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Work arrangements in digitally mediated care and domestic work

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ABSTRACT

As the need for care has grown, paid care and domestic work in the private home is increasingly being organised on the market. Today, digital platforms serve as intermediaries for care and domestic services but systematic research on the resulting work arrangements between workers and clients remains limited. By understanding platform-mediated care and domestic work arrangements as a (social) exchange of 'love and money' between workers and clients, the study explores the working conditions and the worker-client relationships that emerge. Drawing on unique survey data collected on a large digital platform in Germany in 2019, the study shows that care and domestic workers who offer their services on digital platforms often experience informal work arrangements characterised by low working hours and irregular shifts. The worker-client relationships are described as amicable more than professional. They are often built on continuity, long-termism and reliability, which are essential for a lasting relationship. This challenges the on-demand, economic logic characterising other forms of platform work.

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1. Introduction

Paid care and domestic work in private homes is becoming increasingly important. In Germany, as in many other countries, there is a so-called 'care crisis' or 'crisis of reproduction' (Altenried et al., 2021; Dowling, 2021; Jürgens, 2010; Lutz, 2013). In its broadest sense it refers to the increasingly precarious organisation of both paid and unpaid care work due to constantly increasing care needs on the one hand and a simultaneous decrease in care supply on the other hand. In the formal care economy, there are challenges in the form of welfare cuts (e.g. Jürgens, 2010) and shortages of skilled workers in care occupations (Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2024). Meanwhile, the provision of formerly unpaid care and domestic work at home can no longer be taken for granted in light of women's steadily increasing employment rates (Destatis, 2024b) and population ageing (Destatis, 2024a).

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As an individual solution to this societal crisis, there is a growing need for market-based solutions and the outsourcing of previously unpaid care and domestic tasks to the market (e.g. Nisic et al., 2023; see also Hochschild, 2013 on the outsourcing of ‘personal life’ more generally). Today, digital care-work platforms such as *Care.com* and *Helping* bring together care and domestic workers and potential clients online. Individuals seeking care workers can look for them and workers can find jobs in private homes.

So far, research on care-work platforms has pointed to the invisibility and devaluation of online-mediated care and domestic work (Gruszka et al., 2022, 2024; Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022), and has also examined workers’ experiences, motivations, as well as their working conditions (e.g. Baum & Kufner, 2021; Bor, 2021; Gerold et al., 2022; Gruszka et al., 2024; Hunt et al., 2019; Molitor, 2024; Poblete et al., 2024; Wiesböck et al., 2023) and workers’ collective action (Niebler & Animento, 2023). Others have focused on how platform operators exert control over the workforce (McDonald et al., 2021), and on the way platforms create visibility of their workers and deploy digital trust mechanisms (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). While these predominantly qualitative studies are not generalisable beyond the subjects interviewed (cf. Baum, 2024; Hunt et al., 2019; Molitor, 2024; Poblete et al., 2024 pursuing a mixed-methods or quantitative account), more systematic research on the work arrangements in platform-mediated care and domestic work is needed.

Authors have identified several issues regarding (non-platform mediated) paid care and domestic work in private homes. First, paid work in private homes has been considered a female-typed example of nonstandard work. It is typically provided by women with a history of a migration background (e.g. Manoudi et al., 2018) and who often face poor working conditions: low pay and income insecurity, low working volume, informal work along with a lack of social security and regulations dictating working time are prevalent in private households (e.g. Farvaque, 2015; OECD, 2021). Since paid work in private homes is difficult to monitor officially, informality is common and up to an estimated 88.5% of cleaning work in Germany is undeclared (Enste, 2019).

Second, paid care and domestic work performed in other people’s homes is relational in nature and is characterised by trust and privacy issues. This work can be regarded as a specific type of social exchange between the worker and the client, where two disparate resources – ‘love’ and ‘money’ (Foa & Foa, 2012) – are exchanged. These have long been viewed as belonging to ‘hostile worlds’ (Zelizer, 2000). Similar to other forms of social exchange (Blau, 1964), social exchange between care workers and their clients or care recipients is characterised by reciprocity as well as commitment and trust. Care arrangements in particular and ‘good-quality care’ take time to develop (Himmelweit, 1999).

Whether and how these issues are also present in online-mediated care and domestic work currently remains an open question. By drawing on unique survey data collected among platform-mediated care and domestic workers in Germany, the study therefore explores the work arrangements between workers and clients. What do the working conditions (‘money’) and the relationship between workers and clients (‘love’) in online-mediated care and domestic work look like? By conceptualising the work arrangements as a specific social exchange between workers and clients, which is characterised by power asymmetries, reciprocity and, ideally, durability, the present study explores the working conditions and the relational nature of this exchange in terms of the worker-client relationship.

