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The Home as a Place of Work—Who Cares and Why?

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Abstract: As demand for privately organized care and domestic work has grown, digital platforms have emerged as key intermediaries connecting prospective workers with clients. Drawing on unique survey data collected in Germany in 2019, this study offers a systematic analysis of the sociodemographic characteristics of platform-mediated care and domestic workers, with particular focus on their family and household compositions and their motivations for using a digital care-work platform. The study's findings reveal similarities between these workers, traditional care and domestic workers, and other platform workers in the gig economy. This study also focuses on how this work serves as a strategy for reconciling paid work with unpaid family responsibilities. Importantly, a noticeable proportion of the workers have unpaid care responsibilities for children or other family members and friends while pursuing platform work. When asked about their reasons for using a digital platform, the workers mostly name the income potential, job flexibility, and independence that this platform-mediated work provides. However, the motivations of different groups of workers vary: those with children more often value the balance of paid work and family life that this work offers, while financial incentives and professional development are less of a priority.

Keywords: care and domestic work; gender; informality; gig economy

1. Introduction

In Germany, as in many other countries worldwide, there is a longstanding tradition of employing paid household help. Up until the early 20th century, domestic maids were only employed by affluent bourgeois households in a master–servant relationship (e.g., Lutz 2013), while today, care and domestic workers are more widely employed due to major societal and economic changes. These changes include women's increasing labor force participation, changing family structures, and population aging, all of which have contributed to a care deficit or care crisis (e.g., Enste et al. 2009; Jarrow Insights 2024; Lutz 2013). As a result, the demand for private and market-based solutions has increased (Cancedda 2001; Farvaque 2015), particularly among double-earner households with high incomes, older people, and those receiving care benefits (Duell and Vetter 2015). Today, around 9.5 million domestic workers provide their services to households in the EU-27 (European Commission 2021), and the OECD estimates that, in 2019, workers employed in noncare household services accounted for around 1.3% of the labor force in OECD countries (OECD 2021, p. 6).

Although paid care and domestic work in other people's homes is an important pillar of the economy, there are several problematic aspects of this work: care and household helpers often have limited social security, and they face irregular working hours, low working hours, and low pay, as these services are often provided on an ad hoc and informal basis (Angermann and Eichhorst 2013; Farvaque 2015). Within the EU, around 3.1 million domestic workers are estimated to not declare their work (European Commission 2021), and figures for Germany suggest that as much as 88.5% of cleaning work in households is undeclared (Enste 2019).

At the same time, the demand for care and domestic work in private homes is increasing, and one way to find a worker is through digital platform companies, which are

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becoming increasingly important (ILO 2021). Digital intermediaries such as Care.com, Sitly, hallobabysitter, and Helpling have recently emerged, aiming to efficiently match the demand for and supply of care and domestic services online. Although there has been considerable debate both in the media and in academic discourse on platform-mediated work, this phenomenon is still uncommon. Whereas only 0.8% of the working age population in Germany have ever used digital platforms to offer and find work online according to recent estimates (Fernández-Macías et al. 2023, pp. 44–45), around one quarter of these online services are in housekeeping, handy work, beauty, and care (Fernández-Macías et al. 2023, p. 51). Despite its relative importance, however, online-mediated care and domestic work has received comparatively little scholarly attention thus far.

The present study addresses this gap by providing a systematic description of the workers' characteristics and their motivations for using care-work platforms. So far, the majority of research on care-work platforms are qualitative interview studies or theoretical accounts (see e.g., Flanagan 2019; Hunt et al. 2019; Ticona and Mateescu 2018; Van Doorn 2017 on English speaking countries; Wiesböck et al. 2023 on domestic cleaners in Vienna; Gruszka et al. 2024; Orth 2024; Niebler and Animento 2023; Altenried et al. 2021 on care-work platforms in Germany). While these studies have also discussed the gendered and migrant nature of this work, there is a lack of studies that have systematically analyzed the demographic composition of this workforce and their working conditions for Europe or Germany specifically (cf. Hunt et al. 2019; Hunt and Samman 2020 on South Africa and Kenya; Poblete et al. 2024 on Argentina).

Drawing on unique survey data (N = 771) from individuals who offer care and domestic services via one of Germany's largest care-work platforms, this study answers the following questions: Who offers care and domestic services via digital platforms? What are the motivations to offer these services via online care-work platforms, and how do these motivations differ between sociodemographic groups?

By answering these questions, the study contributes to the existing literature on care-work platforms in several important ways. First, this study offers a systematic and quantitative documentation of this "new group" of workers. To the author's knowledge, this is the first study to systematically describe this workforce based on generalizable survey data and to offer findings that are important for current discussions on care and domestic work and the gig economy in general. Second, this study further explores workers' motivations for using a digital care-work platform, with particular attention to those who have unpaid care responsibilities and thus experience a double burden. The findings show that this group is motivated differently from workers without unpaid care responsibilities.

Lastly, the study conceptually contributes to the literature by situating the "new" platform-mediated care and domestic workforce within the context of traditional household services and the gig economy.

2. Background

2.1. Empirical Evidence on the Sociodemographic Characteristics of Care and Domestic Workers

Despite the growing importance of paid care and domestic services in private households, and the efforts of governments to encourage legal employment options of care and domestic workers in private homes, the empirical evidence on the sociodemographic characteristics of these workers and their motivations is limited and not easily comparable. This is not surprising given that a large proportion of working arrangements in private households are presumably provided on an informal basis (see OECD 2021). Existing studies differ in their definition of household services and their sampling strategies, which affects the generalizability of their findings. Nevertheless, there is some agreement on workers' sociodemographic characteristics in the existing research on care and domestic workers in private homes, as outlined below.

Care and domestic workers are overwhelmingly female and often work informally:

> In Europe, paid workers in private homes are predominantly female as women make up more than 90% of the domestic workforce (Cancedda 2001, p. 45; Shire et al. 2017, p. 11).

In Germany, household services are often provided by middle-aged women who want to earn more than what the mini-job scheme (i.e., a small part-time employment contract) allows for. These workers then often work off-the-books rather than being formally employed (FamilienForschung Baden-Württemberg 2008, p. 12). Currently, monthly pay under the mini-job scheme may not exceed EUR 538 per month (Minijob-Zentrale 2024). Workers are exempt from social insurance contributions, while households only pay reduced employer contributions (Shire 2015, p. 203). Despite efforts to formalize jobs in the sector through the mini-job scheme (Shire 2015), choosing not to declare their work and working informally enables workers to earn more than the pay limit of mini-jobs and avoid sanctions. For workers who rely on such jobs for a living and work for multiple households, informal work may be chosen as an alternative (Shire 2015). In fact, undeclared work in German households is common, with an estimated 88.5% of domestic cleaning work, for instance, being undeclared (Enste 2019).

