

Regimes of socio-technical control in Spanish care platform work

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Abstract

The study examines how platform models manage worker autonomy and structure employment relations through distinct regimes of socio-technical control. Drawing on a mapping of platforms and interviews with workers, we analyse the platform governance in the three types of platforms operating in Spain in the care sector. All three platform models rely on algorithmic management and the individualisation of risk, particularly affecting migrant women. However, they differ in their organisational logic. Marketplaces operate through open competition and self-regulation, maximising autonomy but also insecurity. On-demand platforms employ labour dependency and algorithmic control logics, resulting in gig work characterised by highly unstable, poorly paid, and discontinuous work opportunities. Digital agencies centralise control and selectively formalise employment, offering limited security at the cost of autonomy and transparency. This article highlights how care platform models shape labour through different platform-specific strategies that redefine working conditions, job security, and value of care work.

Keywords

domestic and care work, digital labour platforms, platform governance, autonomy, insecurity, sociology of work

Introduction

The rise of digital platforms in domestic and care work is discursively framed as a technological and innovative response to the care crisis of ageing populations in mature economies. Care platforms often promise to professionalise and formalise traditionally informal sectors characterised

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by a precarious feminised migrant work that is otherwise invisible (McDonald et al., 2024; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). However, extant studies suggest a contradiction: while platforms use a technocratic language of quality care and person-centric services, they continue to facilitate precarious, low-paid, and taskified work that can lead to deepening the dynamics of segregation and casualisation in the domestic care market (Fetterolf, 2021; Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022), to compound precarity and individualised risk for care-workers (McDonald et al., 2021; Pulignano et al., 2023), and the deskilling of experienced workers (McDonald et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2024).

Labour platforms, including care platforms, govern workers through algorithmic management (AM), using information selectively revealed and concealed to encourage workers toward decisions that benefit platforms and meet client demands (Lee et al., 2015). Through AM, platforms impose risks that are distinctive to gig labour, such as opaqueness in the assignment of work, gamification, close surveillance, arbitrary termination and extraction of data (Schor et al, 2023; Wood and Lehdonvirta, 2023). Far from operating as simple neutral intermediaries, platforms function as socio-technical infrastructures that shape both the employment relationships and the construction of shared rules and meanings of reproductive work (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018).

Based on a qualitative methodology combining a mapping of 34 care and domestic work platforms in Spain and in-depth interviews with 22 domestic and care workers, our study explores how the different organisational design and labour flexibilisation strategies adopted by care platforms determine the autonomy, insecurity, and employment standards of workers. To examine their impacts, we compare the degree of control, standardisation and managerial oversight embedded in the platform's operational model and the individualisation of risks. In this way, our analysis of digital care platforms in Spain contributes to the literature on how the organisational, symbolic, and disciplinary dimensions of the organisation of care platform work are formed and how they ultimately affect the working conditions of care workers.

Some scholars have questioned whether a precarity lens alone is adequate for understanding platform care labour given that migrants and racialised minorities constitute a large part of the workforce (Van Doorn et al., 2023), and in the context of informal and migrantised labour, platform work is not extraordinarily precarious (Altenried, 2024; Van Doorn, 2017, 2020; Yin, 2024). Studies of care platforms illustrate how platforms may formalise certain aspects of work—such as time tracking or payment systems—while simultaneously intensifying workers' exposure to ratings, self-branding pressures, and reputational risk (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; Van Doorn, 2020). The literature on care platforms thus challenges the uberisation thesis by showing that platformisation of care work is better understood as a process of selective formalisation, in which some employment practices are standardised while others remain informal or precarious. As Van Doorn et al. (2023) argue, platform labour simultaneously degrades working conditions while offering migrants much needed opportunities to improve their livelihoods.

This dynamic is shaped by national regulatory frameworks, welfare regimes, and labour market institutions, which condition how platforms operate and how workers experience platform-mediated employment. The Spanish case also illustrates that, even in societies where home care work has always been characterised by informality, platforms do not promote either formalisation or professionalisation of care work. Instead, the neoliberal logic associated with platform work and its claims of autonomy, flexibility and entrepreneurship hide varying forms of precarity involved in this work. And this care platform model depends on restrictive migration and welfare policies that force socio-legally vulnerable workers to comply with platform prescriptions to avoid losing their livelihoods (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022, 2024). Therefore, our analysis of AM takes into account the varied experiences of women from different backgrounds and their coping tactics.

As Bonini and Treré (2024) incorporate in their concept of algorithmic agency, human agency and algorithmic infrastructures mutually shape each other.

Finally, most empirical research on AM and care platforms focuses on a single platform model. As a result, platform operational models remain underexamined, despite their central role in either reproducing or mitigating the devaluation of care work. While recent scholarship has started to theorise care platform business models (Bonifacio and Pais, 2025; Rodríguez-Modroño, 2024, 2025; Ustek-Spilda et al., 2025), this study advances the debate by examining how three platform business models operating in Spain—marketplace, on-demand, and digital agency models—structure work organisation in homecare. These models generate distinct logics of subordination and worker insecurity. Each business model produces differentiated outcomes with respect to the nature of the work created, levels of autonomy and insecurity, and specific mechanisms of control and working conditions (Rodríguez-Modroño, 2024). Therefore, revenue structures and employment classifications are particularly salient, as they shape how the risks and costs associated with uncertainty are distributed (Celebi and Kemmerling, 2025).

