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A "catalogue" for clients: domestic labour platforms, informality and (in)visibility

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Abstract

Purpose – Based on a study of digital platforms for domestic services in French-speaking Switzerland, this article seeks to analyse how the (in)visibility provided by platforms is perceived and made use of by employers and workers, with the aim of bringing to the fore the experiences of clients and comparing them with those of workers.

Design/methodology/approach – The article is based on a study that combines interviews with employers, workers and managers (25 in total), along with an analysis of platform interfaces and documentation. For the purpose of this article, I particularly draw on interviews with employers and workers.

Findings – My findings show that the (in)visibility created by platforms increases clients' agency to the point of creating a "catalogue effect", enabling employers to find in the same organised place a variety of profiles and options from which to choose when purchasing domestic services or defining working arrangements. This organised place gathers and organises information in a way that encourages comparisons and the expression of preferences and bias on the part of clients, and, while accentuating the commodification of domestic services, forces workers to make an effort to raise their individual visibility. Moreover, most of these platforms reproduce informal economic exchanges while attenuating the negative effects of informality for employers and shifting most of the consequences of informality onto workers. While informality does create a feeling of insecurity in some cases for both employers and workers, it additionally heightens vulnerability for the latter, which extends from the first meeting to the actual employment relationship.

Originality/value – The perspective of employers or clients using domestic-labour platforms is rarely investigated. By analysing how employers make use of and perceive domestic-labour platforms, and how these differ from workers' experience, this article provides insights into the ways in which the different shades of (in) visibility are produced and maintained.

Keywords Labour market, Trust, Domestic work, Formalisation, Platforms, Informal economy

Paper type Research article

Introduction

Over the past decade, we have witnessed the rise of digital platforms in domestic-labour markets. While domestic workers and employers used to rely on networks of social relationships, word of mouth, advertisements in newspapers or shops or placement agencies to come together, they are now turning to digital platforms (Ettarfi, 2024; Rodríguez-Modroño, 2024). By facilitating access to a large supply of workers and job offers, online platforms have become key intermediaries that create opportunities in this labour market. Moreover, domestic labour platforms increase visibility on this labour market, to the point that platforms themselves claim to formalise the domestic service economy and to facilitate the building of trust between strangers (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018), a crucial issue in paid domestic work (Fetterolf, 2022; Pignolo, 2024; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018) [1].

However, studies have documented that, beyond the claims of formalisation, domestic-labour platforms can also reproduce certain conditions of informality, at the expense of

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workers. Van Doorn (2021, 2022) coined the term "selective formalisation" to qualify the tension induced by platforms, formalising some aspect of this labour market while reproducing informal economic exchanges. Since then, studies have shown how platforms have a double effect: increasing individual visibility (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018) to attract clients and facilitate their choices, while reproducing informality (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2024; Dimitriadis and Coletto, 2024; Pulignano *et al.*, 2023).

The perspective of employers or clients [2] using domestic-labour platforms, however, is rarely investigated. We still lack knowledge of the ways in which employers make use of and perceive domestic-labour platforms, and how these differ from workers' experience. Such a perspective, however, would help us to gain knowledge of the barriers to formalisation at the micro-level (Jaehrling *et al.*, 2024) and provide insights into the ways in which the different shades of (in)visibility (Gruszka and Böhm, 2022) are produced and maintained.

Based on a qualitative and sociological study of digital platforms for domestic services in French-speaking Switzerland, this article seeks to contribute to the literature on (in)visibility and formalisation by foregrounding the experiences of clients and comparing them with those of workers. Drawing on interviews with employers and domestic workers, and using an (in)visibility lens (Gruszka and Böhm, 2022), I argue that the (in)visibility created by platforms increases clients' agency to the point of creating a "catalogue effect", enabling employers to find in the same organised place a variety of profiles and options from which to choose when purchasing domestic services or defining working arrangements. This organised place gathers and organises information in a way that encourages comparisons and the expression of preferences and bias on the part of clients, and, while accentuating the commodification of domestic services, forces workers to make an effort to raise their individual visibility (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Moreover, these platforms reproduce informal economic exchanges while attenuating the negative effects of informality for employers and shifting most of the consequences of informality onto workers. While informality does create a feeling of insecurity in some cases for both employers and workers, it additionally heightens vulnerability for the latter, which extends from the first meeting to the actual employment relationship.

All in all, this article contributes to the literature by empirically showing how the (in)visibility created by domestic-labour platforms is transformed differently into resources and constraints for employers and workers. In that sense, (in)visibility seems above all to be tailored to accommodate employers: to reduce their uncertainty when purchasing domestic services and to validate their own understanding of what a suitable worker is, while ensuring their control over working conditions. Thus, one could argue that, while domestic-labour platforms to some extent increase visibility on this labour market, platforms do not counterbalance the mechanisms of invisibility (Hatton, 2017) that make paid domestic work a socially devalued and informal activity.