The study seeks to contribute to research in three ways. First, the study provides insights into the work arrangements in online-mediated care and domestic work by

framing them as a social exchange. It shows that while the working conditions are characterised by informality – such as a lack of contracts, volatile working hours and irregular shifts – the worker-client relationship is more often perceived as amicable rather than professional and develops over time. Second, the study adds a systematic assessment of the work arrangements in online-mediated care and domestic work. Based on weighted survey data, the study's findings are generalisable beyond the survey participants to the active worker population of a large care-work platform in Germany in 2019. Third, it is the first study to systematically explore the work arrangements of online-mediated care and domestic workers in the German context. Germany is a particularly interesting case to study as it has strong labour market regulations but relies on both formal care provision in facilities and informal provision of paid care and domestic work in private homes.

2. Paid care and domestic work in private homes: a social exchange

Paid care and domestic work in private homes combines two previously distinct spheres or resources – those of 'love' and 'money', which refer to the emotional and relational on the one hand, and economic and material benefits on the other (Folbre, 2012). With the advent of industrialisation, paid 'productive' work and unpaid 'unproductive' family work became divided into two distinct spheres, each following its own logic. The public sphere of paid employment was predominantly occupied by men and associated with rationality and economic value, while the private 'female' realm of 'non-market labor' (Folbre, 1994, p. 86) was characterised by care and affection. Here, 'love' was enacted to reproduce the (male) labour force. For good-quality care to flourish, it is crucial to develop a relationship between those providing and those receiving care (Himmelweit, 1999). These relationships are based on reliability, long-term commitment, affection and trust.

With women increasingly entering the labour force, these previously distinct spheres have gradually become less separated. Formerly unpaid care and domestic work is now outsourced and is provided in public institutions, through government programmes, or via market services (Nelson, 1999).

In Germany, a familialistic welfare state, the public provision of paid care services is fairly advanced, yet families – particularly women – still play a major role in providing (unpaid) care (Leitner, 2003). Recent family policies in Germany have thus tried to alleviate work-life conflict and support the move away from the male-breadwinner model towards a dual-earner model (Von Gleichen & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2018); such policies also include tax incentives for domestic services in the private home.

Those able to afford care and domestic services might choose to outsource some of these responsibilities to the market. The resulting work arrangements between clients and workers can be conceptualised as a specific type of social exchange, where economic ('money') and relational aspects ('love') are exchanged and reciprocated. While Hochschild (1985) remains critical of the 'commodification of emotion' (England, 2005) which demands emotional labour – the display of socially appropriate emotions – the present study aligns with the perspective of other economic feminists: Extrinsic (i.e. 'money') and intrinsic benefits (i.e. 'love') of this exchange are understood as interconnected and capable of coexisting within work relationships (England et al., 2012; Folbre, 2012;

Folbre & Nelson, 2000; Zelizer, 2007) rather than representing two 'hostile worlds' (Zelizer, 2000).

The dimension of 'love' encompasses a variety of different aspects related to the rationality of care work, including affection, warmth and feelings of responsibility of others' well-being (England et al., 2012). This hence includes not only direct care tasks for sick or elderly persons, for instance, but also indirect, more instrumental tasks, such as the cleaning and cooking for others (Abel & Nelson, 1990). The dimension 'money' refers to material and extrinsic benefits, including wages and working conditions (England et al., 2012; Howes et al., 2012).

Rooted in a strong norm of reciprocity (Blau, 1964), this exchange is also characterised by power asymmetries and dependence (Blau, 1964; Emerson, 1962), which is typical of employment relationships. Workers typically possess less power than their employers and are therefore more dependent on their employers than vice versa (Blau, 1964; see also Gruszka et al., 2022; Hipp et al., 2024; Schilliger et al., 2023). In care relationships, the power imbalance is further complicated by workers' intrinsic motivations, which facilitate a caring and close relationship between the worker and the recipient. This 'prisoner of love dilemma' (England, 2005) makes it difficult for workers to advocate for better pay and working conditions (Hipp et al., 2024). This is intensified in work settings where informal or undeclared work arrangements are common, as private settings are difficult for the state to monitor. The absence of contracts makes it impossible for workers to exercise their legal rights (Hipp et al., 2024). Workers' economic dependency on their job and intrinsic benefits may lead to an acceptance of certain non-standard working conditions.

2.1. Working conditions in private homes

Paid care and domestic work in private homes is predominantly provided by women, many of whom are migrant workers. In Germany, these migrant workers are primarily from Eastern European countries (e.g. Lutz & Palenga-Möllnbeck, 2010), especially in elder care, where '24-hour live-in' workers care for the elderly at home (Aulenbacher et al., 2024; Hipp et al., 2024). Even though Germany ratified the ILO's Domestic Worker Convention in 2013, traditional paid care and domestic work is characterised by poor working conditions. These include low pay, informal work, lack of social protection, job insecurity, irregular shifts and low work volume (e.g. Böning, 2015; Farvaque, 2013, 2015). Importantly, while minimum wage regulations also apply to employed workers in private homes in Germany, self-employed workers are exempt.