The article proceeds with a review of the literature on the platformisation of care work building on AM and socio-technical systems, followed by the methodology. The results are organised around, firstly, the socio-labour dynamics promoted by the different platform models; and, subsequently, their differentiated impacts on employment conditions in the sector and the socio-economic risks and costs borne by workers. The article concludes by discussing how each platform model organises domestic care work, positioning platforms as key actors in the redefinition of employment regimes.

Socio-technical platform regimes of work organisation in domestic and care services

Algorithmic management (AM) is defined as the delegation of managerial functions—such as coordination, evaluation, and discipline—to machine-learning algorithms (Lee et al., 2015). The current state of research on AM and platform work organisation reveals a shift from viewing algorithms as purely technological entities to understanding them as socio-technical processes deeply embedded in organisational choices and social structures (Jarrahi et al., 2021). In line with socio-technical approaches to AM, a claim has emerged to investigate aspects of the concept beyond the algorithm towards many directions: foregrounding workers' agency and resistance as mutually constitutive of AM, focusing on the values and beliefs inscribed in the design of labour platforms, and placing emphasis on the importance of specific social, legal and regulatory environments facilitating AM (Floros, 2024; Lamers et al., 2024).

While early scholarship focused primarily on ride-hailing and food delivery, recent literature has expanded into the domestic and care sectors, where work is characterised by long-term relational interactions in the private sphere. Despite the organisation of work being heavily reliant on AM by platforms (Khan et al., 2025), workers have to rely on relational skills and labour to elicit high ratings and testimonials and build relational capital to impact future work opportunities, particularly in work contexts requiring ongoing social interactions between workers and clients such as care work (Kalemba et al., 2024; McDonald et al., 2021). To mitigate the low-trust context of inviting strangers into the home, care platforms utilise specific trustworthiness signifiers by rationalising the generation process of trust (Gerold et al., 2025). Workers are pressured to curate profiles that emphasise passion for the job and a naturalised love for caregiving. This narrative serves an extractive purpose by framing precarious labour as a sharing economy interaction, making workers more vulnerable to exploitation. McDonald et al. (2021) coined the notion of “individualised risk” to examine how the governance through market ideas in care has shaped employment in such a way as to create risks for workers.

Pulignano et al. (2023) develop two theoretically informed, ideal types of open and closed socio-technical platform regimes of worker autonomy in care platforms. Those platforms with an open regime offer flexibility accompanied by unstable income and high competition among workers, generating “flexploitation” (Kluzik, 2022). On the contrary, those platforms with relatively closed regimes provide market shelter for workers by reducing the risk they face of being easily and frequently replaced at the expense of more restricted worker autonomy (Pulignano et al., 2024). Algorithmic governance introduces a regulatory control of work, which in open and unskilled platforms, workers’ dependence on clients’ ratings leads them to avoid taking breaks or rejecting orders, creating an “algorithmic panopticon” that increases their subordination to the platforms (Kasparian et al., 2023) with opaque contractual clauses (McDonald et al., 2021). In care work, this new form of exerting pressure on workers’ performance increases their emotional labour and domestic servitude, reinforcing their invisibility, insecurity, and exploitation (Gruszka et al., 2024; Lenaerts et al., 2024; Ticona, 2022). In this context, reputational capital emerges as a symbolic value in access to job opportunities in the digital market (Armano et al., 2023). In the care sector, this translates into performative subsumption processes, where workers must present themselves as empathetic and efficient micro-entrepreneurs (Mateescu and Ticona, 2020).

AM thus conditions workers’ agency, materialising—even monetising—reputation in opaque performance metrics that turn them into quantifiable objects (Hopwood et al., 2024; Mantilla-León et al., 2024). The sum of the factors prioritised by the different ranking algorithms (i.e. ratings, proximity, trustworthiness, price, reply speed, experience, platform activity, acceptance rate) reveal the values that designers have inscribed into their algorithmic systems and the roles that platform management expects from housecleaners to perform (Piña et al., 2024). This contradiction around the autonomy of workers dismantles the discourse of entrepreneurship and evidences that platforms are also devices that mediate subjectivity (Van Doorn and Vijay, 2021). Rankings function as expert systems in generating trust for users, as well as technologies of neoliberal subjectification of female workers, moulding proactive subjects to individually assume the risks of flexible work willingly (Armano et al., 2023). These metrics turn qualifications, hobbies, and personal traits into professional verification attributes (Kalemba et al., 2024) with discrete influence from clients, who act as indirect employers selecting, positioning, and even pricing ideal workers (Khan et al., 2024, 2025).