Migrant workers are overrepresented in marginal jobs in the domestic care sector:

Within the group of female domestic workers, women of color, migrant women, and women from ethnic minorities seem to be overrepresented. Shire et al. (2017), for instance, found that the share of migrant workers (operationalized in the study as "noncitizens") in German households was 42% in cleaning, 25% in eldercare, 19% in childcare, and around 12% in gardening (Shire et al. 2017, pp. 11–12). In the German population, the proportion of foreigners—defined as people without German citizenship—was only 14% in 2022, while 28.7% had a migrant background. This group includes both foreigners and German citizens whose parents were born without German citizenship (Destatis 2023). Yet, average estimates on these workers in private households vary considerably. Even when considering only those formally employed in private households under the German mini-job scheme, we find that 23.3% of the workers were foreigners (i.e., individuals without German citizenship) in 2019 (Deutsche Rentenversicherung Knappschaft-Bahn-See 2019, p. 4). In an earlier study based on the German SOEP data and ISCO classification, Enste et al. (2009, p. 19), by contrast, estimated that only 5.9% of workers in private households were foreigners in 2006, a share similar to workers in other occupations.

Great age heterogeneity among care and domestic workers:

Previous work, moreover, found that domestic workers are also fairly heterogeneous in terms of their age. Cancedda (2001), for instance, found that child care providers in private homes, e.g., nannies, were typically older than their counterparts in centers and other formal institutions, and that all age groups were represented among those providing cleaning services in selected European countries (Cancedda 2001, p. 50). More than 50% of domestic workers were aged 45 and older in many European countries (FamilienForschung Baden-Württemberg 2008, p. 10) but migrant domestic workers tended to be younger than the native-born workforce (Cancedda 2001, p. 50; Jarrow Insights 2024, p. 28).

Figures for Germany also suggest that the average age among those working in private households is higher than of those in other parts of the economy. Enste et al. (2009, p. 18) showed for Germany that the median age of workers in "family-support services" differed by the economic relevance of their work: those who carried out the work as their main job were older than workers in other occupations, while workers who provided it as an additional job were typically younger than those in other occupations.

Relatively high levels of formal qualifications among care and domestic workers:

The empirical findings regarding care and domestic workers' educational background and professional qualifications are also somewhat inconsistent. In general, care and domestic work is often deemed low-qualified, low-status, and menial work (e.g., Lutz 2013; Shahid and Syed 2023) and the lack of professionalization and quality standards in the sector has been described as an impediment to domestic outsourcing (e.g., Nisic et al. 2023).

A closer examination of workers' formal qualifications reveals that while the workers offering household services are not generally unskilled, they typically possess lower levels

of professional skills than workers in other occupations. For Germany, Enste et al. (2009) found that among those who provide these services as part of their main job, higher proportions of these workers had completed vocational training than workers in other occupations, but lower proportions had a tertiary degree and higher proportions had no completed professional qualification than workers in other occupations. However, the share of those with a tertiary degree was twice as high for those who did it as a side job than for those with a main job. At the same time, the share of those without vocational training was higher than in other occupations, also because many were still in school (Enste et al. 2009, pp. 20–22). While professionalization and thus entry barriers to these jobs are low, it should be noted that terming this work low-skilled is indicative of the ongoing social devaluation of these occupations.

Part-time care and domestic work as a response to unpaid family responsibilities and low demand:

As households typically only outsource a limited number of hours of paid care work, domestic care and household services tend to only be provided on a part-time basis. In a survey including companies in Germany, Becker et al. (2012) found that two thirds of the surveyed companies (i.e., provider organizations) reported working, on average, less than 15 hours per month in a given household (Becker et al. 2012, p. 54). Based on SOEP data from Germany, Enste and colleagues showed that workers who provided family-support services as a side job had average working hours of around 21 hours per week compared to the 30 hours for those who did it as their main job (Enste et al. 2009, p. 22).

Part-time work is also a common solution for women with unpaid care responsibilities. These workers might turn to the market to offer their services to better reconcile paid work and family life through flexible schedules and part-time work options, particularly those from marginalized or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. As Cancedda (2001, p. 77) reported, some workers had the flexibility to decide on their working volume and schedule that best aligned with their family needs. Also, for workers with grown-up children ("empty nesters"), working in other people's homes could be interpreted as a way to reenter the workforce after a break due to family responsibilities (Cancedda 2001, p. 50). As such, this work might also constitute an additional income for women who wish to supplement their husbands' income to increase their overall household income.

In terms of family composition, Cancedda (2001) found in qualitative interviews in Europe that many women working in public institutions like child care facilities had no children or grown-up children. By contrast, workers in private homes (cleaners and in-home day care providers) more often had young children (Cancedda 2001, pp. 75–76). For Germany, Enste et al. (2009) showed that family-support workers were more likely than those in other occupations to be single. Among those family-support service workers with a partner, the share of workers without children was higher for those who did this work as a side job compared to those who did it as their main job or worked in other occupations. The share of partnered workers with children was substantially higher for those who did it as a main job compared to those with a side job and also higher compared to workers in other occupations (Enste et al. 2009, p. 19).

With respect to workers' economic situation in terms of household income, Enste and colleagues further found the median net household income of these workers to be lower than that of workers in other occupations, but not by a large margin. However, when considering net equivalence income, those who provided these services as their main job had a substantially lower median income than other workers. In contrast, those providing these services as a side job had a slightly higher net equivalence income (Enste et al. 2009, pp. 24–25).

While differing definitions of care and domestic workers, distinct data sources and country contexts challenge the comparison of these workers, some general aspects can be summarized: workers in private homes are typically female, often older, and frequently have a migrant background. They have often received formal training but they—at least in Germany—are less likely to hold university degrees. Their low income and low working

hours are notable. One reason many women pursue this work is to have an additional income after their children have grown up; additionally, these part-time jobs are possibly a family-friendly solution for workers with children.

2.2. Empirical Evidence on Platform Workers

Limited research on care and domestic workers in the platform economy:

Digital care-work platforms like Care.com, Sitly, Pflegix, or Helpling have facilitated people in finding help with care and domestic work by efficiently matching supply with demand and reducing transaction costs involved in the sorting and matching processes (see, e.g., the discussions by Vallas and Schor (2020) and Einav et al. (2016)). Despite the growing importance of care and domestic work in private households, as well as the rise in platform work, there is a lack of systematic empirical evidence on the sociodemographic characteristics and motivations of care and domestic workers using these platforms.