This article is structured as follows. After presenting the literature on formalisation and (in)visibility in the case of domestic-labour platforms, I present my case study and methods. The results are presented in two sections, one presenting the employers' perspective and the other focusing on workers. I conclude the article by discussing the differences between employers and workers when it comes to experiencing the processes of (in)visibility on domestic-labour platforms, outlining some practical implications and engaging with the debate on the connections and entrenchment between platforms and the informal economy (Dimitriadis and Coletto, 2024).

Digital platforms for domestic services: selective formalisation, individualisation of risks and (in)visibility

Formalisation can be defined as the "transition from informal to formal paid work" (Jaehrling *et al.*, 2024, p. 360, citing ILO Convention No. 189). While defended as key to achieving decent paid domestic work and an important policy aim across the world, "effective formalization", understood as "processes aimed at effectively securing access to labour and

social protection standards for domestic workers" (Jaehrling *et al.*, 2024, p. 360) is still hard to achieve. Indeed, informality prevails in the domestic service economy, as many studies have shown, highlighting the "stickiness of informality" in this sector (Jaehrling *et al.*, 2024).

Paid domestic work – like unpaid domestic work – suffers from a lack of social recognition. Very often, it is not seen as "real" employment (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007). Paid domestic workers are excluded from labour laws (McGrath and DeFilippis, 2009; Raghuram, 2001) and people hiring domestic workers do not see themselves as employers with obligations towards their employees (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Rollins, 1985). Paid domestic work takes place very often outside the scope of formal regulations governing the sector and is therefore informal (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007), an issue that exacerbates the problem of trust (Pignolo, 2024).

Exclusion from laws can also rely on an "ideological devaluation of labour seen as 'women's work'. In spite of women's participation in the labour market, the expectation that women will perform unpaid social reproductive labour in the home continues to exist" (McGrath and DeFilippis, 2009, p. 80). In other words, domestic work's devaluation is reinforced by the legal exclusion that "supports the ideological distinction between the 'women's work' performed by these workers and the 'real jobs' held by, for example, their employers" (McGrath and DeFilippis, 2009, p. 69), as well as by the location of the activity because domestic space is a non-traditional worksite (Hatton, 2017).

Building on several studies, Hatton argues that paid domestic work has been constructed as "invisible work" (Hatton, 2017), namely "labour that is economically devalued through three intersecting sociological mechanisms – here identified as cultural, legal and spatial mechanisms of invisibility – which operate in different ways and to different degrees" (Hatton, 2017, p. 337). Moreover, domestic workers tend to belong to a vulnerable category at the intersection of different forms of power relations (Anderson, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Rollins, 1985; Rodríguez-Modroño *et al.*, 2022). Because of their position of power, employers can impose precarious working conditions on female workers, while emancipating themselves from their obligations as employers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Rollins, 1985). Thus, asymmetries reinforce the invisibility of this work.

Over the past decade, digital labour platforms have appeared as new key actors within this debate about domestic-labour markets and formalisation, to the point that even platform managers brand their platforms as drivers of formalisation (Micha *et al.*, 2024). In what is probably the first article addressing the issue of domestic-labour platforms, Ticona and Mateescu (2018) argued that digital platforms in this labour market engage in a form of "cultural entrepreneurship", in the sense that they "frame careworkers found through their services as safer, as opposed to through more traditional and informal networks" (p. 4385). Indeed, platforms claim to formalise this labour market by increasing visibility and making it safer than informal markets.

Essentially, as the authors showed, platforms provide clients and workers with information and documentation to promote the use of formal standards and make tools available to enhance visibility (profiles, comments and evaluation of workers, for instance). They also provide payment interfaces and tools to declare employment relationships and pay taxes. Whereas informality and invisibility prevail in the domestic service economy, online platforms are thus supposedly a better alternative, formalising some aspects of the hiring process and employment relationships. However, as the authors note, "these efforts toward formalization are mainly aspirational, as interviews with workers highlight the ways that, in practice, platforms permit a wide variety of employment relationships and do not require this type of institutional visibility" (p. 4385). In other words, platforms portray themselves as intermediaries bringing to light the available workers and their evaluations for clients, and use this specific form of individual visibility as an argument for trust-building.

Many studies have shown how platforms have a twofold effect: increasing visibility while reproducing conditions of informality. Van Doorn (2021, 2022), for instance, argues that domestic-labour platforms engage in selective formalisation. While they formalise some

aspects (such as communication and work evaluation), they also perpetuate and sometimes exacerbate conditions of informality, such as a lack of social protection, minimal bargaining power and income insecurity, while also increasing workers' fungibility.

As many studies have shown, platforms do not enforce rules governing employment relationships and shape conditions in ways that disadvantage domestic workers (Poblete, 2024; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; Van Doorn, 2021, 2022). Digital platforms tend to increase competition, incentivise low wages, create worker fungibility (as already mentioned), create information asymmetries and put workers at risk of sexual harassment (Wiesböck, 2023). It has been argued that platforms create structural domination (Flanagan, 2019), in the sense that they provide embedded mechanisms for discipline and control, such as performance monitoring, ratings and punishment. Based on rankings, ratings or acceptance rates, algorithms prioritise some profiles over others (Floros, 2024), forcing domestic workers to conform to the logic of the platform.