Therefore, relationality is a central aspect in the organisation of platform-based care work (Khan et al., 2024; Molitor, 2025). Khan et al. (2025) demonstrate how care platforms employ relational framing as a key strategy to maintain positive favour with users, setting in motion power asymmetries, situating workers with stronger reputational capital in a better position to obtain work from clients and creating vulnerabilities for others (McDonald et al., 2024). Platform workers labour today under a regime of structural domination, where the market system itself provides the primary mechanism for worker discipline, and the rules of the game are embedded within the terms of the platform on a hidden and non-contestable basis (Flanagan, 2019). Reputational pressure, far from being neutral, is intertwined with intersectional inequalities (Kluzik, 2022). Migrant women workers must sustain a continuous emotional performance to counter racial stereotypes or cover up their administrative status (Fetterolf, 2021; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). In this way, reputational capital becomes a symbolic vector for labour segmentation based on gender, class, and racial inequalities (Dowling, 2022). Platforms consolidate racialised labour hierarchies through mechanisms of algorithmic visibility and reputational ranking. As Altenried (2024) argues, AM provides the necessary preconditions for the inclusion—on unequal terms—of a heterogeneous migrant labour force into the labour market. In the Spanish context, the female migrant workers interviewed tend to work for on-demand and marketplace platforms in domestic cleaning services when they lack the legal migrant status. This socio-technical segmentation of work reproduces colonial

stereotypes that legitimise the ethno-stratification of the Spanish care labour market (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2024).

In sectors like home care, algorithmic management is described as operating in a “minor key” (Floros, 2024). As Floros’ (2024) study shows, what occurs in Danish housecleaning platforms can better be described as minor AM. Unlike the complex real-time optimisation of other gig work, domestic and care platforms rely heavily on human-in-the-loop interventions, such as customer support departments that nudge, sanction, and evaluate cleaners to substitute for algorithmic functions. Moreover, restrictive labour and migration policies are an essential condition for guaranteeing the existence of an available labour market pool, and essential in convincing migrant workers with precarious socio-legal status to follow the prescriptions of AM.

To analyse AM as a broad socio-technical phenomenon, it is necessary to distinguish by operational model. Understanding the business models of these platforms is crucial, since how care platforms generate revenue, structure service provision and apply AM shape the organisation, accessibility and commodification of care work as well as working conditions (Celebi and Kemmerling, 2025; Rodríguez-Modroño, 2024, 2025). Without specifically investigating AM, several research articles provide valuable insight into algorithmic features of care platform labour and platform models. Ticona and Mateescu (2018) are the first to provide a taxonomy for distinguishing between on-demand platforms and marketplace platforms—where the platform mainly acts as a matching intermediary. More recent literature identifies key dimensions differentiating care platforms: revenue models, matching mechanisms, employment status, AM, platform interference and types of care intermediated (Bonifacio and Pais, 2025; Rodríguez-Modroño, 2024; Ustek-Spilda et al., 2025). Based on these dimensions, marketplace platforms, on-demand platforms and digital agencies have been established as different types of care platform models (Rathi and Tandon, 2021; Rodríguez-Modroño, 2024).

Marketplaces are decentralised virtual job boards where the platform functions as an open matching intermediary but does not manage the employment relationship. In this model, access to the platform—always for workers and sometimes for both parties—is contingent on payment of periodic subscription fees. In on-demand care platforms, workers are directly assigned to short-term gigs, while the platform centrally determines service prices and retains a fee from clients’ transactions. This model implements stronger forms of control to manage the matching process though AM but not the contract, keeping the work informal. Digital agencies are more centralised models where the platform governs selection, use data and algorithmic systems to partially automate and optimise job matching. Digital agencies are the only type of platform that intervene in the formalisation of employment relationships by facilitating the direct hiring of workers mainly by clients. Like conventional employment agencies, these digital agencies facilitate long-term rather than temporary employment relationships. Their business model relies on one-off fees paid by clients.

Drawing on this theoretical framework, this article investigates how the different organisational design of the three business models of care platforms operating in Spain (Rodríguez-Modroño, 2024, 2025) produce differentiated regimes of socio-technical control that shape worker autonomy, employment relations, and labour market outcomes in distinct ways. To examine their impacts, we operationalise two key dimensions of the work organisation in the three care platform models: (1) platform governance through AM, and (2) the individualisation of risks, and the tensions between autonomy and job security. Platform governance captures the degree of control, standardisation and managerial oversight embedded in the platform’s operational model, shaping the nature of care work. Individualisation of risks underlines that platform business models vary in how they allocate economic, legal, and social risks. While some platforms act purely as intermediaries, others provide more stable arrangements, including formal contracts.

Context, data and methods

As part of the broader marketisation of care, care platforms have emerged as key intermediaries in the provision of care and domestic services (Celebi and Kemmerling, 2025; Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2024). Throughout Europe government policies promoting home care through cash payments, private service provision and the personalisation and individualisation of care have facilitated the emergence of care platforms (Trojansky, 2020). Despite the public provision of long-term care is universal in Spain since 2007, the LTC system has never been sufficiently financed and still relies heavily in the hands of families that resort to the hiring of migrant female workers from Latin America and the Caribbean, either informally or under the domestic work contract (Martínez-Buján and Moré, 2024; Oso and Martínez-Buján, 2022; Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022). Regarding childcare, the Spanish government promotes the use of formal childcare just during school hours, without funding for extra hours or in-home childcare.