Families in Germany have various options for outsourcing their care and domestic tasks to the market and for employing workers in their private homes. They can either employ workers directly (e.g. via the mini-job scheme, which facilitates the use of marginal employment contracts), let them work in a self-employed capacity or hire them informally 'off the books'. While social policies have been introduced to incentivise formal employment in private homes and to increase female employment (Morel, 2015), such services are still often provided informally. For instance, Enste (2019) has estimated that up to 88.5% of cleaning work remains undeclared in Germany; Shire et al. (2017) have estimated that the share of undeclared work ranges from 50% in childcare to over 66% in cleaning to 75% in eldercare. Often, such informal work arrangements

are facilitated by the social relationship between worker and employer (Adriaenssens et al., 2023).

Since good quality care is linked to good working conditions (Howes et al., 2012), the question remains what the work arrangements look like in online-mediated care and domestic work today.

2.2. Care-work platforms

Acting as digital intermediaries between workers and clients, care-work platforms can be considered part of the gig economy where traditional employment has been replaced by tasks that are divided into single jobs or ‘gigs’. Digital on-demand platforms largely operate under a ‘spot market’ logic, with services being available on demand (De Stefano, 2016), often at short notice and for a short period of time (Crouch, 2019; Williams et al., 2021) and provided ‘as-required’ (Duggan et al., 2020, p. 115). Platforms typically act as mere intermediaries between workers and clients (e.g. Schmidt, 2017) and workers are typically self-employed. As such, workers are not committed to clients for lengthy periods of time (Williams et al., 2021). They are considered interchangeable or fungible (Flanagan, 2019), as it often does not matter who does the job – as in food delivery, for instance. Platform work thus often follows an efficient economic exchange logic where services are exchanged for money.

The digital mediation of paid care and domestic work, however, is a special exchange relationship that operates under two distinct logics. First, there is the instantaneous, on-demand, and flexible spot-market logic of money for service provision that characterises many types of platform-mediated work. Second, there is the relational nature of (paid) care and domestic work in private homes. Care work is fundamentally relational; it is built on affection and trust, which requires time to develop. This may challenge the economic principles of the gig economy’s spot market. As McDonald et al. (2023) note, online-mediated care workers and care seekers prefer long-term and trusting relationships, which means it differs from other forms of gig work that concern ‘one-off service transactions’ (McDonald et al., 2023, p. 361), and are based on short-termism and worker interchangeability (fungibility) (Flanagan, 2019). Therefore, typically a multi-stage process is initiated before an individual hires someone to care for loved ones or allows a stranger into their home (McDonald et al., 2023; Trojansky, 2020). Unlike other gig platforms, where a service is often chosen with a single click, care workers and families typically get to know each other first and establish more trust through interaction (see also Khan et al., 2024; Williams et al., 2021).

2.3. Working conditions on care-work platforms

Various studies have reported poor working conditions for online-mediated care and domestic work based on qualitative interviews with workers. Looking at Spain, Rodríguez-Modroño et al. (2022) have shown that online-mediated care work is characterised by poor working conditions including low pay and a lack of social security for workers, most of whom are migrants (based on qualitative interviews). Gerold et al. (2022) have examined the working conditions of platform-mediated cleaners based on interviews with workers and clients in Germany. The workers experienced low incomes, irregular

and variable working hours (averaging 18 hours per week across six clients), and health risks, such as exposure to cleaning agents and physical injuries. Such low working volumes were also reported by Poblete et al. (2024) who found, based on survey data, that over a third of workers in Argentina reported working five or fewer hours per week, and 58% worked six to twenty-three hours.

Research has further paid particular attention to the unequal power relationship or power asymmetries between workers and clients, and between workers and platforms who ‘impose[s] terms and conditions and forms of control that govern the workers’ access to work’ (Williams et al., 2021, p. 4137). Gerold et al. (2022) found that the platform systematically favoured clients over workers, cementing an unequal power relationship between the two parties. For instance, workers were not able to dispute negative ratings and the platform offered little support in cases of unpaid wages (Gerold et al., 2022; Gruszka et al., 2022). Similarly, the relationships between online-mediated care workers and clients often exhibit ‘power imbalances or a “social asymmetry”’ (Poblete et al., 2024, p. 11), especially when the arrangements are informal – including volatile working hours and unpaid overtime – which workers may accept in return for higher wages (Poblete et al., 2024, p. 15).

