inequalities mostly in the global North, but they are largely restricted to formal employment sectors where access to welfare is guaranteed, and have proven largely irrelevant to the lives of precarious workers, to those working in informal sectors and, especially, to migrants without papers.

Since the 1990s, neoliberal feminisms have argued that the flexibility of precarious work (part-time, temporary, on-demand) can provide broader opportunities to combine domestic and care responsibilities with work or other income-earning activities, by reducing dependence on the crumbling welfare state. Digitalisation, especially in the so-called ‘creative’ sectors, became entangled with the developments of new labour regimes in which flexibility was enhanced by the application of new technologies and an ethos of entrepreneurship and self-discipline providing workers with tools to ‘work whenever and wherever they want’ (Gill & Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2016). In this framework, achieving an ideal balance between professional, private and family life seems to become a question of individual choice and self-management. Women with children, dependants with disabilities or elderly relatives, who are forced (rather than choose) to stay at home, might find these promises appealing. What is at stake, however, is an ‘inflexible flexibility’ (Morini, 2007), which does not allow for more free time for leisure and care and which does not resolve their work-life balance dilemmas, but rather dissolves the boundaries between work and non-work to a point where work occupies large parts of life (Gill, 2002). The informality and flexibility of project-based creative work reinforces gender inequalities, leading not only to unbalanced private, family and professional lives, but also to overwork, exhaustion and lack of creativity (McRobbie, 2016).

Recent research has shown that similar patterns of reproductive labour are very common in crowdwork performed on platforms where online work managed online is carried out, like Amazon Mechanical Turk, Clickworker or Upwork. One study found that, especially in the global South, 80% of the women who work for these online platforms are highly educated, but do so because of gender biases, overwhelming care responsibilities and other gendered barriers that compel them to work ‘flexibly’ (ILO, 2021). As in the case of creative workers, women doing crowdwork on platforms have in most cases opted for this type of work because they could not continue to work in full-time employment in the absence of universal care coverage and couldn’t or didn’t want to cover the costs of private paid care. As the existence of numerous popular websites advertising jobs and advice for ‘work at home moms’ illustrates, the need for such flexible neoliberal arrangements increases as austerity measures deepen across the world, reducing access to public structures of care (Altenreid, 2020). As in the case of
domestic and care work, most tasks performed in these private spaces are microtasks which are undervalued and underpaid no matter how technologically advanced the knowledge and skills they require. Similar to paid domestic and care work, this forms part of a continuum with all work performed in private spaces, which is considered as feminised, unworthy of payment and under-appreciated (Webster, 2016; Altenreid, 2020). Here, it is also relevant to consider how the invisible and badly paid feminised and racialised labour of click farmers, moderators and data and content producers in social media platforms is linked to social reproduction (Casilli, 2017).

Methodologically, research on reproductive labour, not limited to care, but also including affective labour and all aspects of labour required for the reproduction of life, raises similar challenges to the ones discussed in the section on domestic and care work: isolation and private spaces create obstacles to accessing platform workers in these fields. In the case of crowdfwork, however, the difficulties multiply because unionisation is uncommon, and workspaces are also usually the homes of the workers. Workers cannot be contacted through labour unions and, furthermore, are usually scattered across diverse places, far from the locations of the central platforms. In this context, the boundaries between private and public dissolve completely as work/home spaces are dispersed across different parts of the globe, making it difficult for the workers to unionise or create other relevant groups and associations (Webster, 2016). Platforms, social media and – especially – specialised forums become the only channels through which researchers can approach platform workers and conduct qualitative or quantitative research. As in the case of domestic and care work platforms, questions of data protection and language translation are crucial in this context.

