

**Situating Platform Gig Economy in the Formal Subsumption of Reproductive Labor:  
Transnational Migrant Domestic Workers and the Continuum of Exploitation and  
Precarity**

Siyuan Yin, PhD  
Assistant Professor  
School of Communication  
Simon Fraser University

Email: [siyuan\\_yin@sfu.ca](mailto:siyuan_yin@sfu.ca)  
Phone: 778-988-6106  
Address: 8888 University Dr  
Burnaby, BC  
V5A 1S6  
Canada

This is the winning paper of the 2022 IAMCR award in memory of Herbert I. Schiller  
It was submitted to the Political Economy Section of IAMCR

## **Abstract**

In conversation with critical platform and labor studies, which tend to focus on drivers and food delivery workers, this article discusses platform gig economy from the perspective of reproductive labor and migrant domestic workers. The exploitation of women's unpaid and low-paid reproductive work has persisted throughout various stages of capitalist development. Migrant domestic workers' underpaid reproductive labor becomes an essential site for primitive capital accumulation and the production of the labor force in the contemporary neoliberal global economy. Building upon analyses of the historical and contemporary circumstances of transnational migrant domestic workers in Canada, I argue that platform gig economy are a technology-enabled, capital-driven force in the larger commodification and exploitation process of migrant workers' reproductive labor, and such processes are underpinned by entangled structural and institutional forces of the uneven capitalist development, racism, patriarchy, and the state's discriminatory (im)migration and labor policies. The article suggests that understanding the seeming prevalence of platform work should be situated in the continuous formal subsumption of reproductive labor and the class immobility of migrant domestic workers, and labor activism and movements should contest the entwined power dominations beyond merely demanding regulations over platforms.

**Keywords:** platform gig economy, reproductive labor, formal subsumption, migrant domestic workers, Canada

## **Introduction**

In the past few years, critical platform and labor studies have focused on the intensifying precarity of workers in the digital economy. In various national and transnational contexts, scholars reveal that labor conditions – particularly among low-income workers – are severely deteriorating in the platform gig economy due to ownership monopolies, algorithmic management, and lack of regulation (Bouchard et al., 2021; Brophy & CMNS444, 2020; Chen, 2018; Graham et al., 2017; Sun, 2019; van Doorn, 2017; Woodcock, 2021). Responding to the proliferating empirical studies on platform work, Simon Joyce (2020) proposes to theorize platform work from a labor-capital approach. Applying Marx’s concept of formal and real subsumption, Joyce (2020: 546) argues that “platform work – in the global North, at least – can be seen as a large-scale re-emergence of formal subsumption, as big capital (often in the form of venture capital) reorganises existing labour processes under its own domination.” Following Joyce’s rethinking of platform work “in the wider process of capital’s reorganisation of production and exploitation of labour” (2020: 549), this article attempts to theorize platform work from the perspective of reproductive labor.

Reproductive labor, predominantly performed by unpaid housewives and low-wage domestic workers, has been systematically excluded from formal employment throughout different stages of capitalist development. I take Canada as a case to study the formal subsumption of transnational migrant workers’ reproductive labor and platform work in western developed countries. The article draws upon existing studies on migrant domestic workers in Canada and interviews<sup>i</sup> with 12 Filipino female workers in Vancouver. The age of the interviewees ranges from 36 to 52 and they have all worked as domestic workers for several

years to over a decade in Canada and elsewhere. The interviews focus on exploring these migrant women's experiences of work and immigration and life expectations. As none of them had working experiences with labor platforms but showed interest, I have asked about their thoughts on the domestic service platforms that have been launched in Canada. The article demonstrates that platform gig economy that enter the care industry becomes a technology-enabled, capital-driven force in the larger commodification and exploitation process of working-class, racial minority groups' reproductive labor, often constituted by migrant women workers. Such processes are underpinned by entangled structural and institutional forces of uneven capitalist international development, racism, patriarchy, and the state's (im)migration and labor policies. The aggregate of these forces consolidates the continuous formal subsumption of reproductive labor by transnational migrant workers from semi-peripheral and peripheral countries, which may temporarily release the tension of the "care crisis" that Nancy Fraser (Fraser, 2016) identifies in western capitalist economies. Digital labor platforms interact with existing structural and institutional power in the formal subsumption of reproductive labor performed by migrant domestic workers. I contend that critical scholarship should decenter platform technologies in the contemporary gig economy and pay more attention to the structural and institutional forces by which platforms' power becomes constitutive in specific contexts.