While there is extensive literature on platform work in general, research specifically on platform-mediated care and domestic work has received less attention and research has only recently been growing (e.g., Flanagan 2019; Ticona and Mateescu 2018; Van Doorn 2017, 2020; Wiesböck et al. 2023). Notably, most studies on care-work platforms use qualitative rather than quantitative methods. Comparatively few studies so far have used mixed-methods including survey data (Hunt et al. 2019; Hunt and Samman 2020 on South Africa; Poblete et al. 2024 on Argentina). For Germany, no systematic and standardized survey data exists that help characterize and describe the platform-mediated care and domestic workers and that allow for more general conclusions beyond the cases studied. As for platform workers more generally, a plethora of studies have focused on their sociodemographic characteristics and their motivations, but these studies differ in their study and sampling designs, affecting generalizability and comparability. For Germany and Spain, Fernández-Macías et al. (2023) offer important insights into the population of platform workers based on "representative" survey data. In the following, I first describe platform workers more generally and then focus on the available quantitative literature on care-work platforms for South Africa (Hunt et al. 2019) and Argentina (Poblete et al. 2023, 2024).

Gender segregation varies by type of platform work:

Women and men typically participate differently in the labor market. Drawing on survey data from Germany and Spain, Fernández-Macías et al. (2023) found that the share of women amounted to 31% among workers for whom platform work constituted an additional job. This share was as high as 48% among platform workers for whom this work constituted their main job compared to 46.6% female workers in the general worker population (excluding platform work). While platform work is usually done as an additional job rather than a main job (e.g., Fernández-Macías et al. 2023), the skewed gender distribution is striking. Based on a non-probability sample from the COLLEEM survey conducted in Europe, Rodríguez-Modroño and colleagues reported that 38% of platform workers were female and the majority of 62% were men (Rodríguez-Modroño et al. 2022, p. 10).

While this gender distribution pertains to platform workers in general, the degree of gender segregation varies across platforms and by the type of platform work provided. Again, Rodríguez-Modroño et al. (2022, p. 10) reported that the share of female workers was only 32% in transport and delivery work and only 23% in software development. Women were, by contrast, more represented in freelance or microtasks (43% and 41%, respectively) and provided more location-based tasks including care and domestic work (38%). Based on non-probability survey data in Australia, Churchill and Craig (2019, p. 751) also reported gender differences in the tasks performed. For instance, women more commonly provided caring, cleaning, and creative tasks than men, who in turn were more engaged in delivery work. In a survey conducted on a digital platform for domestic cleaning in South Africa, Hunt et al. (2019) found that the domestic workers were predominantly female (98%). This,

so far, is the only study known to provide concrete estimates on the gender distribution of platform-mediated cleaners.

Many migrants pursue platform work

Migrant background is a status characteristic that is both relevant in care and domestic work and in platform work. For platform workers in Germany, Fernández-Macías et al. (2023) found that the share of foreign-born workers was higher than in the (otherwise) employed population (excluding platform workers): among those who provided their platform work as an additional job, the share of foreign-born workers was 10.6% while it was slightly higher for those who provided it as their main job (13.6%). In both cases, this share was more than double the share of migrants found in the (otherwise) employed population, where it was only 5.4% (Fernández-Macías et al. 2023, p. 49). While migrant status has also been discussed in relation to care-work platforms (e.g., Ticona and Mateescu 2018; Van Doorn 2017), concrete estimates are available for South Africa with a focus on workers' ethnicity as well as for platform-mediated cleaners in Argentina. Hunt et al. (2019) showed that Black African workers were overrepresented in online-mediated cleaning work, comprising 97% of this workforce compared to 80% in the South African population (Hunt et al. 2019, p. 25). In Argentina, migrant workers were over-represented among platform-mediated cleaners, with a proportion of 35% compared to 12% among domestic workers, in general (Poblete et al. 2023, 2024).

Comparatively younger and well-educated platform workers:

Similarly to what studies have found for traditional care and domestic workers before, platform workers are heterogenous in terms of their age. For platform workers in Germany, Fernández-Macías and colleagues found that platform workers were somewhat younger than non-platform workers. The average age was 38.3 years among those who provide platform work as an additional job and 41.7 years when it was their main job, compared to an average age of 43.7 years in the (otherwise) employed population (Fernández-Macías et al. 2023, p. 47). In South Africa, platform-mediated cleaners had a median age of 35 years compared to 41 years in the general population (Hunt et al. 2019, p. 25). Similarly, Poblete et al. (2023, 2024) found that platform-mediated cleaners in Argentina were younger than domestic workers in general, with an average age of 38 compared to 44 years.

With respect to educational attainment, it is noteworthy that the majority of platform workers are fairly well educated. Nearly half of the workers had tertiary education (both among main job holders and side job holders), compared to only 10.4% in the general population (Fernández-Macías et al. 2023, p. 48). Platform-mediated cleaners in South Africa were also better educated than the general population: 10% had a university degree compared to 5% of the general population (Hunt et al. 2019, p. 25). In Argentina, a higher proportion of platform-mediated domestic workers had completed secondary or higher education (80%) compared to domestic workers in general (37%), and a higher proportion were currently enrolled in education (24% compared to 5%) (Poblete et al. 2023, 2024).

Platform workers' household and family composition:

In terms of household and family composition, Fernández-Macías et al. (2023, p. 48) found that the majority of platform workers did not have dependent children and were single. A lower share of platform workers had dependent children (between 21.7% (side job) and 28% (main job)) compared to 34.3% in the otherwise employed population. For domestic workers in South Africa, Hunt et al. (2019, p. 25) found that most of the workers were single or widowed (63%) and lived in much larger households (4.5 household members) than the typical household in the general population (3.2 persons per household). Strikingly, most of the workers had children under 18 (as much as 98%), and 83% even had small children under the age of six, which was substantially higher than in the general population. By contrast, Poblete et al. (2023, 2024) found that platform-mediated cleaners in Argentina lived with minors less often (33%) compared to domestic workers in general (71%). Lastly, regarding platform workers' income, Hunt et al. (2019) found

that domestic workers' household income was fairly low, with only 15% of the workers having a household income higher than the median income in the country (Hunt et al. 2019, p. 27). More than one-third (36%) even reported that it was very difficult to live on their present income (Hunt et al. 2019, p. 26). While this description offers valuable insights into platform-mediated cleaners in South Africa and Argentina, the sociodemographic situation of platform-mediated care and domestic workers in Germany is possibly different.