Similarly, Pulignano *et al.* (2023) show that although digital platforms increase visibility, they also individualise economic and social risks and pass them on workers. The latter have to invest significant effort and time in promoting their profiles and looking for jobs, with no guarantee of finding one or of being reimbursed for travel. They are encouraged to obtain good reviews even if it means accepting unrealistic demands from clients, given the highly competitive environment. Workers are not protected either against last-minute cancellations or against potential scams and abusive clients, harassment and inappropriate requests. Furthermore, most working arrangements are informal; employers set the rules; wages are very low; and workers are excluded from employment rights and social protection. The literature has also highlighted how the weaknesses of lock-in mechanisms (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2024) or the failure to enforce rules tend to reinforce informality, while fostering poor working conditions.

Analysing the contrast between platforms' claims and their lack of organisational efforts to professionalise this economy, Arcidiacono *et al.* (2024) argue that platforms strategically construct a client-oriented professional discourse, namely "an organizational regime that is primarily oriented toward enhancing the reputation of the platform as a reliable digital marketplace" (p. 2). Through the standardisation of workers' profiles, the incentives for workers to present themselves in a professional way, and the rating systems and reviews, platforms aim primarily to reinforce client trust but without ensuring the formalisation of this labour market. Even if some formalisation tools are available, they are easy to circumvent, leading the authors to argue that the exit option for platforms is a "a course of action configured in the technological system" (p. 12), and that platforms operate with a regime of "transparent informality" (p. 13). Thus, the authors conclude that "the platform uses digital traceability and transparency as a free alternative to labor regulation" (p. 14).

It can thus be argued that platforms understand "formalisation" essentially in terms of increasing visibility on the labour market for clients and platforms (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018) and making tools available that facilitate clients' choices and decision-making when purchasing domestic services. Platforms do not formalise this labour market because the decision to make employment relationships legal is usually outsourced to market actors themselves. Therefore, platform-mediated domestic work shares many features with other forms of labour in the informal economy (Dimitriadis and Coletto, 2024). At the same time, platforms do change this labour market by making it more visible, in many ways.

To make sense of these complex effects, Gruszka and Böhm (2022) propose to analyse platform-mediated domestic work (among other types of platform-mediated work) through an (in)visibility lens. They go beyond the dichotomy between visibility and invisibility and aim instead at analysing "the different ways in which platform workers are exposed to and may experience (in)visibility" (p. 1858). This requires a look at the various processes that make some things visible while obscuring others, and analysis of how these processes are experienced. They differentiate between three types of (in)visibility: (1) perceptible (in) visibility, namely the fact of being actually seen "in the flesh"; (2) individual (in)visibility,

namely how workers are rendered visible through the design and organisation of the platforms (what is actually controlled by the platforms); and (3) institutional (in)visibility, namely visibility to regulatory institutions and actors, and the extent to which working arrangements are included in the laws (formalisation). This framework thus allows us to analyse how platforms simultaneously increase individual visibility and obscure institutional visibility; or reproduce informality, to put it another way.

Within this discussion of formalisation, the perspective of employers or clients is rarely investigated (Fetterolf, 2022). In one of the few relevant studies, Pereyra and Poblete (2024) examine employers' views on formalisation and uncover that they adopt an "à la carte" perspective, selecting which rights they would like to grant among those constituting the regulatory framework. As they show:

> The list of rights recognized in the legislation becomes a sort of menu from which employers can pick and choose which items are in their interest or are even "fair", based on their own idea of what makes a "good employer". (Pereyra and Poblete, 2024, p. 447)

Therefore, the list of rights becomes, in their view, a "menu of options and not a list of obligations" (p. 450). This study offers insights into the perspective of employers, highlighting not only how a continuum is created between formality and informality, but also how employers make use of their power to shape working conditions in a way that they consider fair albeit informal. This constitutes a barrier to formalisation at the micro-level (Jaehrling *et al.*, 2024), as well as a way in which employers reproduce by their practices some level of institutional invisibility. However, with some exceptions – for instance, Gruszka *et al.* (2024) who examine the role of ratings and reviews for clients, as well as how perceptible (in) visibility and face-to-face interactions shape individual (in)visibility – we still lack knowledge of how employers make use of and perceive domestic-labour platforms. Moreover, we do not know much about how the experiences of (in)visibility differ between employers and workers.

Such a perspective, however, would help us to obtain knowledge on the barriers to formalisation at the micro-level (Jaehrling *et al.*, 2024) and provide insights into the ways in which the different shades of (in)visibility (Gruszka and Böhm, 2022) are produced and maintained. This article aims to contribute to the literature on (in)visibility and formalisation by comparing the perspectives of workers and clients. More precisely, it seeks to answer two research questions: (1) how do employers perceive and make use of the (in)visibility provided by platforms? and (2) how do their experiences of (in)visibility differ from those of domestic workers on domestic-labour platforms? In doing so, the article will shed light on the connections between domestic-labour platforms and the notion of informal economy (Dimitriadis and Coletto, 2024).