### **Situating platform work in the continuum of labor exploitation**

Whereas popular and market-promotional discourse celebrates the flexibility that workers enjoy in the platform economy, critical scholars sharply expose that digital platforms, appearing as labor intermediaries, are profiting through labor exploitation of low-income workers globally (Brophy and CMNS444, 2020; Chen, 2018; Graham et al., 2017; Hoang et al., 2020; Srnicek, 2017; Sun, 2019; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018; van Doorn, 2017; van Doorn et al., 2021). Niels van

Doorn's (2017: 900) definition of platform labor/work as "digitally mediated service work" is useful here to differentiate the platform gig economy from other types of platform economy – such as sharing economy, peer-to-peer and business-to-business platforms, financial platforms, and social media platforms – despite their interdependence (Bouchard et al., 2021). Nick Srnicek (2017) has characterised five types of digital platforms and defined the assetless platforms, such as Uber and TaskRabbit, as lean platforms. "Lean platforms operate through a hyper-outsourced model, whereby workers are outsourced, fixed capital is outsourced, maintenance costs are outsourced, and training is outsourced. The most notorious part of these firms is their outsourcing of workers" (Srnicek, 2017: 76). Digital labor platforms that profit from the exploitation of platform work belong to lean platforms.

Focusing on platform work, scholars have revealed that digital labor platforms are prospering from the ongoing precarity of work and are exacerbating existing inequalities in different parts of the world. For instance, applying occupational segregation theory, Lyn Hoang et al.'s (2020) work shows that in the U.S., it is the white, young, and college-educated men who benefit most from the platform economy; while less-educated women, racial minorities, and non-citizens are performing low-income platform work. Julie Chen (2018) and Ping Sun (2019)'s works on drivers and food delivery workers in China condemn the practice of digital labor platforms that take advantage of a large number of migrant workers as a cheap labor force to fulfil the ever-increasing need for on-demand labor for "low-skilled" service. Mark Graham et al.'s (2017) study exposes that corporations in the global North increasingly rely on digital platforms to outsource service work to low-income African and Asian workers in the global virtual production chain.

In the national and international contexts, algorithmic management systems enable digital platforms to exercise expansive control over the workforce (Graham et al., 2017; Sun, 2019; Ticona & Mateescu, 2018; van Doorn, 2017). The power asymmetry between platforms and on-demand labor is further exacerbated by the lack of national labor laws and transnational governance to protect platform workers' rights and regulate platforms' practices (Bouchard et al., 2021; Graham et al., 2017). Despite the institutional and algorithm-enabled control and discipline, digital workers – mostly delivery workers and drivers – have organized in various ways, including exchanging information online, launching strikes and protests, and forming unions, to demand better working conditions and higher salaries in the UK, Italy, Brazil, and Canada (Brophy & CMNS444, 2020).

Scholars often attribute the rise of the gig economy to the neoliberal transitions in the past four decades along with the shrinking welfare state, declining power of trade and labor unions, and reconstitution of the international labor market (Graham et al., 2017; van Doorn, 2017). But this view ignores unpaid or low-paid reproductive labor, which has been systematically excluded from formal employment throughout the history of capitalist development. While white male workers can feel nostalgic toward the glorious past of their affluent living conditions in the post-War economic boom era, working-class racial minorities and immigrants have constantly struggled with precarious, low-paid jobs and poor working conditions in the shadow of industrial capitalism. Domestic workers reside in such a shadow. In their study on care worker platforms in the U.S., Ticona and Mateescu (2018) demonstrate that the prosperity of these platforms hinges on a growing number of disenfranchised people who serve as the key labor force for domestic work. They remind us of the “importance of context-specific analysis of platform work in existing labor markets” (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018: 4385).

The labor market of domestic work has been historically under-regulated, where workers are extremely underpaid and deprived of the benefits of formal employment across capitalist and other economies.

From a totality perspective of interrogating capitalism (Harvey, 1989, 2018), the gig economy – along with the rising power of digital platforms – not only restructures labor relations in a way that demolishes formal employment but also preserves a continuum of exploitation of the degraded labor of underprivileged and marginalized people. The understanding of platform work should thus be situated along the continuum of labor exploitation.

### **Exploitation and formal subsumption of reproductive labor**

Marx has distinguished two forms by which labor is subsumed under capitalism: formal and real subsumption (Marx, 1867). Formal subsumption corresponds to the stage of capitalist primitive accumulation when peasants are expelled from rural land to migrate to cities as wage workers in factories; and real subsumption is when the capitalist mode of production becomes dominant with the incorporation of machines and technologies (Fuchs, 2018; Marx, 1867). Leading contemporary Marxist scholars, like David Harvey, Michael Hardt, and Toni Negri, expand the concept of real subsumption beyond the realm of labor relations and contend that the whole society is now under real subsumption by capital. The main feature of post-Fordist and post-industrial capitalism is the shift of capital accumulation and valorization from factory-based production sites to wider social terrains. Capital domination has extended from the mode of production to almost every aspect of society and across various forms of relations (Hardt & Negri, 2018; Negri, 1991). Harvey emphasizes the fact that the neoliberal transition of capitalism, through fierce marketization and privatization, has exercised universal alienation in



which individuals' present and future lives and labor are subject to the accumulation of financial capital through debt peonage (Harvey, 2007, 2018).