Against this context, platforms offering domestic work and care services in Spain have multiplied over the last few years, and are currently the main channel for contracting this type of services (Fairwork, 2024; Martínez-Buján and Moré, 2024; Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022). Platforms have adapted to the Spanish care and migrant labour regimes through the development of three business models. The main business model in the care sector, particularly eldercare, is the digital agency model. This model charges households (the employers) for finding suitable carers, managing the contract, and processing payments. Marketplace and on-demand platforms mediate care and domestic work, although on-demand platforms tend to provide cleaning services while marketplaces offer a wider range of services. While this work may be performed by independent contractors in other countries, it is mainly informal in Spain since performing domestic work under a self-employment contract is illegal (Lenzi, 2023).

The research adopts a qualitative design and was conducted in two interrelated phases, combining a mapping and semi-structured interviews with platform workers. The first phase, conducted between September and October 2024, comprised a mapping study of 34 digital platforms operating within the Spanish home care sector (Table 1). It involved a review of active care and domestic platforms by consulting websites and app stores, and an in-depth analysis of their intermediary functions, interfaces and Terms and Conditions documents. Following a systematic walkthrough method the websites were mapped section by section. This was complemented by a desk analysis of press articles and company reports, and an interview with an office worker from a hybrid platform (which includes the three business models), who provides a management perspective on labour strategies.

The second phase, from May to November 2024, consisted of interviews with 22 workers in domestic and care work through digital platforms in Spain (see Table A1 in Appendix). This group of workers constitutes a hidden population, as most domestic care work in Spain is performed informally in private homes and by women, some of them with migrant irregular status. To access this hard-to-reach population, a multi-channel recruitment strategy was deployed, including snowball sampling through personal contacts, outreach through organisations, direct engagement on platforms, and targeted social media searches. To encourage participation in the interviews, they were individually scheduled and paid (€40 via bank transfer) for their participation. The interviews were conducted in person or via a commonly used mobile application. Conversations lasted between 45 and 120 minutes and were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent. Each conversation was guided as a semi-structured interview designed so that the conversation would evolve iteratively, or to support participant-driven narrative structure with a guide which allowed for thematic shifts and the emergence of workers' meanings about domestic and care work

Table 1. Care platforms in Spain by business model and service.

Business model	Main services		
	Multiservices	Care services	Domestic services
Marketplace platforms	Auxiliatus Cronoshare Habitissimo TopAyuda Yocuido Zaask	Aupair.com Babysits Care.com Confio ¹ Sitly	Doméstico24
On-demand platforms	Taskia Trabeja Webel Yoopies	Familiados ² Joyners ¹ Nannyfy ¹	Cleanzy Clintu Domestiko.com GetYourHero ¹ Helping ¹ Limpio ¹ MyPoppins ¹ Tidy Wayook ¹
Digital agencies	Helpycare Lady Helper Loreka	Aiudo Ayudania ¹ Cuidelia Cuideo Cuidum CuoreCare Depencare FamiliaFácil MimoCare Qida Senniors Ubikare Wayalia Weli ¹	

Note. ¹These platforms were non-operational at the time of conducting our mapping.

²Familiados incorporates all three business models in the care sector, with on-demand services being its main model.

via platforms without value judgments (Orth and Baum, 2024). The interview process adhered to established ethical standards for qualitative research involving vulnerable populations. Particular attention was paid to ensure participant's anonymity and to protect sensitive information about participants and their privacy (Floros, 2024).

Participants ranged in age from 29 to 64 years of age, 16 were born in Latin America and 6 in Spain, and the majority worked in large urban areas in eight Spanish cities. These sociodemographic characteristics of our sample match the profile of domestic and care workers in Europe (EU-OSHA, 2024). All respondents often used several platforms simultaneously and had engaged with 16 different platforms out of the 34 studied. By business models, 11 interviewees have worked through five different marketplaces, seven workers used five on-demand platforms and 10 women worked for six digital agencies. Most services involved care work (six provided childcare, six eldercare, and five both); four combined domestic and care work; and only one worked exclusively in domestic work via platforms.

Drawing on the typology of business models proposed by Rodríguez-Modroño (2024) for Spain and the literature on the socio-technical systems of work organisation in the digital care market, we examine the specific ways in which different models of digital intermediation in the Spanish care sector shape the logics of subordination and job insecurity of workers through platform governance, the individualisation of risks, and the degree of autonomy and job insecurity.

Findings

The platformised care sector in Spain is still an emerging market that is articulated around three business models of labour intermediation with differentiated forms of value creation and control of the work process. While all three models rely on digital mediation and affective narratives of flexibility and self-agency, they differ significantly in how control is exercised, how risks are externalised, and how autonomy and insecurity are distributed across workers.

Platform governance

Across all three platform models, control is exercised indirectly through a hybridisation of digital infrastructures and managerial supervision, which vary in terms of intensity, visibility, and centralisation of control.

Neither marketplace nor on-demand platforms facilitate any employment contract to carers. In fact, they promote the opposite by constructing an imaginary of independent service providers or “self-entrepreneurs”. The difference between these two platform models is that marketplaces resemble more a social network, treating workers/carers as non-professional collaborators, while on-demand platforms are more hierarchical and imitate the uberised gig model.