Case study and methods

My case study concerns an informal labour market in French-speaking Switzerland, namely the informal domestic-labour market. This is a labour market in the sense that "what (. . .) human beings are renting out is (. . .) [their] labor power, i.e. (. . .) [their] physical and mental capacities for a certain time" (Aspers, 2022, pp. 112–113). In this context, labour refers to cleaning activities, childcare or in some cases other domestic activities, exchanged for money under competitive conditions (Aspers, 2011).

The digital platforms under investigation are intermediaries in this informal labour market. They connect people who are strangers to one another and thus not "socially embedded" with one another in the sense of Portes (2010) or Granovetter (1985). Informality in this labour market stems from violating the regulations governing the sector or the Swiss job market in general. There are two possible scenarios. In the first case, employment relationships violate current regulations in terms of working conditions, wages and declarations to the state. In other words, the dimension of informality is linked mainly to shirking contractual and social obligations. In this case, domestic workers do not obtain access to social benefits. The second

case pertains to the hiring of irregular migrants. According to the law on illegal work in Switzerland, employment of foreign workers with irregular status is illegal.

This article is based on an ongoing research project investigating how digital platforms organise the market for paid domestic work in French-speaking Switzerland. I rely on the data collected so far, namely 26 interviews (8 with employers, 14 with domestic workers and 4 with platform managers), as well as an analysis of platform interfaces and of the documentation platforms provide to help clients and workers. In total, ten platforms are included in the study, reflecting a number of organisational differences: marketplace platforms, digital placement agencies, on-demand platforms, Facebook groups and platforms for posting ads. While all these interviews and analysis provide insights into domestic-labour platforms and their link to informality, (in)visibility or formalisation, I focus in this article on accounts of employers and workers reflecting the most the (in)visibility of these platforms. Although the organisational differences between platforms are significant, I also focus here on the commonalities in actors' experiences to broaden the understanding of (in)visibility processes.

The employers all belonged to the middle or upper class, with ages ranging between 30 and 60. With one exception, all the employers were women. They were all Swiss, apart from one employer from Japan. All the workers interviewed were women. Seven were migrants, from Spain, Latin America, the United States, Japan or France. Among these, two had a past history of being irregular in Switzerland and three were studying at a university in Switzerland. The six remaining workers had grown up in Switzerland and were either high-school students or in transition between jobs.

I recruited participants through word of mouth, snowball sampling and posts on social media. In selecting participants, I aimed to maximise the diversity of profiles as much as possible. A gift card worth 25 Swiss francs was offered to domestic workers. Interviews lasted between 30 min and three hours, depending on the case. They were conducted in French, English or Spanish, and translated into English when needed for the purpose of this article. The questions focused on the reasons for using platforms, participants' experiences navigating them, selecting/hiring workers, finding work, job interviews and employment relationships. When possible, I also asked the participants to show me their profiles, posts and/or the interfaces of the platforms.

All interviews were transcribed, anonymised and then analysed. For the analysis, a qualitative approach was adopted with the aim of understanding the actors' meaning. I followed the principles of the inductive grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss, 2017), progressively developing a system of codes and analytical categories as I read the transcripts and became familiar with the data. Starting from initial codes such as "choice of platform", "selection", "profiles", "working conditions", "job interviews" and "employment relationships", I gradually constructed broader analytical categories including "visibility/invisibility", "trust/mistrust", "security/risks", "control", "unpaid labour", "emancipation", "exclusion" and "impression management". This process led me to introduce the notion of a catalogue effect.

The employers' perspective

According to the employers I met, using digital platforms offers several benefits. The first is to facilitate access to potential candidates in a context in which their social networks and relationships are limited. After turning to their own social relationships, hoping to rely on word of mouth, some employers explained that they use the platforms to be able to find people they could not have met otherwise. In some cases, employers had used word of mouth in the past, but realised that it came with a few difficulties.

> In the past, word of mouth didn't work so well because I had a cleaning lady who was the same one my grandmother had. And well, she would tell my grandmother that I'd been throwing parties and that there were alcohol bottles in my trash. It just didn't work at all. (Employer, Aurélie)

> I had someone who was recommended to me to look after my daughter, and it went very badly with that person. It was through acquaintances of acquaintances. I told myself, okay, I can't do this anymore. I don't want to go through friends or acquaintances to find someone because it creates this awkwardness afterward when we see each other and things didn't go well. (Employer, Catarina)

As these passages show, relying on word of mouth may risk disclosing personal information or creating interpersonal conflicts if problems arise. In that case, the problem stems not so much from a lack of opportunities as from the social pressure inherent in interpersonal networks of relationships. Finding a worker who is "socially disembedded" from one's own social network thus becomes advantageous, and digital platforms make a whole pool of workers visible.

Moreover, access to these platforms is regarded as fairly easy. All employers emphasised how easy it was to sign up, post job offers or automatically receive notification of available cleaners or babysitters after filling in the relevant form to detail their needs. Then, employers could "post job offers from their own bed", as one stated, using their phone or computer, and simply await applications. This underlines that the attractiveness of platforms is based on the way they enhance the visibility of the market by providing an identifiable and accessible place where many workers gather. By contrast, informal networks tend to limit visibility to a selective pool of workers.