The real subsumption of society and flexible accumulation of capital in the contemporary world economy coexist with continuous formal subsumption of labor and primitive capital accumulation, through the exploitation of workers' labor in factories of multinational corporations in the global South and low-income service workers across the global North and South. Women's reproductive labor lies at the center of such formal subsumption and primitive accumulation. While machines and technological developments, by changing the mode of production, enable the real subsumption of manufacturing workers' labor under capital, reproductive labor has primarily and consistently relied on human labor which cannot be simply replaced by machinery. The exploitation of women's unpaid reproductive labor and migrant workers' low-paid reproductive work has spread throughout various stages of capitalist development.

Marxist feminists, such as Silvia Federici, Heidi Hartmann, and Maria Mies, have pointed out that the exploitation of women's reproductive labor is an inherent part of capitalism and capital accumulation. Federici (2004, 2018) criticizes that the incomplete understanding of reproduction in Marx's work fails to critique men's control over women's labor and bodies and to realize women as the subjects of proletariat struggles. Hartmann manifests that patriarchy existed long before capitalism; and capital adapts to the patriarchal power relations by consolidating sexual divisions of labor and placing women in subordinate positions (Hartmann, 1979). Men, regardless of their class and race, have a shared material interest in their domination over women's labor and sexuality "for the purpose of serving men in many personal and sexual ways and for the purpose of rearing children" (Hartmann, 1979: 11). Mies (2014) defines the

exploitation of women's unpaid reproductive labor, along with peasants and colonized people's non-wage labor, as superexploitation. Superexploitation is "not based on the appropriation (by the capitalist) of the time and labor over and above the 'necessary' labor time, the surplus labor, but of the time and labor necessary for people's own survival or subsistence production" (Mies, 2014: 48).

Family remains a private space and the key site for producing labor power in the modern capitalist economy. The value of housework continues to be degraded by sexist ideology and the interests of capital. Nancy Fraser (2016: 2) identifies a "care crisis" inherent in capitalist systems whereby "capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilize the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies." This crisis has been displaced onto working-class, racialized immigrant women and men in western post-industrial countries (Fraser, 2016; Hochschild, 2014) and onto disenfranchised urban poor and rural migrants in industrializing countries (Yan, 2008). When neoliberalism has redistributed wealth and enlarged material disparities among the working populations all over the world, many dual-earner couples from middle-class families rely on low-paid domestic workers to fulfil the need for childcare, eldercare, and housework. Hochschild (2014) coins the term "global care chain" to explicate the reproduction of capitalism in the post-industrial age, which has become heavily reliant on the care work of migrant workers – predominantly female ones – who move from poor to rich countries or from rural to urban areas within poor countries.

The transnational migration of domestic workers in developed countries is the product of the huge development gaps among nations and within nations in the capitalist world economy, the persistent sexual division of labor, and the degradation and privatization of domestic work. In the process of neoliberal globalization, the U.S.-led western countries consolidate their political-

economic domination through military force and financial debt (Fraser, 2016; Harvey, 2007). Newly industrialized and developing countries launch a series of neoliberal reforms to advance economic development at the expense of shrinking public service and ever-increasing wealth gaps (Ong, 2006). Exporting gendered migrant labor as domestic workers to developed countries and areas has become an important source of remittance for countries such as the Philippines, Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Malaysia, and these countries all have national policies and government agencies to facilitate labor export (Zaman, 2006). Although transnational female migrants may not be the poorest people in their home countries (Mills, 2003), they are nevertheless trapped in feminized, low-income jobs, such as domestic care, in the global economy. The further declining role of the state in providing social welfare and the privatization of care have led to rising demand for commodified care services among middle-class families in developed countries (Fraser, 2016). Scholars have extensively documented the severe mistreatment, exploitation, and discrimination that migrant domestic workers suffer in the U.S. (Glenn, 1992), Europe (Anderson, 2010), Hong Kong (Constable, 2007, 2014), and China (Yan, 2008), among other places.

Migrant domestic workers' low-paid reproductive labor is an essential site for primitive capital accumulation and labor force production in the contemporary neoliberal global economy. While factory assembly lines – along with machines and later with Taylorist management systems – enable capital to extract relative surplus value from workers' productive labor (Harvey, 1989; Marx, 1867), capital is still exploiting domestic workers' absolute surplus value through long working hours and low salaries. Family is the production site where material product/commodity in the form of human labor and immaterial product/commodity of care and emotions are produced, both by women's unpaid reproductive labor and by domestic workers'

low-paid labor. In this sense, formal subsumption of workers' labor is not only evident in offshoring manufacturing factories in the global South but pervasive in the commodification and degradation of domestic workers' labor across the global North and South. The formal subsumption of migrant domestic workers' labor is fundamentally driven by capital accumulation in the interest of producing labor power. Just as the formal subsumption of peasants' labor to factories was sanctioned by bloody legislation in the early industrial age (Marx, 1867), the subsumption process of migrant workers' reproductive labor entails a series of structural and institutional forces in the contemporary era, including international division of labor, state disciplinary power through (im)migration and labor policies, the segregated domestic labor market, a feudal residue of master-servant relationship, and the enduring patriarchal system that degrades domestic work. Below, I elaborate on these forces through the circumstance of transnational domestic workers in Canada.