The question of whether and how care-work platforms contribute to the formalisation of previously unregulated care and domestic work remains disputed. Ticona and Mateescu (2018) have discussed how platforms attempt to formalise working arrangements by creating visibility for the workers through their digital profiles and by managing booking and payments online. Gerold et al. (2022) have suggested that such fully platform-mediated and controlled work arrangements could promote formalisation in the household service sector. However, many self-employed workers on the platform are unaware that they must declare their platform income to authorities. Van Doorn (2020) has argued that a process of ‘selective formalisation’ is under way, where platforms formalise aspects like online payments but avoid enforcement or monitoring formal employment, as they self-identify as intermediaries only. As a result, wages may be lower than minimum wage, income may remain insecure, and career advancement may be limited.

Pulignano et al. (2023) have analysed care-work platforms in Belgium and France, where household service work is comparatively formalised and regulated through a voucher system (i.e. families or households receive subsidies to hire housework help). They argue that platforms undermine the existing formal system by discouraging registration with the voucher system, thereby perpetuating informal arrangements in private homes.

Survey data from Poblete et al. (2024) on platform-mediated cleaners in Argentina has shown that platform-mediated workers tend to more often have formal employment contracts than those in traditional domestic work. However, formalisation varies by ‘hiring modalities’ in online-mediated cleaning: fully platform-managed jobs were more formal (37% of jobs), while jobs managed by employers/clients were less often formalised as the employer is responsible for registering the worker in the social security system. On-demand, one-time only gigs were typically informal as workers are not required to be registered for social security.

While these studies provide important insights into various aspects of working conditions in online-mediated care and domestic work, they are often based on qualitative

interviews (meaning that they cannot be generalised beyond the subjects interviewed) or focus on other country contexts (e.g. Poblete et al., 2024; Pulignano et al., 2023). The present study seeks to fill this research gap by focusing on the work arrangements of online-mediated care and domestic workers in Germany.

3. Data and methods¹

To learn more about the work experiences of online-mediated care and domestic workers, a standardised online survey was conducted. Workers who used a large, international platform for a range of care services in Germany in 2019 were invited to participate. The services on that platform include both person-related and material services like caring for children, the elderly or sick, performing domestic tasks (cleaning or gardening) and offering pet sitting.

The platform where the survey was conducted has a subscription-based model. Both workers and clients can register with the platform for free, but, in order to get in touch with others and read messages via the app or website, one of the parties needs to have a paid subscription. The users can find each other online, and the specific working conditions are agreed upon between the users directly, without the direct intervention of the platform operator.

To access the target population, we (a group of researchers) cooperated with the platform operator. Active workers were invited by the platform operator via email to participate in the study and were incentivised to do so. The complete analytical sample used to create survey weights comprises $N = 771$ observations (see also Table 1 in online appendix for a short sample description). To account for non-response bias of different groups of care and domestic workers, I calculated poststratification weights by using population information that was provided by the platform operator (for more information on weight calculation, please refer to the online appendix, chapter A1). The sample was thus adjusted to known population totals, see Valliant and Dever (2018). Consequently, the data are generalisable to the active male and female service providers on that specific platform at the time in terms of gender, membership status (i.e. whether or not the worker had a subscription) and childcare provider status (i.e. whether someone offered child care or not, which is the type of service most commonly offered). Because the target population included all active workers with equal selection probabilities, the base weights that account for the inverse of the selection probabilities were set to equal one. Missing values in the poststratum variables (grouped variable based on gender, membership status and childcare provider status), i.e. item non-response, were not imputed and dropped by default during the weight calculations and excluded from analyses ($n = 3$).

3.1. Analytical strategy

To explore the work arrangements, I descriptively analysed selected variables by presenting weighted univariate distributions of working conditions and the worker-client relationship (section 4). The working conditions represent the economic sphere of 'money' and include information on pay, the existence of a written contract and working time arrangements. The worker-client relationship represents the sphere of 'love' in terms of interpersonal and relational aspects. This includes information on the

nature of the relationship between workers and clients, as well as its development and durability.

I applied Stata's `svyset` commands and probability weights to analyse all the variables of interest. The weighted descriptive analyses presented in section 4 are based on an analytical sample of $n = 278$ observations. Only a subset of workers had actually worked for at least one client in the last four weeks and were thus asked to provide information on that specific work arrangement. Due to listwise deletion, the observations for selected variables presented in section 4 may be somewhat lower.

For illustrative purposes, I added insights from selected qualitative interviews to supplement the quantitative analysis with clients' and experts' perspectives. The clients used various digital platforms to find care and domestic workers and the interviewed experts were representatives of care-work platforms or other organisations in the care sector. These interviews were conducted in Germany between May 2017 and February 2019 (see Table 4 in online appendix).