Marketplace platforms (e.g. Sitly, TopAyuda, Doméstico24) have a very open registration process—often without legal documentation requirements (PW15)—but the access to tasks is conditioned on subscription fees: “you can create your profile, but you cannot contact others if you don’t pay the membership” (PW15). Platforms enforce this monetisation through technical restrictions such as blocking contact exchanges or limiting messages between users.

The key business strategy of marketplace platforms is to generate network effects by attracting large numbers of users to their databases, particularly workers who value the “freedom” of self-employment over “security”, such as PW18 and other migrant women interviewees. For many migrant workers—especially those in an irregular administrative situation or without support networks—marketplaces constitute a first channel of entry into the labour market, albeit of a highly unstable and precarious nature. PW20 acknowledged that this platform model “did help” her find work without the mediation of “a third party”, as she preferred, yet also highlighted its biased governance logics:

I have always felt that there was more care for the employer than for the employee. Also, I don’t know if it was because of my perception that I was irregular and I was against everyone [laughs], I was angry with the world in general [laughs]. But I did feel that there was very little care for us as domestic workers.

Control in marketplaces is mainly exercised through self-regulation by the workers, due to their perception of being in a highly competitive market: “a post requesting a service comes out and within an hour there are at least 20 messages or calls” (PW7). This competitive pressure encourages unpaid work, self-branding, and wage undercutting (PW2). Unlike other models, marketplace platforms are perceived as technological tools rather than labour intermediaries, reinforced by business language (“Find, book, and manage. . .”) and social-media-like interfaces (PW14, PW18).

This perception masks the normative form of control embedded in profile design, algorithmic ranking, and client reviews.

Marketplaces encourage workers to create attractive profiles and self-promote themselves as trustworthy subjects. Trust is the specific form of reputational capital of these workers, which is generated by self-branding practices and materialises with public clients' reviews about their willingness to work in the form of ratings: "the more reviews you have, obviously the better it is, and the more families trust you" (PW4). Reputation systems function as technologies of power, given that they directly impact the algorithmic positioning of workers' profiles, and, by extension, their job opportunities. As expressed by PW3: "You are a product that you put on the market and you would like to have a good reference". Therefore, workers have to increase their unpaid work devoted to improving profiles, job search, and relational tasks on the platform, where they have to be chosen by an indeterminate person who advertises a job offer to a multitude of "standard" carers. The platform uses this as a disciplining process, which is activated through AM systems that reinforce the best-positioned profiles and penalise those that are inactive or have poor ratings. PW20 denounced "the double standards of these matching and rating systems", given that relying on client reviews to obtain employment is discretionary, asymmetrical, and precarising, as it increases their exposure to situations of discrimination, negligence, and vulnerability, especially if they are in an irregular administrative situation. Ironically, she also valued the "flexibility" of working in marketplaces, showing awareness of the inherent tension between flexibility and security in the workplace.

Secondly, on-demand platforms (e.g. Clintu, Webel, Familiados) intensify control by embedding it in a hierarchical and task-oriented labour regime. Using algorithms and geolocation, they allocate tasks, recommend rates—"the suggested [rate] for this month is €9.5" (PW6)—monitor performance, and sometimes track working hours. Unlike marketplaces, workers do not primarily compete for visibility but for continuous eligibility within a closed system. Control is mainly exercised through taskification and standardisation of care work, breaking it into service units such as cleaning per stay or hours of ironing. This de-professionalises care labour—"I have no social and health care training whatsoever" (PW9)—and facilitates replaceability: "people with training versus people who do not have it are just paid more" (PW10). Work rhythms are tightly regulated: "we had to clean 4–5 floors in 4 hours [. . .] it was crazy" (PW15).

Unlike marketplaces, these systems create internal hierarchies rather than open competition. Reputational control in on-demand platforms is more explicitly linked to compliance to services than to the information provided in profiles. Ratings determine whether workers "exist" on the platform—"stars do not feed me, but if I don't have them, I don't exist" (PW9). Also, some platforms use gamification strategies, such as bronze-to-diamond rankings, modulate commissions and access to bookings: "when you are bronze, they discount up to 5 or 6 euros for each service" (PW6).

Thirdly, digital agencies (e.g. Cuideo, Cuidum, Aiudo) rely on centralised, semi-automated managerial control, resembling traditional employment agencies augmented by digital tools. They monopolise worker selection, client allocation, administrative validation, and negotiation of working conditions. As PW21 stated, "everything was done by the platform [. . .] I had nothing to do with the family".

Control operates through opaque recruitment and supervision practices, often mediated informally via WhatsApp (PW5, PW17). As claimed by PW22, workers are excluded from direct negotiation with families, and monitoring focuses on contractual compliance rather than actual working conditions. Reputation circulates privately in the form of worker references—from clients to digital agencies, and subsequently from agencies to prospective clients—rather than public ratings: "They gave me a very good reference" (PW21). Unlike marketplaces and on-demand platforms,

digital agencies limit worker visibility and self-branding, reinforcing dependence on managerial discretion.