### **Transnational domestic workers and class immobility in Canada**

Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century to the present, migrant domestic labor in Canada has been profoundly configured by gender, class, and racial politics. In the first decades of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the main labor force of paid domestic work was young, working-class immigrant women from Britain (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1994). With the highly selective and exclusive immigration law and policy, the Canadian government recruited British women and girls to fulfil the demand for domestic service and redress the need for wives among Canadian single men while restricting Asians from entering Canada (Armacost, 1995; Bakan & Stasiulis, 1994). The immigration policy back then, as criticized by Nicola Armacost, "represented middle-class bourgeois self-interest and an ethnocentric selection process regarding prospective immigrants, both informed by Victorian values concerning the proper role for women" (1995: 26). The

economic boom after World War II in Western countries resulted in the decline of the unemployed and surplus population and much fewer British women emigrated. From the 1950s to the 70s, the Canadian government mainly recruited Western Indian women from the Caribbean to serve as domestic workers in middle-class Canadian families; from the 1970s onward, Filipino migrant women have become the main labor force for domestic service (Hsiung & Nichol, 2010). Compared with prior British immigrant women workers, Caribbean and Filipino women face rather circumscribed conditions set by the discriminatory immigration policy which restricts these women from obtaining access to permanent residence (Arat-Koc, 1997; Harzig, 2003; Hsiung & Nichol, 2010).

In the early 1990s, the Canadian government implemented the Live-in Caregiver Program (LCP) to attract foreign domestic workers, most of whom are Filipino women working in major cities such as Vancouver and Toronto. The LCP allows migrant women to apply for immigrant status once they have served as live-in domestic workers for two years (Zaman, 2006). The high unemployment rate, growing living costs in the Philippines, and the national policy of exporting domestic workers are all driving forces behind the transnational migration of Filipino female workers. Also, Filipino migrant women's English-speaking skills make them an ideal labor force for domestic care in Western families.

In the past three decades since the LCP was launched, many studies have revealed that instead of empowering migrant domestic workers with access to immigration, the program exacerbates these workers' vulnerability (Hill et al., 2019; Hodge, 2006; Hsiung & Nichol, 2010; Moors, 2003; Zaman, 2006). To fulfil the two-year domestic service requirement, Filipino domestic workers must endure long working hours and employers' often abusive and discriminatory treatment (Hsiung & Nichol, 2010; Zaman, 2006). Besides the policy constraints,

the lack of transnational and national regulation over private employment agencies – which play a vital role in recruiting migrant women for domestic service – deepens migrant domestic workers’ susceptibility. For instance, labor law scholar Judy Fudge (2011) examines the abusive practices by private employment agencies in Canada and calls for transnational, federal, and provincial governance and regulation over these agencies to protect migrant domestic workers’ rights.

Over the years, protests and activism by advocacy groups, NGOs, and migrant domestic workers themselves have vigorously demanded the improvement of domestic workers’ labor and human rights in Canada (Galerand et al., 2015; Zaman, 2006). These accumulated activist efforts contributed to the recent adjustment of the LCP program by the Canadian government in 2014, which eliminates the live-in requirement for migrant domestic workers; but the prerequisite for 24-month care work for immigration eligibility remains.

My interviews with Filipino domestic workers in Canada show that their life and work situations have not improved much with the newly implemented policy change. Most of the structural and institutional forces exposed in prior studies remain intact. Lack of employment opportunities and low-paid jobs in the Philippines are still the main reasons that drive Filipino women to emigrate to search for better lives (Galerand et al., 2015). The global care chain, as a product of neoliberal reform, capitalist globalization, national labor exporting policies, and international sexual division of labor, preserves Filipino migrant women as the ideal labor force in advanced economic areas and countries. The migration trajectories and working experiences of my interviewees echo the main accounts narrated in prior studies (Bakan and Stasiulis, 1994; Hsiung & Nichol, 2010; Stasiulis & Bakan, 2005; Zaman, 2006). Before landing in Canada, it is common among Filipino women to have first served as domestic workers in other developed

countries and areas, such as Saudi Arabia, Singapore, and Hong Kong. One worker, Ula told that she wanted to work in Canada but could not afford the fees of recruitment and immigration so she decided to work in Hong Kong to save some money. Ula found her domestic job through a private agency based in Hong Kong and worked for a family to take care of the children and do housekeeping. After working for the family for four years, she managed to connect with an employer family via a local private agency in Vancouver. At the time of the interview, Ula has worked for two families for over three years, had submitted her immigrant application for permanent residency, and was still anxiously waiting for approval.