Money, flexibility and autonomy are important reasons to do platform work:

Why do workers choose to offer their services on digital platforms? Money is one of the primary reasons to pursue platform work: a review study on platform work in Europe showed that (in location-based platform work) the workers' primary motivation was income-related. Flexibility and autonomy were other important reasons to pursue this work, and for most workers platform work typically supplemented their main income (Elmer et al. 2019). Based on non-probability data from platform workers in Australia, Churchill and Craig (2019) found that the motivational structures differed somewhat by gender. While money was the primary motivation for men in the sample, women also placed greater emphasis on the flexibility, i.e., the fact that they could organize their platform work around their personal schedules: nearly one in five (17.8%) women reported that it fits with their schedule compared to only 7.9% of men. Compared to men, women more often reported that they could not find other work—the figures were 13.8% compared to only 3.6% of men (Churchill and Craig 2019, p. 752).

An almost equally important motivating factor was the flexibility and autonomy that platform jobs (promise to) offer (Elmer et al. 2019, pp. 27, 38). This aligns with research that has discussed platform work as a means for women to reconcile paid work and family life (cf. Glavin et al. (2024) on role conflict between platform work and family life). For instance, the European Institute for Gender Equality found in a survey of platform workers in ten European countries (excluding Germany) that more than one in three of the surveyed female platform workers had caring responsibilities (EIGE 2021). Despite the promise of flexibility, autonomy, and independence associated with platform work, the workers in this study nonetheless experienced challenges with their work schedules, particularly when they worked irregular shifts—for instance in the evening or at nights (EIGE 2021).

Similarly, by drawing on the nonrepresentative COLLEEM survey data, Rodríguez-Modroño et al. showed that—contrary to expectations expressed in other studies—women did not necessarily achieve a better balance of work and family life by pursuing "flexible" platform work. Women participated less in platform work when they had children, as these women had less time to spend doing platform work, which in turn lowered their income. Therefore, platform work is not used generally to better combine paid work and family life (Rodríguez-Modroño et al. 2022, p. 18).

One explanation for this finding is the challenges resulting from the blurring of the worker and carer roles. Glavin et al. (2024) analyzed boundary work among (location-based) platform workers in Canada, studying whether platform work was associated with work–family conflict and challenges in boundary work. They found that the flexibility associated with platform work came with a blurring of boundaries between the two roles, which might be challenging for workers. By contrast, qualitative findings by Milkman et al. (2021) suggested that the female workers highly appreciated the scheduling flexibility associated with app-based and app-managed food shopping and food delivery.

For platform-mediated domestic workers in South Africa and Kenya specifically, Hunt et al. (2019) found that an important reason was that it was "an easier way to access paid work than other available options" (Hunt et al. 2019, p. 29). These workers also listed flexibility over their work as the first or second most important reason to be working through the platform. In Kenya, another important reason was client acquisition that the platform facilitated (Hunt et al. 2019, p. 30). For Germany, Bor (2021) reported that earning money was an important reason for cleaners using a platform, while Baum and Kufner (2021) found that for elderly care takers in Germany, important motivations for solo self-employment via platforms were time sovereignty and autonomy (both studies based

on qualitative interviews). These motivations align with the motivations indicated by other platform workers outside the domestic work sector.

To summarize, platform workers differ from other workers in terms of their sociodemographic characteristics, as well as their household and family compositions. While they are often portrayed as young and male, research has shown that the gender distribution varies by type of platform work provided. Additionally, the share of migrant workers among platform workers is higher than among non-platform workers, and they tend to be somewhat younger. Platform workers are typically well educated, with many holding university degrees; most are single and do not have children. Quantitative research on platform-mediated care and domestic workers remains limited. First insights from South Africa and Argentina suggest that platform-mediated cleaners are mostly female, often have a migrant background, are younger and may have more (Hunt et al. 2019) or fewer children (Poblete et al. 2023, 2024) compared to their counterparts. This suggests that platform-mediated care and domestic workers form a distinct group within the gig economy.

2.3. The German Country Context

Having identified a gap in quantitative and generalizable research on care-work platforms in Germany, the following section outlines the German country context to frame the emergence of digital care-work platforms.

Esping-Andersen (1999) distinguishes between familialistic and de-familialistic welfare states, based on the extent to which families (mainly women) are responsible for welfare. Leitner (2003) described the German welfare state as one of "gendered familialism", where care policies reinforce women's caregiving roles. For example, in long-term elderly care, eligible patients receive a care allowance (Pflegegeld), which they can use to pay (female) family members providing care at home. This reliance on female caregivers has been linked to the male breadwinner model, which leaves wives out of paid employment and financially dependent on their husband (Jokela 2019). Wives also benefit from social protection through their husbands' employment as long as their earnings do not exceed a certain threshold (Shire 2015).

With the shift to dual-earner households in affluent countries (von Gleichen and Seeleib-Kaiser 2018), women's unpaid care and domestic work in private homes has become more precarious. These pressures are further compounded by population aging and skills shortages in the care sector. As a result, many families outsource some care and domestic tasks to paid workers and various policies have been introduced to relieve families' "care burden" (Jokela 2017). In Europe, policies mainly aim to foster demand by providing affordable services through tax deductions or by regulating employment conditions for low-paid jobs, like the German mini-job scheme (Jokela 2017). In Germany, 20% of the costs for household-related services (including cleaning but also caring tasks) in the private home are tax-deductible, up to EUR 4000 annually. These tax-deductions require formality, i.e., the self-employed workers or firms issue invoices and provide proof of bank transfers (BMFSFJ 2024). The mini-job scheme allows workers to earn up to EUR 538 per month (Minijob-Zentrale 2024), without paying social security or income tax, while households pay reduced tax rates and employer contributions (Jokela 2017; Shire 2015). In a setting where state control is very limited, undeclared informal work is still a persistent phenomenon (e.g., Enste 2019; Nisic and Molitor 2022; OECD 2021) and Shire (2015) has argued that the mini-job scheme coerces some workers to work informally due to its pay limits. The scheme has further been criticized for having created a low-wage sector and failing to provide social security (Jokela 2019; Morel 2015). Care and domestic workers in private homes generally face precarious and nonstandard working conditions, including low pay, irregular hours, and minimal social security (e.g., Farvaque 2013, 2015; Jarrow Insights 2024; Jokela 2019; Manoudi et al. 2018).