Overall, the agencies adopt strategies of self-representation and positioning of the workers (PW1), although without generating dynamics of visibility and digital exposure of the workers. On the digital agencies, the reputational capital of workers circulates as private information and in an opaque manner, remaining largely internal to corporate mediation processes. These platforms do not operate through open competition or promote self-branding practices among workers, but rather through centralised assessment and discretionary matching. In this sense, digital agencies constitute a platform model that hybridises the traditional logics of trust and recommendation with platform-based mechanisms of reputation rating, thereby reinforcing managerial control while limiting workers' autonomy and visibility within the care labour market.

Individualised risks, autonomy and job insecurity

Despite different organisational forms, all three models rely on the individualisation of economic, legal, and social risks, particularly affecting migrant women.

Marketplace platforms offer the highest degree of formal autonomy: workers choose services, set prices, and manage schedules—"you are the one who chooses the service" (PW11). For some, this flexibility supports work-life balance. However, autonomy is undermined by intense competition, reputational dependency, and income instability. In marketplaces, risks are individualised through the absence of contractual mediation and institutional protection. Workers bear the full responsibility for non-payment, scams, harassment, or abusive clients. PW7, after experiencing non-payment, framed it as an individual ethical failure: "That person abused my trust". Platforms offer minimal support, typically limited to email-based review moderation, as in PW2's case of sexual harassment and retaliatory negative reviews.

Workers become "self-taught in their protection" (PW7), learning through trial and error in an unregulated environment. This is particularly acute for migrant women in irregular administrative situations (PW4), whose lack of socio-legal protection intensifies vulnerability. PW4 pointed out: "if you don't have a good score, you don't get any job; it is like being punished". AM not only distributes tasks, but also shapes career paths, hierarchies, and the economic uncertainty inherent to gig work. PW4 sums it up clearly: "you work and you don't know how much you are going to earn until the end of the month . . . or if someone is going to cancel you".

On-demand platforms configure a regime of limited autonomy, characteristic of gig work. While framed as freelancing—"as a freelancer, I did it on my own" (PW16)—workers' choices are constrained by algorithmic allocation, minimum rates, and constant availability demands. Raising rates can lead to exclusion: PW10 stopped receiving offers after increasing her price. Flexibility becomes conditional on economic insecurity: "if you don't have a work permit, these applications open the door" (PW11). For many, gig work is an "extra income" (PW16), but dependence on it traps workers in fragmented, short-term employment.

On-demand platforms intensify risk externalisation through algorithmic opacity and economic dependence. Workers often do not know how rates, commissions, or hours are calculated—"I was paid €300 for 80 hours" (PW15). The ambiguity of employment status—"I don't know if I am self-employed or subcontracted" (PW19)—creates legal and financial insecurity. Penalties for disintermediation, delayed payments, and automated account deactivation further individualise risk. PW19 refused off-platform payment fearing suspension: "that would result in an account suspension". Although platforms manage payments and retain commissions, they disclaim employer responsibility, leaving workers exposed to cancellations, fluctuating demand, and unpaid availability: "you work and you don't know how much you are going to earn until the end of the month" (PW4).

Digital agencies appear to mitigate risk through formal contracts and social security registration. Unlike the other models, they explicitly manage labour intermediation within the framework of domestic work regulations and, in some cases, the public long-term care system. However, risk is reintroduced through partial formalisation, underemployment and informational asymmetries which favour employers over workers. Workers are often hired as domestic employees while performing complex social-healthcare tasks (PW5) or required to work informally beyond contractual terms (PW21).

Conflicts reveal the fragility of this protection. PW17 was deactivated after internal coordination failures between supervisors, exposing the discretionary power of agency staff. Workers also bear the costs of training and professional development, reproducing a “self-taught apprenticeship” similar to marketplaces. Thus, individualised risk persists despite formal employment status.

Regarding digital agencies, these platforms offer relatively greater stability but minimal autonomy. Workers are excluded from negotiating tasks, schedules, and wages, and underemployment is common. Job security depends on both family employers and agency supervisors, producing a regulated yet precarious insertion into the labour market. Workers are often registered with social security and hired as domestic employees. However, this apparent formalisation conceals a regime of underemployment and occupational downgrading, where workers perform complex care and social-health tasks while being contractually classified as domestic workers—even in cases of professional trained workers, noted PW5. As PW21’s experience shows, contractual security does not prevent informal overwork. PW21, for instance, emphasised the sense of security, trust and comfort that the digital agency brings as a corporate intermediary in working relationships with a family:

I said, well, they will send me to any home because of everything that had happened to me. Then they explained that they do everything according to the law, guaranteeing our rights, and I liked that.

However, her work experience revealed clear discrepancies between the contractual arrangements mediated by the digital agency and the actual working conditions. In practice, the family employer required her to work more days than those specified in her employment contract as internal carer, consistently on weekends and in an informal manner. Thus, the functionality of informality and information asymmetries also emerge as characteristic features of employment relationships in this platform model. PW17 underlined this when she recounted resigning from a job as a live-in domestic worker, where the platform had concealed the true nature of the employment conditions. The worker felt cheated. Despite being hired as a domestic employee, she performed excessive social, health, and domestic tasks for an employing family. She described the platform’s operations as a “scam”, citing the opacity and disengagement of her supervisor in the agency. This contrast reveals an organisational architecture in which platforms present a façade of formalisation and support but do not perform supervisory functions or guarantee support throughout the relation between the families as clients and the workers.