Similar to Ula, all the interviewees regarded Canada as a more appealing destination, mainly due to the granted access to permanent residency. Even though over 90% of migrant domestic workers can successfully obtain immigration status (Fudge, 2011), the actual process involves much more effort than the required two years of domestic service. My interviewees explain that it usually takes longer than anticipated – on average three to five years – for them to finally acquire permanent residence. For some recently landed workers, the processing time was severely delayed due to the Covid. During the long waiting period, these Filipino migrant women have limited employment choices other than domestic work, due to the varied constraints set by immigration policy and the segregated labor market. While making ends meet, these migrant women also have to save money to support their families back in the Philippines.

The workers I interviewed make between \$1,000 and \$2,000 each month. Taking into consideration their working hours each day, from early morning at 6 am to evening around 7 pm, the hourly rate for domestic workers' salary is significantly lower than the minimum wage in British Columbia, which is currently \$15.2 per hour. Different from the previous generations in the 90s when employer families were mainly white middle class (Cohen, 1991; England & Stiell,

1997; Stasiulis & Bakan, 2005), more affluent non-white families have begun to employ migrant domestic workers. The trend corresponds to the rising numbers of middle-class immigrants as a result of Canada's selective immigration policy under the category of "skilled workers" to attract global professional elites. Most of my interviewees work for non-white middle-class families, including Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, and Filipino. Whereas the demographic shift does not indicate any departure from racial politics, class dynamics become more salient in the present relations between migrant domestic workers and their employer families.

The desire for class mobility among migrant domestic workers is reflected in their expectations for their children and plans for themselves. One main factor that particularly attracts these Filipino migrant women to Canada is the affordable and high-quality public education for their children. All the interviewees are mothers of one to two children, from little kids to teenagers, and their children are living with the workers' husbands or other family members back in the Philippines. Except for two women who have obtained residency status for their children, other workers are still waiting for or preparing the paperwork for their children's immigration. Talking about their expectations, these women were very enthusiastic about the promising future for their children in Canada. Christina, a mother of two teenagers, told that "I am so eagerly waiting for my children to come (to Canada) and I hope they can go to college here in Vancouver". As with themselves, while these Filipino migrant women have almost a decade of experience as domestic workers, many of them plan to go back to school to get a degree or certificate and enter another profession after obtaining permanent residency. Most of these women had a college degree back in the Philippines – in social work, healthcare, management, etc. But they also admitted that they cannot afford to go back to school in Canada and often have to work several part-time jobs to support the family. Some scholars categorize Filipino migrant



women as middle-class groups back in the Philippines to differentiate their situations from the poorest people, who are unable to migrate (Mills, 2003; Parreñas, 2000). But such power dynamics do not deny the fact that Filipino migrant women are becoming the transnational working class whose gendered labor is subject to exploitation. The degrees that these women earn in the Philippines are not accredited in the Canadian labor market (Bauder, 2006; Zaman, 2006). In the highly segregated labor market structured by class, race, gender, and nationality (Bauder, 2006), social mobility for migrant women is severely limited, despite having achieved immigration status.

The story from Lila<sup>ii</sup> demonstrates that it is difficult for migrant domestic workers to navigate the segregated labor market, even with citizenship status. In the early 90s, Lila was recruited by an employment agency in the Philippines and started to work as a domestic worker for a Canadian family. She became a permanent resident in the late 90s and was then able to bring her son to Canada. Lila obtained her Canadian citizenship in the early 2000s. Since then, Lila had been working at several local convenience stores for more than a decade. The long working hours, low salary, and lack of benefits made the job hardly bearable, but Lila had few better choices. Although Lila had a degree and experience in healthcare back in the Philippines, it is almost impossible to secure a job in public hospitals due to the lack of accreditation and recognition of these degrees and skills.

Over the past two decades, home care services in Canada have gone through a major shift from being mostly publicly funded to increasingly privatized and commodified, a change promoted by a series of federal and provincial policies and institutional reforms (Coyte & McKeever, 2001). The services range from nursing, physiotherapy, and personal support to eldercare. Private home care services have flourished in metropolitan Canadian cities, including

Vancouver and Toronto, which demand a large number of the labor force. But the lack of enforcement of national standards and principles leaves private home care agencies largely unregulated. With former experience and qualifications as a care worker, Lila was able to land a job at such an agency in Greater Vancouver at the hourly rate of \$18, only slightly above the minimum wage in British Columbia. Each week, Lila and her coworkers usually work between 50-60 hours, but they receive no overtime pay. The agency also has strict “no disclose, no asking” rules that forbid care workers to ask clients how much they pay the agency for service. More often, workers must do overnight caregiving and are paid a package of \$150 for 12 hours.

On Sundays, Lila works at a retail store in order to earn more income. Compared with her former job at convenience stores, Lila is more satisfied with the caregiving work at the agency, but she was also quite aware of the exploitation of her labor. She said, “Justin Trudeau once advocated that care workers should get paid at least \$23/h, but we are still paid less than that!” As the employment at private home care agencies is primarily on contracts, job security and benefits of formal employment are largely inaccessible to workers like Lila.