4. Work arrangements

4.1. Working conditions

To examine the economic and monetary aspects of the social exchange between workers and clients – the extrinsic benefits related to the sphere of 'money' – this section analyses various factors related to working conditions including pay, contracts and payment methods as well as irregular shifts. The responses pertain to the work arrangement that a worker had with a client they had worked for in the last four weeks (or, if they had worked for multiple clients, the one for whom they had worked the most).

The data revealed that, for the clear majority of the workers (72.3%), their platform-mediated work constituted an additional income source rather than their main source of income (Figure 1)². The average hourly pay was €13.30 among these workers (Table 2, online appendix). The workers thus earned an average pay that was higher than the national minimum wage level of €9.19 per hour in 2019 (Destatis, 2024c). While workers could indicate their desired hourly pay rate on their profiles, the actual pay is determined between worker and client once they meet, as the workers are not directly booked through the platform.

Likewise, any contractual aspects of the work arrangement are left to the client and worker to decide upon rather than being directly managed through the platform. The results in Figure 1 further show that the work arrangements may be characterised as informal. An overwhelming majority of the workers did not have a formal contract with their client (70.9%) and as many as 54.1% received their income in cash. Of those without a contract, as many as two thirds of the workers (66.7%) were paid in cash.

As such, the work does not provide social security to many: When asked if they benefitted from any form of entitlements due to their work via the platform – including whether they paid into the state pension scheme, got paid annual leave or were eligible for sick or disability pay or even a Christmas bonus – the clear majority said no (see Table 2, online appendix). Only a minority of 27.2% paid into the state pension scheme via their work, and even smaller percentages were eligible for paid annual leave (13.2%), sick pay (11.6%), a disability pension (11.9%) or a Christmas bonus (4.3%).



Figure 1. Working conditions.

Clients also mentioned the informal nature of such arrangements in some interviews, citing unregistered payment and the lack of a contract. One mother reported that she had entered an informal arrangement with her children's babysitter.

'Yes, she worked I think you call it off the books. So I gave her the money cash and we arranged via telephone when she would come next. There was nothing written, absolutely nothing' [Interview 09, client of care services]

Users of other platforms that directly intervene in the matching process – where booking and payment are managed online – described ways in which they circumvented this type of formalisation. A client who had booked a cleaner directly online explained how they agreed to avoid the platform and its commission fees after the initial online match was successful.

'At some point she said, "Well, I'm here and there and could we do it without [the platform]?" It's understandable that you do not want to pay the commission fees etc. And then we did it without [the platform]' [Interview 11, client of cleaning services].

Informal work may be present in online-mediated care and domestic work, as it is in traditional paid care and domestic work. Although these arrangements disadvantage workers by depriving them of social protection and making it difficult to assert their rights in the event of disputes with their clients, they might also have certain benefits. For instance, when income is not declared, workers can retain a larger share of their earnings and effectively earn more per hour. In turn, clients benefit from a less bureaucratic

and less costly solution to meet their needs. In addition, in the absence of formal contracts, the exchange might feel less like an economic market transaction and more like a personal, friendly and caring relation between workers and the clients or care recipients. The combination of market transactions with the private realm of ‘love’ or intimacy might be perceived as uncomfortable (Zelizer, 2007) or even dubious.

The informal nature of these work arrangements is also reflected in the working time arrangements: irregular shifts, low working volumes and fluctuating hours are common in online-mediated paid care and domestic work. With respect to the client they had worked for in the past four weeks, workers averaged about seven hours of work in the reference week, indicating a rather low working volume (see Table 2 in appendix). In addition, as many as 61.6% experienced volatile hours (Figure 2), meaning that their working hours varied from week to week.

Irregular shifts are also common in online-mediated paid care and domestic work: Nearly 43% of workers reported working on weekends and over one-third (35%) indicated that they worked evening or nights. Additionally, around 34% reported having to work overtime at short notice and nearly 30% experienced cancellations at short notice. Clients apparently often have more volatile and flexible needs and rely on caregivers to help them cope with additional demands that arise outside of regular operating hours, such as when childcare facilities are closed or have reduced hours due to staff shortages.