After identifying and accessing a platform, most employers emphasise that a crucial advantage of platforms is to increase employers' control over candidate selection, working conditions or the handling of employment relationships. According to one employer using a digital marketplace, it allows her to post an offer "with exactly what I needed" and to find "women who match everything". It also enables the comparison of different worker profiles, their skills and their prices. It makes it possible "to compare the different offers (. . .) [to have] a range of experiences, a range of prices". In that sense, digital platforms provide more "transparency" on this market, as some employers put it, in comparison with resorting to word of mouth.

On marketplace platforms, particularly, employers can browse through many applications or workers' profiles and compare them, using the sorting tools offered by the platforms or paying attention to the metrics and workers' photos and communication skills. This employer, for instance, relies not only on appearances (in photos), but also on other criteria:

> I received about ten applications, which I filtered according to various criteria: the profile, but above all the area where they lived, because I wanted someone who didn't live too far away (. . .) those who were particularly interested in children, who were in our neighbourhood, who were young, who were women. So I'd sort them out and come up with a short list of two or three names, and I'd ask them for either letters of reference or contacts of people they had worked with. (. . .) I also looked at their qualifications. I wanted them to have at least a pre-university diploma, the equivalent of a baccalaureate. (. . .) I think I'm being a bit elitist here, because texts where people don't speak French or English are immediately obvious. If there are a lot of spelling mistakes, that stops me (. . .) And it reflects the level of education, so it doesn't mean that the person can't take care of the children, but I think it's social racism on my part. (Employer, Yuko)

Thus, employers' potential assumptions and biases seem to be encoded in the technological design of platform functioning, giving them a sense of agency in terms of selection and choices. Interestingly, other employers may use other criteria, such as the use of a car to go to work, or the age and life stage of their selected employee. Take the example of this employer, who explains how she chose her housecleaner:

> [T]he aim was to find someone local, because I don't want someone to come to my house in their car. That's not good. So yes, someone local, someone with whom we have at least one language in common. (. . .) I didn't want (. . .) a student who was trying to make ends meet. And I needed someone I knew would be reliable. I mean, if (. . .) I have guests in the evening, she has to be there. She can't just write to me and say sorry, I'm hungover and I couldn't come. So I went through the different profiles and there were some people I was more interested in than others. (. . .) I'd rather meet someone who's middle-aged, between 35 and 55. Because if they're younger, I'd prefer them to do something else, and if they're older, there are a lot of stairs in my home. (Employer, Aurélie)

Transparency, then, could be understood to mean that platform design confers visibility on aspects that correspond to employers' own understanding of who is a "trustworthy" or "suitable" worker. Platforms also make it possible to ask for more information about the candidates:

> I think with the people we meet through networks, we don't necessarily ask for their CV or references. I'd feel a bit less comfortable questioning them. Whereas with the platforms, it was really like a job interview. (Employer, Yuko)

Digital platforms, in other words, enable one to express more demands with regard to workers' profiles. The idea of making this labour market more "professional" thus seems to echo the idea of a client-oriented professional discourse (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2024). Professionalism here refers more to the skills that workers must possess and that digital platforms display, rather than inclusion in legal frameworks and rights.

This is further reinforced by the fact that most platforms give employers the possibility of negotiating more freely on working conditions, without being forced to accept specific regulations. It allows employers to use services to find workers and, at the same time, to reduce economic costs or avoid the administrative tasks associated with formalisation. This can sometimes help when clients select a candidate they find trustworthy even though they do not have legal status in Switzerland, which makes the relevant employment relationship informal. Finally, this sense of agency also extends to workers' availability. Workers must specify when they are available, which enables clients to check their compatibility with their own schedules and needs.

Visibility does not equal trust, however. This has been shown for domestic workers, but it also seems to be the case with regard to employers. Portes (2010) noted that in the informal economy economic exchanges were even more socially embedded, to solve the problem of trust. Interestingly, my interviews show that even if digital platforms, as new intermediaries, become attractive to employers when such social embeddedness becomes too limiting, these platforms do not seem to elicit as much trust as social networks (Granovetter, 1985; Portes, 2010). "You never know who you might come across", as Chantal, one employer, put it. Similarly, for Aurélie, an employer who is apprehensive about letting a cleaner enter her home with all her belongings when she is away, "there's a bit of a lack of formality in the working relationship. (. . .) I feel like I have to be extremely careful about how I choose people". She adds that "there's no real oversight on these platforms either. (. . .) It gives you a sense of security that doesn't actually exist because there's no way to really verify it". For this reason, she defines the platforms as a parallel, unregulated and unsanctioned economy, which she compares to a "jungle" due to the risks.

There may also be concerns about hiring a child carer who might not call the emergency services in case of problems (if they are undocumented, for instance) or even hurt the children. Alternative measures may be taken, such as organising interviews and trial periods, doing some "digital homework" (Ticona *et al.*, 2018) to obtain more information on workers or making sure other people would be available to call the emergency services, if necessary.