The interlocking power systems, formed through disciplinary immigration and labor policies, a segregated labor market, and underregulated private agencies, perpetuate the formal subsumption of Filipino migrant domestic workers as a cheap labor force reserved for the expanding care service market in Canada. The absolute surplus value is being produced through working-class female migrants’ overloaded working hours and low salaries. The privatization and commodification of care are sustained by the hyper-exploitation of migrant women’s reproductive labor, which benefits the state, market, and private agencies and further divides the middle class and working class as wage earners.

## **Domestic service platforms and the vicious circle of low-income service work in Canada**

Understanding platform work should thus be situated in the persistent formal subsumption of reproductive labor and the class immobility of migrant domestic workers. A recent research report on the platform economy in Canada reveals that the size of the gig economy that relies on on-demand labor platforms has grown substantially in the past decade (Bouchard et al., 2021). Most gig platform workers are Uber/Lyft drivers and food delivery workers for platforms such as Uber Eats and Instacart. A few studies have addressed these workers' precarious working conditions and labor organizing efforts in the metropolitan cities of Vancouver and Toronto (Bouchard et al., 2021; Brophy & CMNS444, 2020). Major global domestic service platforms, such as Care.com and Handy, have also launched their services in main Canadian cities in the past few years. Although it remains to be further explored to what extent these platforms have shaped the labor market of the care industry in Canada and it is beyond the scope of this article to address this issue, perceptions of domestic workers about these platforms may shed some light on the relationship between workers and domestic service platforms. The Filipino migrant women that I interviewed have not yet encountered these domestic service platforms, but the structural and institutional forces that trap them in the low-income service work make them the anticipated "reserve army of labor" for the ever-expanding care industry in Canada, in which service platforms would become a non-negligible force.

While my interviewees are quite familiar with on-demand platforms such as Uber, they have little knowledge of other service platforms including Handy, TaskRabbit, and Care.com. When I introduced what these platforms are about (matching workers with clients in need of care service, cleaning, and furniture assembly), many showed strong interest and expressed that they may turn to these platforms as supplementary income sources in the future. For instance, one

worker, Gloria said that “I have used Uber several times, but I have never heard of Handy and TaskRabbit. It sounds like they could be a place to find some part-time jobs. I will look into them and see how the opportunities are.” Such views are shared among the interviewees, and they confirm scholars’ findings of workers’ attitudes toward on-demand platforms in the U.S. and Europe (van Doorn et al., 2020). In their work on migrant workers and the platform gig economy, van Doorn et al. (2020) summarize the main factors that drive migrant workers to register with on-demand platforms as exclusion and discrimination in the formal job market, which involves background checks and a lengthy hiring process, while the low-barrier entry and the bonus for registration on platforms are more appealing to migrant workers. The discriminatory labor market and the degrading service jobs affect migrant workers and local working-class and disenfranchised people. For instance, Ticona and Mateescu (2018) reveal that in the U.S., the urban poor, working-class women, and racial minorities, along with undocumented immigrants, have become the main labor force for care service platforms. In the political economic context of Canada and elsewhere, where the labor market for domestic work has been historically informal and underregulated, for migrant domestic workers, digital labor platforms may not be distinctively different from private placement agencies upon which they rely to search for jobs. They are the labor intermediaries for migrant workers with little economic and social capital, to navigate the labor market.

With aspirations for formal employment in the area of their passion, as discussed in the above section, these Filipino migrant women were struggling with the rather limited access to securing jobs. The story of Cecilia is exemplifying. Cecilia has a bachelor’s degree in social work in the Philippines and had worked for a local NGO for several years before working as a domestic worker in Hong Kong and then Canada. She said, “I am really passionate about social

work and have a lot of experience, but my degree is not recognized (by the labor market) here in Canada.” Although Cecilia is dedicated to returning to her profession as a social worker and does have a very firm plan to get a degree at a local institute in Vancouver, she admits that supporting her family and herself is the top priority and the financial burden may not allow her to go to school. Cecilia plans to find a full-time job and attend school part-time, but the chances to secure formal employment for Filipino migrant women are rather low and many of them end up continuing as domestic workers or working in other low-income service sectors.

Cecilia’s experience is not uncommon among Filipino migrant domestic workers. Without adequate financial support, these Filipino migrant women cannot afford to attend school; and without an accredited degree, they must stick with low-income service jobs, including domestic work. As the low-income jobs barely allow these workers to make ends meet, it is rather difficult for them to become financially equipped for school. Stuck in a vicious circle, for Filipino migrant women, care service platforms would become one of the means among their limited choices to search for job opportunities and earn income. But at the same time, some workers were suspicious of the branded flexibility of the service platforms and were quite aware of the precarity they face with the platforms. As Lila said, “I am more interested in full-time jobs with a stable income. I am not sure if these platforms (Handy and Care.com) can provide such opportunities”.