Furthermore, the question of reproductive labour raises broader questions about gender that are not limited to women with care responsibilities. Research on Uber and Deliveroo riders in London and Paris shows that male platform workers often select platform work because it allows them to combine work with care, especially child and elderly care (Benvegnu & Kambouri, 2021). The promise of flexibility offered by platforms acts as a powerful motive for both male and female workers who have lost access to the formal labour market because of work-life balance issues. Undoubtedly, austerity policies and the reduction of public and free-of-charge care services contribute to rising pressures for carers of all genders. While for women this may form a continuum with work outside platforms, new male platform workers’ subjectivities emerge that may be associated with gratifying roles such as those of the father, the son or the carer. Methodologically, these dynamics open up multiple questions on the production of precarious masculinities and on how male workers cope with new affective ties in their attempts to combine care with working on platforms. On the one hand, the flexible timetables of platform workers open up possibilities for a more equal division of labour within households, as male workers have no longer to follow the time and space limits of standard masculinised employment and can contribute more substantially to household and care chores. On the other hand, however, the algorithmic pressures that platform workers experience for meeting demand and maintaining their income pushes them to move vital resources from the reproductive sphere to their work (Chicchi et al., 2020). As the platforms expand, these pressures grow, pushing platform workers to exhaustion and overwork in their attempts to
achieve work-life balance. In general, the study of work-life balance in platforms opens multiple questions about femininities and masculinities and the gendered subjectivities of carers that are yet to be analysed.

Finally, a research question that needs to be problematised theoretically and methodologically in relation to reproductive labour in platforms has to do with the digitalisation of reproductive labour itself. As Huws (2019) argues, the emergence of platforms does not simply coincide with austerity cuts in welfare state provisions but was born out of the need to deal with the time squeeze that was produced as a result of the crisis of public care. For those who struggle with work-life balance, platforms offer cheap domestic and care work, cheap transportation, cheap ready-made meals and shopping delivered to one's doorstep, cheap holidays and other cheap services that ease the time squeeze that workers experience. ‘A pattern seems to be emerging whereby the needs of time-poor households are met through the labour of the money-poor. The intensification of work and poor work-life balance that leads working women to depend increasingly on the market for their social reproduction directly feeds the development of a form of labour that is characterised by even poorer working conditions’ (Huws, 2019:20). Through this argument, Huws revisits the feminist debates on reproductive labour, placing at the centre of the study of platforms the relationship between paid and unpaid care work. Crucially what comes to the forefront is the under-researched subject of users as consumers of platform services who are dependent on the cheap services that platforms offer and users as precarious workers in these platforms. In fact, research has shown that those who work on platforms are also using them (Huws, Spencer & Coates, 2019; Huws et al., 2017). This theoretical problematisation points to the need for a more elaborate study of the interdependencies between users as consumers and users as workers in the context of the crisis of care, the dismantling of the welfare state and the rise of austerity policies.

In general, the question of reproductive labour raises multiple challenges for the study of platforms, which cannot be analysed here in depth. However, this question cannot be reduced to broad gender-neutral comments. While reproductive labour is about the unequal power relations between men and women, the ways in which these are articulated in the platform economy are complex and intersectional. More in-depth research is required across sectors involving both workers and customers in order to explore gendered interdependencies, intersectional asymmetries and power dynamics across the global North and South. Both qualitative and quantitative research can enrich understandings of reproductive labour in platforms, provided that it is informed by feminist perspectives and methodologies.

**Platform labour as affective labour**

The affective turn in gender studies (Ahmed, 2004; Anderson & Harrison, 2010; Clough & Halley, 2007) can provide a valuable theoretical framework for exploring platforms by opening new research possibilities for analysing the production of the subjectivity of platform workers. To take one example, domestic work and care platforms devote extensive resources (articles, information material, blogs) to developing information on how cleaning should be done and what a clean house should look like. Domestic work involves various affective ties that develop around notions of
cleanliness and dirt. Cleaning another person’s home becomes part of affective relations based on standards of cleanliness and good taste that might differ between employers and workers. Domestic and care workers end up selling not only their work but, most importantly, their own personhood as they invest in complex emotional relations to sustain their precarious presence in households (Anderson, 2000). Affective economies also structure power dynamics in the care of children and the elderly because paid workers are tied to those they care for not only through strictly professional relations, but also through emotional interdependencies that often legitimise the overriding of formal and informal labour agreements. Child carers are expected to expand their working hours according to the emotional needs of children who love them, while elderly carers are expected to be available to support without breaks the vulnerable elderly or people with disabilities they care for. In global care chains, emotions about those one is paid to care for become intertwined with emotions relating to one’s own children or relatives left behind in the country of origin, who are often being cared for by other relatives (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001).