To conclude this section, the findings show how employers take advantage of the (in) visibility platforms provide. A platform's visibility facilitates access to workers. Individual visibility validates the user's understanding of what a suitable worker is and provides the possibility of selecting workers based on a range of criteria. Institutional invisibility enables some sort of emancipation from legal obligations and ensures user control over working conditions. It is interesting to note, however, that employers do recognise that some inconvenience may arise from the absence of institutional visibility. However, as this problem is framed mainly in terms of their own security, they believe that self-protective measures are probably good enough to compensate for the exclusion of legal frameworks. The next section turns to the perspective of the workers.

The workers' perspective

The matter of the (in)visibility of domestic-labour platforms is also prevalent in domestic workers' accounts. As I will show, domestic workers face challenges because of the

individualisation of risks (Pulignano *et al.*, 2023) created by platform design and functioning, but also find advantages in turning to platforms. As in the case of employers, digital platforms represent a good solution because of the limited job opportunities available in domestic workers' networks. Domestic workers emphasised the easy access to job opportunities provided by digital platforms (see also Rodríguez-Modroño *et al.*, 2022). Particularly when social embeddedness could not provide them, resorting to online platforms gave access to many job offers with people they would not have come into contact with otherwise. Migrant domestic workers faced a situation in which they did not know enough people in Switzerland who, ideally, might have provided job opportunities.

> I consider myself very social. (. . .) But I didn't know anybody. Even though you get to know people fast, you need to find a job faster. So you look and you search. When you come to a new place, when you don't have documents, when you don't have money, you search (. . .) [I looked up] taking care of kids, Geneva, babysitting, Geneva, and it appeared. (Domestic worker, Camila)

For Swiss students, platforms offer the possibility of job opportunities outside their own circle, which often comprises their parents' acquaintances or parents of friends living in their neighbourhood. Workers regarded digital platforms as easy to access. This starts with the visibility of the platform itself, which can be easily found on the Internet by using keywords. They must register and provide the requested information or documents, create a profile or submit to interviews with platform managers in the case of digital placement agencies. For migrant workers (even irregular ones) and students alike, platforms' visibility and easy access offered a chance to secure, or at least hope to secure, a more stable income beyond the restrictions of social embeddedness (Granovetter, 1985).

However, finding a job entail facing the challenges associated with individual visibility (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). On marketplace platforms in particular, gaining visibility involves not only knowing how to "sell oneself" and manage one's image and impressions, but also navigating platforms' algorithmic logic, which determines visibility (Ettarfi, 2024; Ticona *et al.*, 2018). For some students, getting a job seemed quite easy:

> Within a week, I had people reaching out to me. (..) it's super fast. (. . .) I was just following what they told me to write (. . .) it's literally yeah tell us a little bit about yourself. So I was like yeah so I'm Ayaka, born to two Japanese parents, I lived abroad xyz, which languages I speak, experiences with kids with my mother as a kindergarten teacher. (..) my personality really came across. I was really sounding super, you know, I love sport, I guess almost like a dating profile. (Domestic worker, Ayaka)

Finding a job seems fairly easy for some people if one follows the instructions but also if one is able to present oneself in accordance with what employers seem to expect. For others, however, finding a job involves spending significant time and unpaid effort because of the highly competitive environment and/or the difficulty of understanding platform logic. Paola, a migrant domestic worker, is active on five different platforms, looking for additional hours. She explains that checking all the platforms and searching for offers takes her 45 min a day. However, Paola finds that her searches on most platforms are unsuccessful. She frequently reflects on the reasons for her difficulties but says that she "can't find the real answer". Indeed, understanding the reasons for success or failure on digital platforms is not straightforward. Another student thinks that getting a job requires "time and patience":

> [T]o try reaching out to as many people as possible. Not just stopping at "I wrote to one person, and I'll wait for their reply and see what happens." Instead, try to contact at least five people a day and keep going, keep going, keep going, and eventually, a family will respond. (Domestic worker, Léa)

For some, spending time, being patient and going step by step might improve their rating and visibility (see also Dimitriadis and Coletto, 2024 for the perception of ratings by workers). They may be able to obtain reference letters from previous or current employers, or extend their social networks and be recommended to clients outside the platforms. Thus, individual visibility as designed by the platforms makes "spending time" a necessary requirement to

access work, as least for some. This can be interpreted as another way they force workers to conform to their logic (Floros, 2024). The time spent searching for new job opportunities does not necessarily or immediately lead to new hires.

Additionally, when job seeking does lead to new employment relationships, my interviews showed that these are most often informal working arrangements, namely undeclared work and with poor working conditions. Most platforms do not impose rules and leave it to workers and clients to negotiate (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018), which ultimately leads to institutional invisibility. Thus, my results echo other research emphasizing how platforms shape working conditions that disadvantage domestic workers (Poblete, 2024; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; Van Doorn, 2021, 2022). Camila, for instance, explains that employers have the "power to exploit". Similarly, Carmen notes that finding work through platforms is "very easy but [with] poor conditions", meaning that some employers try to pay as little as possible:

> [Y]ou can find everything on the internet. But most people looking there try to pay the minimum. What they want is to work themselves and leave the house and the children to someone for a low salary. For me, live-in work was the worst. They don't see you as a person living with them. They see you as a sub-worker. (Domestic worker, Carmen)