## **Conclusion**

To protect workers’ rights in the platform gig economy, many scholars, activists, and protesters have called for government regulation over digital labor platforms to enforce formal employment (Bouchard et al., 2021; Chen, 2018; Woodcock, 2018, 2021). Granting formal employment is undoubtedly an indispensable way to improve platform workers’ well-being, but such a solution

is often constrained by national boundaries and premised on the requirement of citizenship status. For online workers located in developing countries and working on digital platforms in developed ones, protection of their labor rights requires transnational governance, which is not yet implemented (Graham et al., 2017). For transnational migrant workers, the lack of immigration status limits their access to the entitled labor rights of formal employment. As van Doorn et al. (2020: 2) contend, “employee status is by itself not enough to counter the precarisation of migrant gig work. Exigencies of platform-mediated migrant labour require a thorough and ambitious revision of existing regulation at the intersection of immigration and employment law and welfare policy.”

Policy adjustments and government regulation at the national and international levels are certainly crucial steps, but addressing the labor issues requires wider and more radical social change. Digital labor platforms rely on the longstanding historical, structural, and institutional factors which produce a cheap labor force. In the realm of reproductive labor, as experiences of transnational migrant domestic workers in Canada have demonstrated, the cheap feminized migrant labor is the product of the intersected power structures of patriarchy, the capitalist world system, a selective and discriminatory immigration system, and a local labor market segregated by gender, race, and class. It is in the context of this entangled power structure that digital labor platforms would become part of the intricate forces that drive the continuum of the formal subsumption and exploitation of underprivileged migrant women’s reproductive labor. While it is true that platform technologies are the latest development for capital valorization (Srnicsek, 2017; Woodcock, 2021), seeing “platform technology as the all-powerful dominator of a fragmented working class,” which Joyce criticizes as a trend among many critical platform studies (2020: 543), is also problematic. Platforms should be characterised as a technology-

enabled and capital-driven facilitator in the enduring process of labor commodification and exploitation. For migrant domestic workers, digital labor platforms are among the very few options they are offered to access the labor market. Demanding regulations over platforms can be a short-term goal but is insufficient to address workers' inequalities. There thus awaits the mobilization and formation of broader labor movements at the local, national, and transnational levels with transformative and inclusive agendas, which seek not only to confront platforms' exploitation but also to undermine the entwined power dominations.

## References

- Anderson B (2010) Just another job? Paying for domestic work. *Gender & Development* 9(1): 25–33.
- Arat-Koc S (1997) From 'Mothers of the Nation' to migrant workers. In: Bakan AB and Stasiulis D (eds) *Not One of the Family: Foreign Domestic Workers in Canada*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, pp. 53–80.
- Armacost NC (1995) Gender and immigration law: The recruitment of domestic workers to Canada, 1867-1940. *Indian Journal of Gender Studies* 2(1): 25–43. DOI: 10.1177/097152159500200102.
- Bakan AB and Stasiulis D (1994) Foreign domestic worker policy in Canada and the social boundaries of modern citizenship. *Science & Society* 58(1): 7–33.
- Bauder H (2006) *Labor Movement: How Migration Regulates Labor Markets*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Bouchard G, Haddad F, Norris D, et al. (2021) *A platform economy strategy for Canada: Supporting place-based governance for a more resilient and inclusive post-pandemic Future of Work*. Ontario, Canada: Action Canada. Available at: <https://actioncanada.ca/publications/a-platform-economy-strategy-for-canada-supporting-place-based-governance-for-a-more-resilient-and-inclusive-post-pandemic-future-of-work/>.
- Brophy E and CMNS444 (2020) *Food delivery platform work and the COVID-19 outbreak, in the Metro Vancouver Regional District*. Burnaby, BC, Canada: SFU School of

Communication. Available at:  
<https://www.sfu.ca/content/dam/sfu/communication/Team/Endabrophy/MVRD%20Delivery%20Platform%20Work%20and%20Covid%2019%20.pdf>.

- Chen JY (2018) Thrown under the bus and outrunning it! The logic of Didi and taxi drivers' labour and activism in the on-demand economy. *New Media & Society* 20(8): 2691–2711.
- Cohen R (1991) Women of color in white households: Coping strategies of live-in domestic workers. *Qualitative Sociology* 14: 197–215.
- Constable N (2007) *Maid to Order in Hong Kong: Stories of Migrant Workers*. Second. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Constable N (2014) *Born out of Place: Migrant Mothers and the Politics of International Labor*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Coyte PC and McKeever P (2001) Home care in Canada: Passing the buck. *Canadian Journal of Nursing Research* 33(2): 11–25.
- England K and Stiell B (1997) 'They think you're as stupid as your English is': Constructing foreign domestic workers in Toronto. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 29(2): 195–215. DOI: 10.1068/a290195.
- Federici S (2004) *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Federici S (2018) Marx and feminism. *triple C: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 16(2): 468–75.
- Fraser N (2016) Contradictions of capital and care. *New Left Review* 100: 99–117.
- Fuchs C (2018) Universal alienation, formal and real subsumption of society under capital, ongoing primitive accumulation by dispossession: Reflections on the Marx@200 - Contributions by David Harvey and Michael Hardt/Toni Negri. *triple C: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 16(2): 454–67.
- Fudge J (2011) Global care chains, employment agencies and the conundrum of jurisdiction: Decent work for domestic workers in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Women and the Law* 23(1): 235–64.
- Galerand E, Gallié M and Gobeil JO (2015) *Domestic labour and exploitation: The case of the Live-in Caregiver Program in Canada (LCP)*. Montreal: Université du Québec à Montréal.
- Graham M, Hjorth I and Lehtonvirta V (2017) Digital labour and development: Impacts of global digital labour platforms and the gig economy on worker livelihoods. *Transfer: European Review of Labour and Research* 23(2): 135–62.