Discussion and conclusions

Our findings allow us to identify significant differences in organisational work patterns in care platforms in Spain according to the business model of the digital platforms analysed. Together, these models illustrate how care platforms organise domestic and care work through differentiated regimes of control, risk and insecurity, while consistently externalising responsibility onto workers under the promise of flexibility and opportunity.

Mechanisms of control: From self-regulation to hierarchical and managerial governance

In terms of control mechanisms, there is a gradation in the intensity and sophistication in the disciplining of workers among the different models of digital platforms. Marketplaces exercise reputational control over workers based on reviews and profile visibility and proactivity, transferring the evaluation of work to the clientele in the role of indirect employers (McDonald et al., 2024). The digital visibility device of marketplaces thus also conditions the autonomy of female workers, institutionalising practices of online exposure and self-promotion (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018) that feed back into their dependence on reputation systems and their symbolic subordination to clients (Kalemba et al., 2024; Piña et al., 2024). While references have long shaped access to domestic and care work, platform reputation systems formalise and intensify this logic by transforming trust into customer satisfaction metrics that condition workers' daily access to employment. On-demand platforms deepen this logic through algorithms and automated decision systems. Their AM system integrates reputation as an indicator of job performance. Using algorithms to nudge workers' behaviours can be more subtle, but no less effective (Sullivan et al., 2025). The practice of using client feedback and performance ratings to define workers' access to services reduces workers' autonomy and their potential to exercise agency, while the platform refuses to assume any responsibility as an employer (Arcidiacono et al., 2024; Mantilla-León et al., 2024). While digital agencies only filter workers' profiles based on their occupational characteristics—socio-demographic and experiential, not professional—, they implement partial formalisation strategies and intensify domestic forms of formal subsumption institutionalising the underemployment of migrant care workers.

Distribution of risks, insecurity and precarity

Regarding the externalisation of risks, all models offload the instability of employment onto female workers, although they do so through different combinations of informal autonomy, affective subordination, and structural precarity (Poblete et al., 2024). Marketplaces are a decentralised and competitive work model, where apparent autonomy predominates accompanied by high competition, public exposure and absence of guarantees at the labour, economic and social levels (Ticona, 2022). The individualism of this work aggravates the potential risks for domestic and care workers, who are usually in a situation of exclusion from certain labour protections and institutional invisibility (Gruszka et al., 2024; Lenaerts et al., 2024; Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2024; Sciannamblo, 2024).

In contrast, on-demand platforms generate a strong algorithmic dependence, marked by constant economic insecurity, low bargaining power, and a large amount of invisible unpaid labour (Pulignano et al., 2023, 2024). In this model, algorithms operate as “digital bosses”, distributing, supervising and making work visible with complex parameters that combine geographical proximity, time availability, and reputational scores of workers and impose opaque, client-influenced performance standards without providing review mechanisms (Sedacca, 2022). Thus, AM structures inequalities rather than neutralising them (Strüver, 2024). Under the model of labour flexibility of on-demand platforms, the dependence of workers is ensured in a discursive fiction of autonomy that mystifies the individualisation of risk, giving rise to a paradoxical situation in which less autonomy does not imply greater job security (Pulignano et al., 2024).

In both cases, the new symbolic demands of labour in conflicting regimes of visibility generate imbalances between security and employment (Mateescu and Ticona, 2020). These imbalances increase the subsumption of women workers within the capitalist technological process by diluting the responsibility of labour in their exploitation (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2024).

Digital agencies are the only platform model that provides relative job security to female workers, with a regularisation of their employment situation and a perception of institutional support, which does not translate into greater economic and labour protection or a career path. Nevertheless, their labour intermediation strategies tend to reproduce the subordination of domestic workers, intensive work rhythms, informational asymmetries, and the need to become self-taught occupations (Murphy et al., 2024). Labour relations are centralised and opaque, excluding workers from direct negotiation with families and limiting their autonomy despite the promise of stability.

The three platform models depart from the standard employment norm, although configuring different variations in the commodification of care work. The work configuration promoted by each platform model draws on distinct labour imaginaries that enable the neoliberal subjectification of care workers.

Self-exploitation, and the platform governance of care work

Overall, our analysis shows that, beyond the differences between models, the decentralisation of employment promoted by care work platforms broadens control mechanisms, technifies informality, and consolidates a regime of structural precarity under new forms of symbolic exploitation, such as personal branding practices linked to reputational capital (Armano et al., 2023). In this sense, decentralisation is accompanied by a growing sophistication of indirect control devices, especially through artificial intelligence systems of evaluation, classification, and visibility of female workers (Mateescu and Ticona, 2020). These technologies of power are articulated with technologies of the self, such as self-branding practices in a context of normative reputation or codetermined heteronomy, which describe how reputation systems act on platforms as surrogate relationships for the interpersonal ties that underlie the informal generation of trust. Thus, the central socio-technical component of the organisational model of reproductive labour is mediated by digital intermediaries with specific business models.