These findings indirectly highlight the intrinsic benefits of care jobs, as workers seem willing to go above and beyond to accommodate their clients’ needs and sustain their

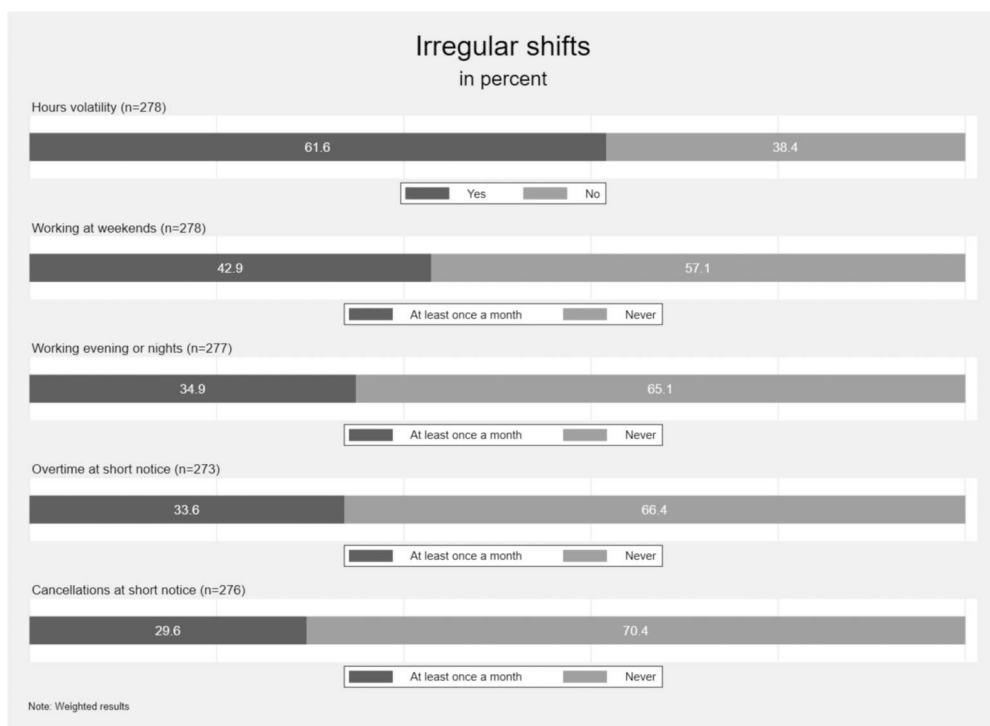


Figure 2. Working time arrangements.

work arrangements. While the variability and low work volume might pose a risk to workers, especially if income becomes unstable, workers adapt to their clients' flexible and volatile needs. In turn, flexible hours may also benefit workers who have multiple jobs or other responsibilities.

4.2. Worker-client relationship

Given these insights on the objective working conditions of platform-mediated care and domestic workers, the survey inquired about the nature of the worker-client relationship to learn more about the relational aspects of working in private homes. Once workers and clients have 'matched' online, they enter a work relationship. To better understand the nature of workers' relationships with clients, the survey asked participants to choose from a range of characteristics to describe these relationships (Figure 3; Table 3 in online appendix). A clear majority of 73% described this relationship as amicable. This is particularly relevant in this specific context as it points, again, to the informal nature of work arrangements that are not merely economic but also relational. More than half of the workers also experienced this relationship as respectful (55%) but only 26% characterised it as professional. By contrast, only 9.4% of workers characterised their relationship as demanding, 6% as distant and 2% as distrustful.

This finding is noteworthy as it directly applies to the informal arrangements common in the household services sector and underscores the finding that most workers lack



Figure 3. Nature of the worker-client relationship.

formal contracts. In the specific context of paid work in private homes, relational aspects appear to be more important than professional work-related factors. Attributes associated with interpersonal relationships – such as amicable and respectful – were more frequently chosen than professionalism. Importantly, workers almost never described these relationships as ‘distrustful’. However, it is important to bear in mind that while positive characteristics dominate, this may be due to selection bias at an earlier stage, as those who are severely dissatisfied are likely to have left their jobs.

In any social exchange, especially those involving close contact and interaction, time is needed for trust and a trusting relationship to evolve. However, this dynamic may challenge the typical spot-market characteristics of platform work, such as worker replaceability (fungibility), spontaneity and short-term engagement. To explore this further, the survey specifically asked about the long-term and spontaneous nature of the resulting work arrangements. The results show that the vast majority of workers (75%) had not worked for a client spontaneously, i.e. without getting to know them first (Figure 4).

In addition, 70% said they had been working for their client for two months or longer. These findings indicate that the majority of the workers do not work in one-time, spontaneous and instantaneous gigs but that they seek rather long-term engagements with families that are the basis for a work relationship based on commitment and trust. Illustrative findings from an interview highlight that finding quality care and a trustworthy caregiver requires time and effort; it is not simply a matter of a quick online search.



Figure 4. Development of the worker-client relationship.

A mother who found a babysitter online with whom she worked for one and a half years reported that she did indeed undertake a multi-stage screening process prior to hiring the worker. This included initiating contact through the platform for the first time, scheduling appointments with potential candidates outside the home for initial interviews, and then meeting her favourite candidate at home. This allowed the candidate to get to know the child, while the mother could observe how the babysitter and child interacted and got along with one another [Interview 09, client of care services].