- Hardt M and Negri T (2018) The powers of the exploited and the social ontology of praxis. *triple C: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 16(2): 415–23.
- Hartmann HI (1979) The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: Towards a more progressive union. *Capital & Class* 3(2): 1–33.
- Harvey D (1989) *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change*. Cambridge, MA & Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Harvey D (2007) Neoliberalism as creative destruction. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 610: 22–44.
- Harvey D (2018) Universal alienation. *triple C: Communication, Capitalism & Critique* 16(2): 424–39.
- Harzig C (2003) MacNamara’s DP domestics: Immigration policy makers negotiate class, race, and gender in the aftermath of World War II. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society* 10(1): 23–48.
- Hill NS, Dorow S, Barnetson B, et al. (2019) Occupational health and safety for migrant domestic workers in Canada: Dimensions of (im)mobility. *New Solutions: A Journal of Environmental and Occupational Health Policy* 29(3): 397–421.
- Hoang L, Blank G and Quan-Haase A (2020) The winners and the losers of the platform economy: Who participates? *Information, Communication & Society* 23(5): 681–700.
- Hochschild AR (2014) Global care chains and emotional surplus value. In: Engster D and Metz T (eds) *Justice, Politics, and the Family*. New York: Routledge, pp. 249–61.
- Hodge J (2006) ‘Unskilled labour’: Canada’s Live-in Caregiver Program. *Undercurrent* 3(2): 60–66.
- Hsiung P-C and Nichol K (2010) Policies on and experiences of foreign domestic workers in Canada. *Sociology Compass* 4(9): 766–78.
- Joyce S (2020) Rediscovering the cash nexus, again: Subsumption and the labour-capital relation in platform work. *Capital & Class* 44(4): 541–52.
- Marx K (1867) *Capital. A Critique of Political Economy*. London: Penguin.
- Mies M (2014) *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour*. London: Zed Books.
- Mills MB (2003) Gender and inequality in the global labor force. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 32: 41–62.
- Moors A (2003) Migrant domestic workers: Debating transnationalism, identity politics, and family relations. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45(2): 386–394.

- Negri A (1991) *Marx beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*. New York: Autonomedia.
- Ong A (2006) *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Parreñas RS (2000) Migrant Filipina domestic workers and the international division of reproductive labor. *Gender & Society* 14(4): 560–80.
- Srnicek N (2017) *Platform Capitalism*. Cambridge, UK and Malden, MA: Polity Press.
- Stasiulis DK and Bakan AB (2005) *Negotiating Citizenship: Migrant Women in Canada and the Global System*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Sun P (2019) Your order, their labor: An exploration of algorithms and laboring on food delivery platforms in China. *Chinese Journal of Communication* 12(3): 308–323.
- Ticona J and Mateescu A (2018) Trusted strangers: Carework platforms' cultural entrepreneurship in the on-demand economy. *New Media & Society* 20(11): 4384–4404.
- van Doorn N (2017) Platform labor: On the gendered and racialized exploitation of low-income service work in the 'on-demand' economy. *Information, Communication & Society* 20(6): 898–914.
- van Doorn N, Ferrari F and Graham M (2020) Migration and migrant labour in the gig economy: An intervention. *SSRN*. Available at: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3622589>.
- van Doorn N, Mos E and Bosma J (2021) Actually existing platformization: Embedding platforms in urban spaces through partnerships. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 120(4): 715–731.
- Woodcock J (2018) Digital labour and workers' organisation. In: Atzeni M and Ness I (eds) *Global Perspectives on Workers' and Labour Organizations*. Singapore: Springer, pp. 157–173.
- Woodcock J (2021) *The Fight against Platform Capitalism: An Inquiry into the Global Struggles of the Gig Economy*. London, UK: University of Westminster Press.
- Yan H (2008) *New Masters, New Servants: Migration, Development, and Women Workers in China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Zaman H (2006) *Breaking the Iron Wall: Decommodification and Immigrant Women's Labor in Canada*. Oxford, UK: Lexington Books.



## Notes

---

<sup>i</sup> I have recruited 7 Filipino migrant women as interviewees primarily through a local NGO on domestic workers' rights and relied on snowball sampling to reach out to the other 5 workers. Due to Covid-19, all interviews are conducted via Zoom or telephone. Interviewees' names are replaced with pseudonyms to protect their privacy. The author deeply appreciates the interviewees' kind willingness to share their experiences and thoughts.