Moreover, as Wiesböck (2023) also noted, the increased competition on these platforms leads some workers to lower their rates in the hope of getting more opportunities. Generally, the rates are low and increase very little or not all, which echoes the lack of social recognition conferred on paid domestic work (Hatton, 2017). As Paola explains:

> You know, 25 francs was my rate in Geneva 10 years ago. 10 years. And I don't understand why it hasn't changed. Everything else has gone up, but not nanny or cleaning rates. It continues, you see. And I said, even worse, 25 francs net is considered crazy for them. And I explain that 25 francs was 10 years ago. And they still don't want it. (Domestic worker, Paola)

At best, she says, one can earn a wage of CHF 2,000 per month. Furthermore, usually, travel time to the employer's home is not paid. For this reason, Paola sometimes has to refuse job offers when they involve too much travel, going too far, and thus losing too much unpaid time.

Poor working conditions also affect students in search of an income during their studies. Clémence, for instance, worked for a rich family for two years. She was initially hired to assist the mother in taking care of the baby. She felt uncomfortable trying to strike the right balance and work out exactly what she was supposed to do, and therefore started to take the initiative and do more in the house. She started to do the laundry and the cleaning and to cook for all the family. The mother then started to do less and less for the baby and Clémence had to take on that task as well. She did overtime, but felt she received no recognition for it and eventually no longer knew how to set limits. She worked three days a week, from 8:00 to 21:00. As a result, she felt exhausted and could not organise anything else in her life or have a social life. She felt that the mother expected her to complete all these tasks and criticised her when she missed anything out. Not only that, but although her employers had promised to declare her employment, she eventually realised that they hadn't taken the necessary steps to that end.

To give another example, Sarah, who is studying at university, found a family for whom she worked 22 h a week. Many of these hours were undeclared. According to her, "I'm actually like a family assistant. I would consider myself more like a family assistant than a nanny." This is because the parents expected her to take care of many different tasks, including picking up the kids from school (sometimes with her own car without being reimbursed for petrol), taking them to practice, helping with the packing when going on vacation, cleaning up, doing laundry for the whole family, changing the children's bed sheets, helping them with their homework, teaching them English and piano lessons, taking them to doctor's appointments or to meetings with teachers and walking the dog. She added that "they are pretty strict. They want me to do all these tasks because they think they're paying me a lot."

However, Sarah regarded her salary – 22 francs for one undeclared hour – as insufficient. She was not paid extra for overtime and did not receive any holiday bonuses. "I was naïve and I

needed the money and for me like 22 was a lot." After the first year, during which she wanted to make a good impression, she started negotiating a higher salary. However, as she recalls, "the Dad was really against it. He was like why don't you just work more hours?" She struggled to have her wage raised and thought about quitting twice. She also thought that taking legal action was not an option because "they would take all the extra money that I've made, that I didn't declare (. . .) I can't afford the State to take all my undeclared money". Eventually, they reached agreement. Now, Sarah explains:

> I'm making about 2000 francs and I'm working about 15–17 h a week. (. . .) I actually do appreciate that they increased my wage but 2000 francs also isn't super liveable [in Switzerland]. (Domestic worker, Sarah)

While many studies have highlighted the power asymmetries between employers and migrant domestic workers from poorer backgrounds (Anderson, 2002; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Rollins, 1985), my results show that exploitation can also take place with university students, even when finding work is easier.

Beside the issue of enhancing visibility when it comes to finding work and the issue of working conditions, some platforms also generate security concerns. While for some, having a platform as an intermediary that allows them to meet people and communicate online before an in-person meeting was a first level of security, many workers expressed concerns, as "you don't know who's behind the door", as one put it. As Wiesböck (2023) points out, such platforms may put workers at risk. Digital platforms create information asymmetries between employers and workers (Rodríguez-Modroño *et al.*, 2022; Ticona *et al.*, 2018). Sometimes, domestic workers I met reported "scams", people who look suspicious reaching out or posting offers (see also Pulignano *et al.*, 2023). Some feared that "unknown people can pretend to be a parent, and then, you know, you meet up, and it can end in harassment". As one worker put it:

> There's still this fear, thinking, I don't know this person, I don't know if they're real or not, if they're trustworthy or not. Or if they're going to follow through on the commitment we agreed on. (Domestic worker, Léa)

Therefore, besides avoiding suspicious job offers or not responding to employers who gave them a bad feeling after first contact, some domestic workers also give relatives or friends the address of the first meeting – a form of self-protection (Ticona *et al.*, 2018). However, it did not always prevent problems or misbehaviour once the employment relationship had begun. Many workers came to accept a certain level of risk as inherent in the functioning of this market. This highlights how the individualisation of risks (Pulignano *et al.*, 2023) is enforced by the platforms and seems hard to counterbalance by collective action.