The information and imagery that platforms share to improve the performance of platform workers effectively defines what type of results clients should expect from workers and acts as a strategy to pressure workers to abide with often impossible standards of cleanliness. The same applies to platforms in which labour is hidden because they involve the rental of assets. Airbnb devotes special attention to the rating of cleanliness in the clients’ evaluations of hosts. These evaluations are functional for both the monitoring of guests, who share their experiences with other guests, and hosts, who internalise these standards and work harder under pressure to follow the expectations of platforms and clients.

Gender research on affective labour has shown the significance of internalisation and self-management of emotions to please customers and employers (Hochschild, 1983, 2003). While in the past techniques of self-management were taught mostly during training, online rating and customer evaluation systems are embedded in contemporary platforms to pressure workers to internalise self-management of their emotions on an ongoing basis. Through digital techniques of rating and evaluating, labour supervision is delegated to customers, who perform supervisory tasks without payment (De Stefano, 2016; Rosenblat and Stark, 2016) while the precarious status of workers, which ensures that they can be devalued or ‘terminated’ without reasonable excuse at any time, works as a deterrent against attempts to challenge those standards. Moreover, research on domestic and care work has shown how, on top of these systems, social media are constituted as surveillance mechanisms by clients who use them to scrutinise every aspect of the personal and professional lives of carers and domestic workers (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018; Van Doorn, 2020). The pressures to present an appropriate online caring profile are added to exigencies to keep private lives open to scrutiny in order to appease the anxieties of employers.

A gender perspective can expand research on online affective labour in platforms. Some interesting methodological questions to pose in this context relate to the algorithmic imaginary of platform workers and how workers experience algorithms as secretive, oppressive and threatening mechanisms that dictate their lives (Bucher, 2017). Similarly, researchers could ask questions about how gendered and racial biases are
embedded in algorithms or gradually acquired through algorithmic learning in platforms (Vyas, 2021). In that sense, even if algorithms were gender and race neutral, it is likely that that the gendered and racial prejudices and stereotypes that determine customer ratings and evaluations would eventually end up being part of platform management as they are automatically fed into the system.

Apart from algorithmic control, research should also take into account the affective labour performed on platforms as work. As research has shown, platforms for the exchange of goods automatically translate acts of affect expressed online into ‘monetisable gain’ (Arcy, 2016). This applies also to platforms where off- and online work is managed online; positive reviews and evaluations of workers by customers have an impact on workers’ rankings on platforms and their ability to get work and income through them. Although affective labour plays an important role in how work is evaluated and recognised, it nevertheless continues to be underpaid or unpaid because it is considered as feminised. The reverse process takes place when affective labour is carried out in the physical spaces that are managed through online platforms. A relevant example is that of affective labour in short-term rental platforms, like Airbnb. Research has shown that hosts renting out parts of their own homes on Airbnb are burdened with extra domestic and affective care work that is not even considered as work and is not remunerated (Kambouri, Walsh & Huws, 2021). Platform workers of this type find it hard to recognise themselves as workers, although the affective and domestic labour required to sustain their precarious presence on platforms may even prevent them from finding work in other sectors. Short-term rental platforms tend to increase gender inequalities within households as women are the ones usually carrying not only most of the unpaid care and domestic work, but also the online affective labour (Kerchner, 2019). Although this dynamic is typical of the tourist sector, it takes new forms through platformisation because of the rating and customer evaluation systems that constantly pressure private hosts to abide by professional standards of hosting, increasing pressures to self-manage their emotions and needs (Niebler, Altenried & Macannucuo, 2020).