As the need for paid care and domestic work grows, market-based solutions including care-work platforms have emerged. These platforms help families and households orga-

nize care and domestic work by connecting workers with those needing help with their (previously) unpaid tasks. Clients can select from a pool of workers, while workers use a low-barrier option to find paid work. The platform businesses typically portray themselves as mere intermediaries (see also Poblete et al. 2024), treating the care and domestic workers as self-employed. As is the case with the platform studied here (see Section 3.1), clients and workers are matched online, and all negotiations occur between the two user parties. Any contractual relationship is solely between the two parties, leading to the various employment forms discussed before: solo self-employment, marginal employment, and undeclared work arrangements.

Several qualitative studies have explored platform-mediated care and domestic workers in Germany. For instance, Niebler and Animento (2023) and Orth (2024) focused on migrant workers in cleaning and delivery work, while Bor (2021) investigated the experiences of cleaners in Berlin, and Gruszka et al. (2024) examined the invisible nature of cleaning work, which is maintained online. These studies addressed various aspects related to platform-mediated cleaners' experiences (by also referring to the gendered and migrant nature of this work), but a systematic documentation is still lacking, and a more comprehensive understanding of this workforce is timely.

3. Material and Methods

3.1. Platform Model

The researchers cooperated with a large, internationally operating care-work platform where a variety of care and domestic services are offered and searched online, including care for children, the elderly or sick, tutoring, domestic tasks (cleaning or gardening), and pet sitting. The platform operates nationwide in Germany but the services are location-based, provided in the town or region where the worker resides and works. The platform business model can be described as a marketplace model, where prospective clients and workers are brought together through the digital interface and can then contact each other (see also Poblete et al. 2024; Ticona et al. 2018 on marketplace models). While anyone with internet access can easily set up a profile and register as a worker or client, the model is also subscription-based, i.e., users have to pay for specific services. Through the on-site messaging system users contact each other and discuss any further steps, including first meetings. As stipulated by terms and conditions, the platform acts as an intermediary between self-employed workers and prospective clients. As such, the platform does not assume responsibility for working conditions or quality of the services and any contractual relationships are solely negotiated between worker and client.

3.2. Standardized Survey Data and Research Cooperation

To better understand the workforce and their motivations, the present study draws on standardized survey data (N = 771) collected in 2019 through an online survey of platform-mediated care and domestic workers. In order to gain access to the relevant population and because accessing the specific worker population on care-work platforms is challenging (see also Orth and Baum 2024), the researchers collaborated with the platform operator. A cooperation agreement was established, stipulating that the survey data were collected and owned by the researchers and would not be shared with the platform operator, who received a report with aggregated findings.

The researchers drafted and discussed the online survey and email invitations with the platform operator. The platform operator then sent out the invitations via email to its workers, who could choose to participate. Participation was incentivized in the following way: participants could enter a lottery to win vouchers for either a paid service from the platform or Amazon vouchers. There was no time limit to complete the survey; respondents took an average of 14 minutes. Methodologically, this study sought access to the entire active worker population on the platform, avoiding reliance on convenience samples. Ethical concerns such as posting "fake" jobs in order to survey workers were avoided. This approach received ethics approval by the researcher's institution.

3.3. Analytic Approach

In order to describe the workforce, univariate distributions of selected sociodemographic variables and workers' motivations to offer their work online were calculated. While the full sample comprises $N = 771$ observations (used for calculating the survey weights), the case numbers for selected sociodemographic variables in Section 4.1 are somewhat lower due to listwise deletion. In order to be able to make more generalizable statements and to counteract non-response bias, the researcher calculated poststratification weights using Stata (see Valliant and Dever 2018). The platform operator provided the population statistics that were used to create the survey weights. Consequently, the weighted data are generalizable to the active workers on the platform at the time in terms of gender, membership status, and childcare provider status (whether or not the worker provided childcare, which was the job most commonly offered). The Supplementary Material (Tables S1 and S2) provides additional statistics including point estimates, their standard errors, and confidence intervals for all univariate distributions presented in Section 4.

In addition, the study examined workers' motivations to use the platform to find work for different subgroups. Survey participants were asked "What are your reasons for providing your services on [platform]?". They were shown a list of various reasons and allowed to choose multiple answers. Their answers were stored as a set of dummy variables, equaling 1 when respondents selected a specific reason and equaling 0 when they did not. In a first step, these motivations were descriptively analyzed by providing weighted univariate distributions for all respondents. The sample reduces substantially to $N = 278$ because only workers who had worked for at least one client in the past eight weeks were asked this question. In a second step, I ran separate (weighted) linear probability models on the set of dependent dummy variables that reflected the various reasons to use the platform. The linear probability model for binary responses allows for an intuitive interpretation of the results in terms of probabilities. The main predictor variable was the care group, i.e., the type of care responsibility workers had (1 = none, 2 = children under 18 who lived in the same household but no other care responsibilities, or 3 = care for others including friends and family but no children under 18; due to low case numbers, the combination of having dependent children and regular care responsibilities for others was not included). In model 1, I examined the association between care groups and the various reasons to use the platform. In model 2, I added other salient sociodemographic characteristics as predictor variables: gender (1 = female, 0 = male), country of origin (1 = born in Germany; 0=born elsewhere), age (1 = younger than 25, 2 = 25–34 years, 3 = 35–44 years, 4 = 45–54 years, 5 = 55 years and older), along with workers' professional qualifications (1 = no professional education, 2 = vocational education, 3 = university degree), and whether they were in paid employment (1 = yes; 0 = no). The sample size of this analytical sample is $N = 257$, including only observations with non-missing information on the variables. Statistical significance was reported at the 5% level ($p < 0.05$).

4. Analyses

4.1. Who Offers Care and Domestic Services Through Platforms?

Similarly to the traditional care and domestic workers—but unlike other platform workers—the studied workforce was also characterized by a high degree of gender segregation and a wide age distribution of predominantly native-born workers. More than 90% of the workers were women, only about one in five workers were born outside Germany (20.6%) and about one in four workers (24.8%) were 55 years and older (see Table S1 in Supplementary Materials for detailed estimates). In this regard, the platform-mediated care workers are similar to the traditional care workforce while constituting a distinct group in the gig economy. Compared to the share of 'foreigners' (individuals without German citizenship) of 12.4% in the German population at the time, the share of foreign-born workers (20.6%) on the platform was higher and more similar to the share of 26% migrants in Germany at the time (Destatis 2020). This share was also similar to the 23.3% marginally employed foreigners under the mini-job scheme in private households in 2019 (Deutsche

Rentenversicherung Knappschaft-Bahn-See 2019). With regard to care responsibilities, my data show the following: More than one in five workers (22.3%) had at least one child under the age of 18 living in their household (the mean age of these children being 9.2 years).[1] One in four workers (25.5%) regularly provided care for a friend or family member. While the proportion of platform-mediated care workers with childcare responsibilities is below the proportion of working parents in Germany overall (around 75% of mothers in Germany pursued paid employment in 2019 (Destatis 2021)), the proportion of platform-mediated care workers with other caring responsibilities is higher than in the general working population (9% in 2017, according to the DGB-Index Gute Arbeit (2018)). Overall, the proportion of platform-mediated care and domestic workers with unpaid care responsibilities is not a majority. However, one in four to five workers faces the challenge of balancing unpaid care and domestic work—often alongside another job as platform work typically is an additional source of income—a finding justifying a closer examination of these workers' motivations below (Section 4.2).