This section shows that the visibility platforms provide represents, in the first place, a source of hope and holds out the prospect of obtaining an income, even for irregular migrants. Because of the individualisation of risks (Pulignano *et al.*, 2023), however, individual visibility often poses challenges and becomes a constraint, at least for some. They must also avoid clients who appear suspicious. Moreover, finding work through digital platforms often reproduces certain conditions of informality (Van Doorn, 2022). While institutional invisibility may help irregular migrants access jobs, it also translates into a sense of vulnerability for all the workers I met, which is carried over into the workplace and working arrangements, on top of, in some cases, a sense of insecurity before the job interview.

Discussion and conclusions

Based on a study of digital platforms for domestic services in French-speaking Switzerland, this article analysed how the (in)visibility provided by platforms is perceived and made use of

by employers and workers, with the aim of bringing to the fore the experiences of clients and comparing them with those of workers.

My results show that we must first look at the visibility of the platforms and access to them, which reduces uncertainty (Aspers, 2024) as regards where to go (see also Gruszka *et al.*, 2024 for a discussion on the inclusion of platform companies in the perceptible (in)visibility). Platforms provide opportunities when social embeddedness may be limiting. They give workers hope. Individual visibility (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018) poses workers the challenge of standing out in order to find a job. It is thus also a constraint. For employers, it validates their understanding of what a suitable worker is and provides them with the possibility of selecting workers from a large pool. Institutional invisibility enables employers to emancipate themselves from legal obligations and ensure control over working conditions.

Generally speaking, this leads to informal working arrangements, as other studies have shown (Arcidiacono *et al.*, 2024; Dimitriadis and Coletto, 2024; Pulignano *et al.*, 2023). My results show that it may create a lack of security for both employers and workers, although institutional invisibility simultaneously generates a sense of vulnerability for the latter, which extends from the first in-person meeting to the actual employment relationship.

All in all, this article contributes to the literature by empirically showing how the (in) visibility created by domestic-labour platforms is transformed differently into resources and constraints for employers and workers. For these reasons, I argue that (in)visibility increases clients' agency to the point of creating a catalogue effect, according to which employers can find on the same platform a variety of profiles and options from which to choose when purchasing domestic services or defining working arrangements. This organised place gathers and organises information in a way that encourages comparisons and the expression of preferences and biases on the part of clients, and forces workers to put some effort into their individual visibility, while accentuating the commodification of domestic services. It seems to exacerbate the "à la carte" effect (Pereyra and Poblete, 2024), reinforcing the idea of clients' choice, which extends beyond the issue of (in)formalisation.

In that sense, (in)visibility seems above all to be tailored to accommodate employers, to reduce their uncertainty (Aspers, 2024) when purchasing domestic services, while in most cases ensuring their control over working conditions. Thus, one could argue that, while domestic-labour platforms increase visibility on this labour market, they do not counterbalance the mechanisms of invisibility (Hatton, 2017) which make paid domestic work a socially devalued and informal economic activity.

Domestic-labour platforms thus provide an important case for examining the relationship between platforms, debates on the informal economy and the processes of hybridisation between formal and informal work in the labour market (Dimitriadis and Coletto, 2024). This article not only shows that the exclusion of laws and regulations in platform-mediated domestic work complicates trust-building (Portes, 2010) and contributes to poor working conditions, as previously discussed. It also shows how domestic-labour platforms further accentuate processes of hybridisation by shaping workers' and clients' subjectivities in different ways: they mitigate the negative effects of informality for employers while shifting most of the consequences of informality onto workers. As a result, platforms further intensify the process by which informality, as a condition, is experienced in different ways by different actors.

This has several social and practical implications. One important intervention to potentially mitigate platform-induced commodification and invisibility would be that platforms not only emphasize employers' freedom but also their obligations to guarantee decent work (Jaehrling *et al.*, 2024; Pereyra and Poblete, 2024), even when full formality is difficult to achieve (as in the case of irregular migrant workers, for instance). As such an intervention may not be sufficient, it would be equally crucial that platforms provide spaces – online or physical – for workers to organise and exchange (Gruszka *et al.*, 2024), as well as the possibility for workers to review and rate clients. These measures could contribute to enforcing decent work.

This article has some limitations that leave important aspects unexplored. Among them, three are worth noting. First, due to the limited size of the sample, it is difficult to assess the extent to which perceptions of (in)visibility are linked to variables such as class, gender and migration background. Second, I did not address the influence of platforms' organisational structures and business models on perceptions of (in)visibility. Further research should explore how such organisational differences shape the experiences of workers and clients. Third, this article does not address the extent to which institutional (in)visibility is a unilaterally enforced, mutually agreed, or negotiated process between employers and workers (see Dimitriadis, 2023 on this aspect).

(In)visibilisation and (in)formalisation are not neutral. They must be carefully investigated, especially when they risk reproducing social inequalities. Domestic-labour platforms are key actors in this labour market, also because they have the potential to give domestic workers "a novel *collective visibility* that leads to more public debate on their working conditions and recognition in society" (Meyer-Habighorst *et al.*, 2025, p. 2). Thus, it is crucial to further investigate how digital platforms – particularly marketplaces (Aspers and Asaf, 2022) – are organised within the domestic service economy.

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Notes

1. See also Lentz *et al.* (2025) for a discussion on platform companies' narratives.
2. In this article, I use both terms interchangeably.

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