As a result, doing research on affective labour involves being attentive to both psychological and material aspects of platform work that are often ignored in gender-neutral perspectives (Ahmed, 2004). Thus, a combination of research of the on- and offline circulation of affects and an examination of how they produce value would be a useful starting point to engage with the notion of affect in platforms in gendered ways. It is especially important, in this context, to raise questions about the gendered pressures that platform workers face to conform with platform requirements. This may be achieved through a combination of qualitative research on the impact of customer ratings and evaluations work, on the platform workers’ perceptions of how algorithms work and on the interactions amongst customers, workers and platforms that produce affective circuits. In turn, this should also include analysis of time spent doing unpaid affective labour and of the emotional and material impact this has on the lives of platform workers, especially female ones who usually take most of the burden. Other issues, such as migration, ethnicity, race and age could also be studied in this context in order to explore the making of digital subjectivities in platforms and how these impact the everyday lives of platform workers.
Conclusions
The analysis above has provided an overview of current research strands on gender in platform labour. This may give an incomplete picture, as there are several ongoing projects on these issues. However, I have tried to demonstrate that gender perspectives on platform labour pose challenges to some of the dominant premises of recent research and theorising on platforms, including the disruptive impact of platforms, the nature and characteristics of labour struggles and the private or public character of labour relations on platforms. Rather than simply adding women in data collection, most of the work on gender and platforms is intersectional, expanding research on platformised care and domestic sectors, exploring the crucial question of reproductive labour and analysing the circulation of affective labour both within and around digital platforms. In this framework, there are some important gender issues that still need to be addressed.

The feminisation and racialisation of platform labour
I have already mentioned the need to explore how platforms become feminised and racialised and how these are linked to gendered genealogies of precarity. The spread of precarity through new technologies becomes far less unexpected when one focuses on feminised and racialised sectors which have traditionally fallen outside the framework of the Fordist paradigm. In this context, it is worth exploring different forms of activism and dissent, as well as strategies that resist dominant gender relations in platforms that operate in historically informal sectors. In the same framework, it is worth exploring the impact of these processes on workers’ femininities and masculinities as traditional worker subjectivities become far more conflictual and undetermined than in the past.

Exploring the gendered representations and discourses of platform workers
As I have tried to show with some examples in this article, platforms are engaged in promoting representations and discourses of platform work as being diverse and inclusive. These are often adopted and internalised by users as clients who rate and evaluate them on the basis of gender and racial biases and stereotypes. These can be studied from a gender perspective, unpacking the implicit intersectional presuppositions and biases that underlie them. They usually are used to legitimise gender and race categories as naturally inclined to do specific underpaid and unpaid digital labour. Moreover, these representations of corporate diversity can be contrasted to counter-representations of gender, race, class and sexuality produced by alternative media, labour unions and activists.

Studying how gendered and racial algorithmic biases can be learnt and made to appropriate alternatives in platforms
Digital methodologies can be used to expand our understandings of gender and racial biases as they become embedded into ratings and evaluations produced by clients to reinforce inequalities that are built into the fabric of platforms. To address these issues, it is worth conducting more research with customers and studying digital
methodologies of algorithmic learning and usage. Of particular interest in this context would be to develop an understanding of how platforms are used as vectors to appropriate alternative gendered countercultures and to canonise and exploit them for profit in ‘gentrified’ online and offline environments, such as those of Airbnb and Deliveroo.

**Gender-based violence in platform labour**

Gender-based violence (GBV) has been the subject mostly of sensational news reporting that often demonises platform workers, especially in taxi and delivery platforms, as dangerous, criminal and predatory. These are usually reinforced by gendered and racial stereotyping of migrant platform workers as threatening, especially for female customers. Although there have been incidents of GBV against customers, this is not the only aspect of GBV that should be considered: platform workers are also under the threat of violence. ‘Workers on location-based platforms also indicated having faced or witnessed discrimination or harassment. App-based taxi drivers reported facing aggressive or rude behaviour, mainly by clients, traditional taxi drivers and police officers, in the course of their work. App-based delivery workers mentioned instances of discrimination based on the grounds of their occupation by customers, restaurants as well as the police’ (ILO, 2021:25). From a gender perspective, it is important to develop more studies on the vulnerabilities to off- and online GBV of platform workers and customers and the ways in which they can be protected from GBV.

© Eleni Kampouri, 2022

**References**


Black, S., C. Fox Miller & D. Leslie (2019) 'Gender, precarity and hybrid forms of work identity in the virtual domestic arts and crafts industry in Canada and the US', Gender, Place & Culture, 26 (2):272–292. DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2018.1552924


National Domestic Workers Alliance (2021b) ’Direct cash payments for frontline workers during Covid’, https://www.ndwalabs.org/alia-cares