Figure 1 further shows workers' partnership status. Nearly one in three (29.6%) were married or in a civil partnership, a similar proportion of workers were partnered, and the majority were single (41.4%). Consequently, the majority of the workers lived in single households without partners or children under 18 (46.1%). About one in three (31.6%) lived with their partner but without children under 18 in a two-person household. About 9% lived with (a) child(ren) under 18 but without a partner or spouse, and another 13.2% lived with (a) child(ren) under 18 and a partner or spouse.

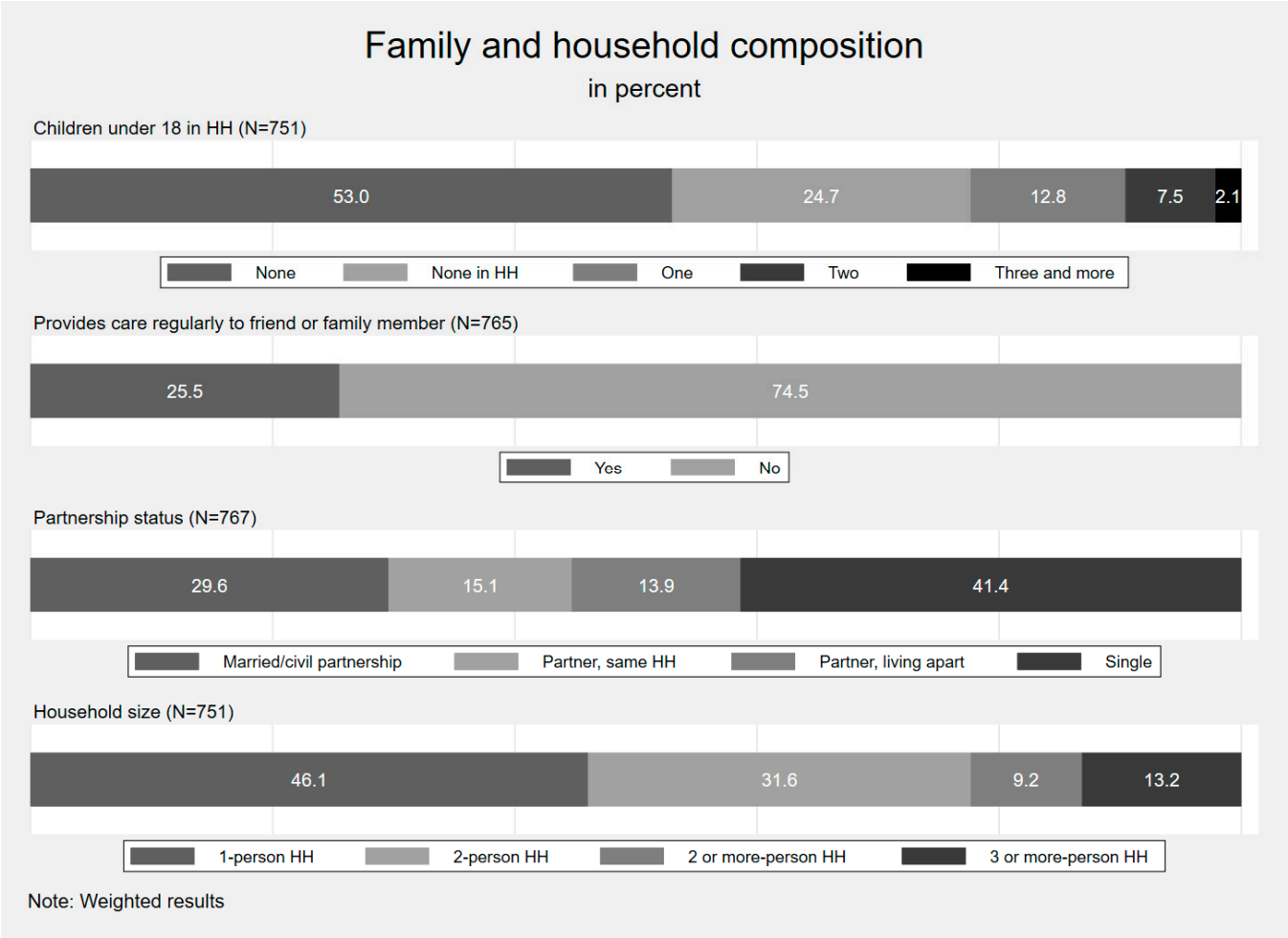


Figure 1. Family and household composition.

Care and domestic work in private homes is often considered low-qualified and low-status work. The results, however, showed that the care and domestic workers were fairly well educated (Figure 2). While the majority of nearly 55% had vocational training, more than one in five had a university degree (21.5%). Out of the remaining ones who did not (yet) have any professional qualifications (22.7%), as many as 45% were still in education (Table S1 in Supplementary Materials). This high level of education is noteworthy in light of the general perception of this work as low-status work that does not require professional skills.