An expert working in the field stressed the importance of the long-term nature of working arrangements in private homes: *'[...] when someone contacts an agency for services [...] the focus is on security, trust and continuity'* [Interview 07, expert]. Similarly, another expert noted that reliability was an important criterion that clients expected from potential care givers.

'It is reliability, much more than flexibility. [...] You always imagine that a babysitter needs to be flexible, needs to fill in, etc. It's nice when s/he can, but, normally, it is a regular need that you can rely on [...]' [Interview 03, expert].

When asked about past jobs found through the platform, 63% of the workers reported having worked only once or twice for previous clients altogether (Figure 4). This could indicate that a lack of fit between the worker and client prevented the development of a lasting and long-term work relationship. Although it may also suggest that workers or clients were seeking one-time, spontaneous services, this seems less likely in light of the previous findings.

Regarding instantaneous or spontaneous jobs, a client of pet sitting services reported that they attempted to use a search engine when they needed one-time services on very short notice. Despite being on a platform that allowed for direct bookings, the client still found it challenging to find a pet sitter spontaneously.

'And this was at quite short notice. And then it is quite difficult to really find someone, because normally you do that a few days in advance or one day in advance, and we contacted her the same day. We contacted several people. And some did not reply at all. [...]' [Interview 10, client of pet sitting & cleaning services].

Indeed, even when clients seek spontaneous solutions, these (theoretical) options may not always be realistic or feasible. Workers themselves may prefer more stable and long-lasting work arrangements that provide greater income security and are essential for developing the long-term and trusting relationships that are necessary for providing high-quality care.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The study systematically explored the working conditions and relationship between care and domestic workers and their clients in online-mediated paid care and domestic work in Germany. By conceptualising these work arrangements as a social and reciprocal exchange, it highlights both objective aspects of the employment relationship and intrinsic benefits from the relationship between workers and care recipients. Integrating the concepts – or resources – of 'love' and 'money' (Foa & Foa, 2012), the study sheds light on the 'give-and-take' and reciprocal dynamics in care work arrangements.

The study findings reveal that, similar to prior research on traditional paid care and domestic work, the working conditions are characterised by informality, little social security, varying working hours and irregular shifts. Despite Germany's comparatively strong labour market regulations and the various possibilities for formally employing workers in private homes, the vast majority of the workers did not have a formal contract with their clients and the majority were paid in cash, a practice even more pronounced among those without a contract. While the lack of a written contract and the use of cash payment does not *necessarily* mean that the work is always *undeclared*, it does hint at the potential for informality that digital platforms perpetuate in the care and domestic work sector and which cements an unequal relationship between workers and clients. While the degree of formalisation might also depend on the business model a platform pursues, that is, whether it is a subscription-based platform or one that organises online booking and payment, users still have an option to avoid this formalisation, as some interviews have illustrated. Contrary to what some platforms promise ('We fight the black market' (Höhne, 2017, own translation)) and despite many platforms' attempts to provide information on legal employment in private households, the study findings indicated that many working arrangements in the private home potentially remain just as informal as 'traditional' paid care and domestic work in private homes. Although platforms could theoretically address the unequal power relationship between workers and clients by intervening actively and advocating for better pay and working conditions for workers or by employing workers directly (see this argument in Hipp et al. (2024) on placement agencies in live-in elder care), they often do not.

Yet, there are presumably benefits to these work arrangements for both users; otherwise they could be expected to stop reciprocating and end the exchange. As further shown in the analyses, the money earned was mostly an additional source of income. Additionally, pay levels were above minimum wage levels at the time. This could also be interpreted as reducing a workers' dependency on their job to some extent if they also have other jobs.

This type of informality and the acceptance of such working conditions is facilitated by a potential 'prisoner of love' dilemma (England, 2005). There are other intrinsic benefits that characterise care exchanges. As the findings further showed, the relationship between workers and clients is typically not seen as a merely economic employment relationship or a formal relationship between employer and worker; instead, it often involves elements of trust, affection and mutual respect. In concrete terms, the findings show that the vast majority of respondents characterised the relationship with their client as amicable as well as respectful, and only 6% described it as distrustful. By contrast, only one in four workers described this relationship as professional. This personal relationship component with intrinsic benefits may encourage the acceptance of certain non-standard working conditions.

Recognising that social exchange relationships – in particular, care relationships – are built over time, I further explored the duration of the ongoing work relationships as a key dimension in their development. The findings indicate that workers largely do not take on one-time gigs or work without becoming familiar with their clients first. Instead, they typically engage in more long-term relationships that allow trust, affection and a personal relationship to develop. Findings from qualitative interviews further reinforced the necessity of stability, continuity and reliability in care work.