Although all platforms under study rely on activating discourses of forms of self-exploitation (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018), each of these digital intermediaries resorts to specific semantic and performative codes to legitimise their strategies of capitalising reproductive labour. Marketplaces promote a passive de-labourisation of employment by replicating the user experiences of social networking sites (Ticona, 2022), which dilute the salaried nature of commodity labour by recreating a virtual community of people who interact based on profiles, posts, and digital visibility strategies (Mateescu and Ticona, 2020). Workers interpret the functioning of marketplaces through cultural frameworks associated with social media platforms (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). On-demand platforms also facilitate a discursive de-labourisation of employment, but in an active way, inscribing themselves within the normative strategies of labour flexibilisation that were initiated during post-Fordism by managerialist ideology and the motivational discourse of entrepreneurship (De Krijger, 2019). However, digital agencies are embedded in the familialist and postcolonial imaginary of social reproduction work, emphasising the centrality of affective work in care, the blurring of the boundaries between domestic work and care work, and the intersectional gender stereotypes that naturalise gender and racial occupational hierarchies in the care sector (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2024).

Despite their differences, all models share a logic of externalisation of costs, individualisation of responsibilities, and neoliberal subjectification of work, which allows capitalisation of labour effort without assuming business or social commitments (Pulignano et al., 2024). The platformisation of reproduction configures a stratified digital work ecosystem, in which platform intermediation introduces the logic of factory labour through renewed languages of flexibility, entrepreneurship, and efficiency (Pais and Zanoni, 2024). In this sense, the strategies of organisational flexibility in

domestic and care work platforms are characterised by the de-qualification of reproductive activities, thus enabling outsourcing, de-personalisation, and segmentation of work thanks also to the availability of a migrant workforce with no rights (Strüver, 2024). The model requires a “stock” of easily replaceable workers, which is articulated with migratory logics that allow the intermittent integration of surplus and informal labour, maximising the profit margin (Van Doorn, 2017). In doing so, platforms draw on pre-existing global care chains to access a labour force made vulnerable, informal, and precarious by existing regulation and migrant labour regimes, which enable the formation of a large potential supply of workers (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2024).

Future research should continue to adopt comparative, gender-sensitive, and institutionally grounded approaches to platform labour, moving beyond dominant narratives of flexibility and innovation to critically examine the socio-technical mechanisms through which platforms shape care work and social reproduction.

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Ethical considerations

This study is based on in-depth interviews. Our institutions did not require ethical approval for this research.

Consent to participate

All participants provided written informed consent prior to participating.

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Appendix

Table A1. Occupational profiles of the interviewed women workers.

ID	Age	Country of birth	City of residence	Platform and model	Services provided
PW1	33	Spain	Valencia	Cuidum (DA)	Elderly care
PW2	46	Colombia	Valencia	Doméstico24 (M)	Domestic work
PW3	64	Venezuela	Valencia	Sitly (M), Cuidum (DA)	Childcare, elderly care
PW4	42	Argentina	Valencia	Sitly (M), Babysits (M)	Childcare
PW5	30	Peru	Madrid	Cuideo (DA), TopAyuda (M)	Childcare
PW6	30	Peru	Alicante	Webel (OD)	Childcare, domestic work, ironing
PW7	59	Spain	Sevilla	TopAyuda (M)	Childcare, elderly care, pet care, private lessons
PW8	35	Spain	Málaga	Cuidelia (DA)	Elderly care
PW9	36	Spain	Pamplona	Familiados (OD)	Childcare, elderly care (home and residential)
PW10	38	Spain	Pamplona	Familiados (OD)	Elderly care (home and residential)
PW11	32	Colombia	Valencia	Domestiko.com (OD), Webel (OD), Sitly (M)	Childcare
PW12	50	Perú	Madrid	Senniors (DA)	Elderly care
PW13	29	Spain	Sevilla	Babysits (M), Sitly (M), TopNanny (M), Familiados (OD)	Childcare
PW14	35	Argentina	Madrid	Sitly (M), Babysits (M), TopAyuda (M)	Childcare, elderly care, pet care
PW15	34	Venezuela	Madrid	Taskia (OD), Sitly (M)	Childcare, housekeeping
PW16	31	Venezuela	Valencia	Yoopies (OD)	Childcare, domestic work
PW17	40	Peru	Madrid	Wayalia (DA), Felizvita/Cuideo (DA)	Elderly care
PW18	30	Peru	Sevilla	Babysits (M), Sitly (M), TopAyuda (M)	Childcare
PW19	34	Paraguay	Madrid	FamiliaFácil (DA), Webel (OD)	Elderly care, ironing
PW20	31	Mexico	Madrid	Sitly (M), TopAyuda (M), Care.com (M)	Childcare
PW21	55	Colombia	Ciudad Real	Cuideo (DA)	Elderly care
PW22	40	Bolivia	Madrid	Senniors (DA)	Elderly care

Note. In brackets: marketplace (M), digital agency (DA), and on-demand (OD).