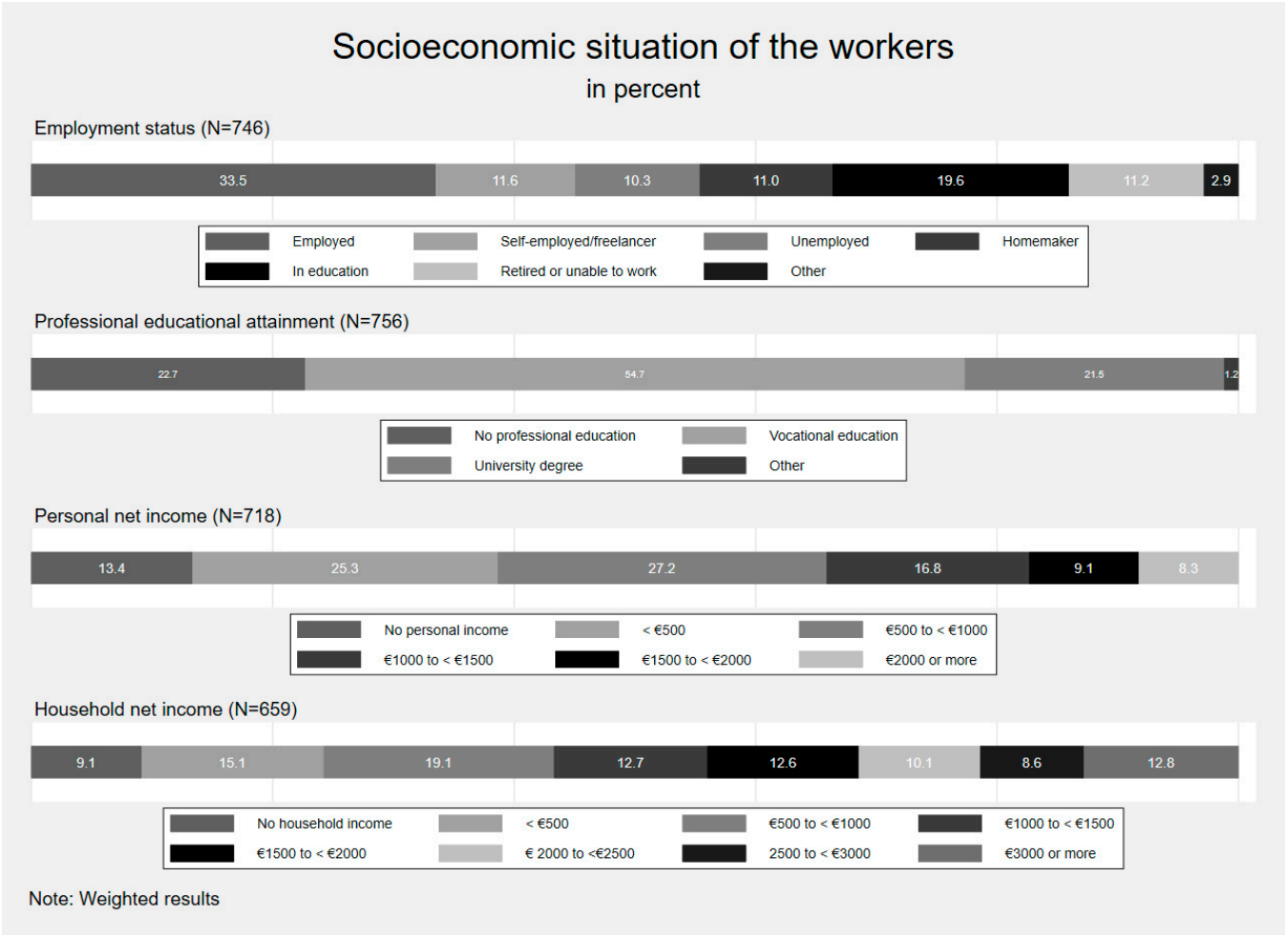


Figure 2. Socioeconomic situation of care and domestic workers.

At the same time, the employment statuses of the workers varied[2]: more than one in three of the care workers were employed full-time or part-time (33.5%). This is particularly noteworthy as for most workers platform work is an additional income rather than a main source of income. These workers face the challenge of juggling paid and unpaid care work alongside another primary job. Almost one in five (19.6%) were still in education (attending university or school or undertaking an apprenticeship). Roughly equal proportions of workers were freelance/self-employed, homemakers, unemployed or retired or unable to work (between 10% and 11.6% for each).

Despite their comparatively high educational levels and different employment statuses overall, both personal and household net income were fairly low: more than half of the workers had a personal net income below EUR 1000 per month. While the workers' household incomes were typically higher than their personal ones, they remained fairly low: more than one in three (34.2%) had a net household income lower than EUR 1000 and only 12.8% had a monthly household income of EUR 3000 or more.

In light of these findings, the focus now shifts to workers' motivations for using the platform to better understand why they are drawn to online-mediated care and domestic jobs.

4.2. What Are Workers' Motivations for Using a Digital Platform?

When asked about their reasons for using the care-work platform, most workers (more than 70%) selected financial ones—the work simply was a way to earn money (Figure 3 below; Table S2 in Supplementary Materials). This suggests a high level of extrinsic motivation among these workers, who often seek an additional income. However, this does not clarify whether or why they chose this work over other alternatives. It appears to be less than a "last resort", as only a clear minority (6.2%) reported choosing to provide their services online due to a lack of options. Notably, 29% did not select monetary reasons, which could imply that they are motivated more by intrinsic or other job-related characteristics.