However, these characteristics stand in stark contrast to central features of the gig economy, an economic exchange logic that underpins much of platform work, such as short-termism or worker fungibility (Flanagan, 2019). The gig-economy logic of on-demand and instantaneous service provision runs counter to high-quality services in the private home, which are based on trust and long-term commitment. Intrinsic benefits, particularly the social and relational aspects of this work, may contribute to sustaining ongoing work relationships, even if the relationships are casual, minimally professional and often informal.

The present article's contribution is threefold. First, the study explored the working conditions and worker-client relationship as a specific social exchange. On the one hand, there is the on-demand spot market logic characterising platform work and its specific working conditions; on the other hand, there is the amicable and informal relationship – rather than a professional one – that develops over time between workers and clients. Second, the study contributes to existing research on digitally mediated care and domestic work by systematically studying the work arrangements. The resulting survey findings presented here are generalisable to active care and domestic workers on the specific platform where the survey was conducted in 2019, thereby going beyond other studies that often are not generalisable beyond the interview subjects. Third, the study provides the first account of working conditions for care and domestic workers in a German context. An empirical and quantitative investigation of working arrangements in Germany has been missing from research on platform-mediated care and domestic work. Despite the possibility of formally employing workers in private households, the work arrangements are often informally organised and agreed upon between workers and clients.

The study's limitations relate to the survey data, which were gathered on a single digital care-work platform in pre-pandemic 2019. While the findings are generalisable to the active platform workers on said platform at the time, they cannot be considered 'representative' of all care and domestic workers using digital care-work platforms in Germany. Furthermore, these findings are not generalisable to non-platform mediated care and domestic workers at large. The volatility of platforms may lead to high worker turnover and users can register with multiple platforms simultaneously, making it challenging to study the worker population. Nonetheless, the study provides the first systematic, survey-based insights into platform-mediated care and domestic workers in the German context. Future research based on national probability data (which would need to include information on platform work and platform-mediated care work more specifically) could further help us understand the pervasiveness of the phenomenon and possibly make more generalisable claims about the workers and their working conditions that extend beyond a single platform.

Since the data were collected in pre-pandemic 2019, more recent data on the working conditions are needed to have a more complete picture of the sector. However, since care and domestic work in private homes has long been characterised as precarious and existed prior to the emergence of the gig economy, it is likely that the present findings on work arrangements are (mostly) still valid today and offer important insights into how such work is organised. While these workers were certainly under strain during the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO, 2021; Schilliger et al., 2023), recent research also suggests that the effects of the pandemic have not persisted. For instance, Poblete et al. (2024)

found that while working conditions were substantially altered during the pandemic in Argentina, they have now returned to pre-pandemic levels. Certainly, future studies based on more recent quantitative data collected after the pandemic will be needed to identify concrete changes in these working arrangements.

Lastly, while the study explored and described the work arrangements between workers and clients at a specific point in time, there is no information what happened prior or afterwards. Tracking different phases of the exchange between workers and clients over time would allow for a better understanding of when and under what conditions one party stops reciprocation and exits the social exchange, i.e. when costs and benefits are no longer balanced. Such longitudinal approaches are another important consideration for future research.

Other promising avenues for future research could involve a comparative perspective on different platform business models and an examination of whether and how these platforms contribute to the formalisation and professionalisation of a market that is traditionally rather informal. While care-work platforms typically portray themselves as mere intermediaries without any employer-like responsibilities, many adopt a 'normalisation discourse' (Lentz et al., 2025, p. 8) by which they frame their mediation as a contribution to formalisation, thus normalising this platform-mediated work (Lentz et al., 2025). Whether and how different platform models actually live up to this claim is open to further investigation, especially given the findings presented here, making it a worthwhile endeavour for future studies.

Lastly, another comparative perspective could focus on cross-country differences and commonalities in paid care and domestic work. This work clearly shares commonalities across the globe, such as being female-dominated, often racialised and poorly paid. However, it is important to explore how platforms function within distinct care and welfare regimes, as well as to examine any consequences in terms of working conditions.

Despite these limitations, the findings presented here raise the question of policy regulation regarding work arrangements in the private sphere. In order to provide effective and lasting solutions to current crises of care, digital platforms could more actively facilitate negotiations between workers and families to agree upon formal and fair working conditions that are beneficial to both parties. This could also include additional policies that further support legal and fair employment of care workers in private homes and contribute to the professionalisation of the sector.

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Notes

1. Data collection received approval from the ethics commission in the author's research organisation and was realised in close collaboration with the organisation's data

protection officer. Informed consent to participate in the study was obtained by the study participants.

2. Please refer to Tables 2 and 3 in the online appendix for standard errors and confidence intervals of the estimated coefficients.

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