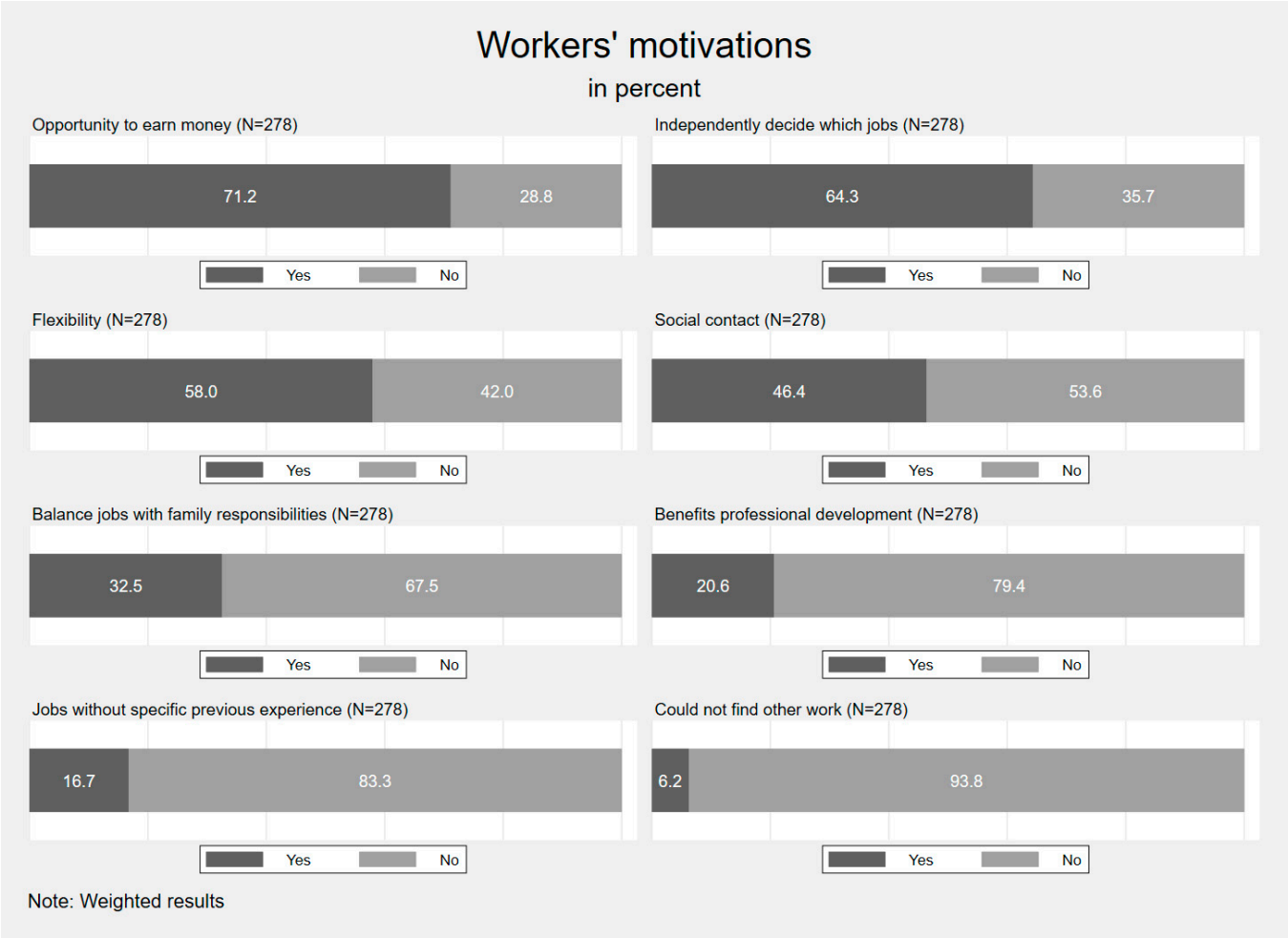


Figure 3. Workers' motivations to use digital care-work platforms.

The second most common reason, which 64.3% of the workers selected, was that they were able to decide independently which jobs to accept or refuse. Many workers (nearly 58%) also appreciated the flexibility associated with this work, in general, as it allowed them to flexibly integrate these jobs into their personal schedules. These findings align with earlier qualitative research, which found that platform-mediated elder carers in Germany highly value the autonomy, time sovereignty, and flexibility provided (e.g., Baum and Kufner 2021).

In addition, for a substantial share of the workers (46.4%), the social contact with people they got to know via the platform was also a reason for using it. This finding is noteworthy as it underscores the intrinsic motivation often observed among care workers: their commitment to caring for others and valuing the relational aspects of this work.

Respondents were also asked specifically about the balance of work and family life. One in three (32.5%) indicated that platform work helped them to "balance the jobs with [my] family responsibilities." This finding is particularly noteworthy, since platform work has been (critically) discussed with respect to the reconciliation of paid work and family life (see e.g., Glavin et al. 2024; James 2024). Given the earlier finding that a substantial proportion of workers experience a double burden (which might be further exacerbated by holding another main job), the study will further explore the relationship between different care responsibilities and worker motivations in the next sections. Lastly, less commonly selected reasons were professional development and the fact that jobs could be taken on without specific qualifications. Interestingly, one in five considered the work relevant for gaining work experience to advance their careers. Another 17% chose the platform because they were seeking work that did not require prior experience.

Motivations of workers with children and other care responsibilities:

While earlier studies specifically cited monetary aspects and flexibility as important motivations for platform workers, the present study additionally asked specifically about care-related reasons and responsibilities. To further explore the relationship between care responsibilities and various reasons for using the platform, I first added the different care groups to the model to predict the various reasons for using the platform (model 1). In a second step, I further added other salient worker characteristics (model 2) along with the care groups in order to explore differences between important groups of workers.

Importantly, there were noteworthy and statistically significant group differences in selecting the following reasons for using the platform: that the work was an "an opportunity to earn money", that workers could "balance the jobs with [my] family responsibilities", that "working on [platform] benefits my professional development", and that workers "could not find other work". Because the case numbers (and cell numbers) were very low and the estimates had large confidence intervals, the results should, however, be interpreted very cautiously. Figure 4 displays the coefficients for the distinct care groups. For details on all other predictors included in model 2, please refer to Tables S3–S10 in the Supplementary Materials.

As shown in panel 1 in Figure 4, workers with children under 18 selected the reason to be undertaking this work for monetary reasons significantly less often than workers without any care responsibilities at all in both models. Those with children were 29% less likely to be using the platform for monetary reasons than the reference group, who were workers without any care responsibilities (model 1). When accounting for other worker characteristics in model 2, this probability declined to 23%. With respect to earning money as a primary motivation, workers who had other care responsibilities for friends or family members did not differ from those without any care responsibilities. Monetary reasons were equally important to these two groups. Including other worker characteristics in model 2 revealed that workers in paid employment were 19% less likely to report monetary reasons for pursuing platform work than those who were not in paid employment (Table S3 in Supplementary Materials).

As shown in panel 2 in Figure 4, those with care responsibilities were more likely to provide their services online because they can "balance the jobs with [my] family responsibilities" than those without care responsibilities. For both care groups—those with children and those with other care responsibilities—there was a positive relationship. In model 1, this association was only statistically significant for those with children (who were 25% more likely to choose this reason than those without care responsibilities), while it was significant for those with children (who were 23% more likely to choose this reason than the reference group) and for those with other care responsibilities (who were 19% more likely to choose this reason) in model 2. The balance of paid work and family life was an important

motivation for workers with unpaid care responsibilities, who were more likely than those without caring responsibilities to select this reason. This finding is not entirely surprising as workers without strong family obligations do not need to prioritize balancing paid and unpaid care work. However, it suggests that those with caregiving responsibilities might specifically choose this type of work because it (seems to) allow(s) workers to combine these two roles. If this balance is actually realized in these jobs is, however, a different question. Additionally, I ran another analysis for "work-family balance" by changing the reference group to those with children, allowing for a direct comparison between workers with different care responsibilities (results available upon request). I did not find statistically significant differences, implying that both groups similarly chose and valued perceived work–life balance. Lastly, workers aged 45 years and older and those aged between 25 and 34 years were significantly more likely to select this reason than those who were younger than 25 years (Table S5 in Supplementary Materials).

With regard to professional development through this work (panel 3 in Figure 4), the findings showed that workers with children under 18 years living in the same household were 15% less likely to select this reason compared to those without care responsibilities (statistically significant in model 2). Although the coefficients for workers with other care responsibilities showed a positive sign, this relationship was not statistically significant in either model (Table S6 in Supplementary Materials).

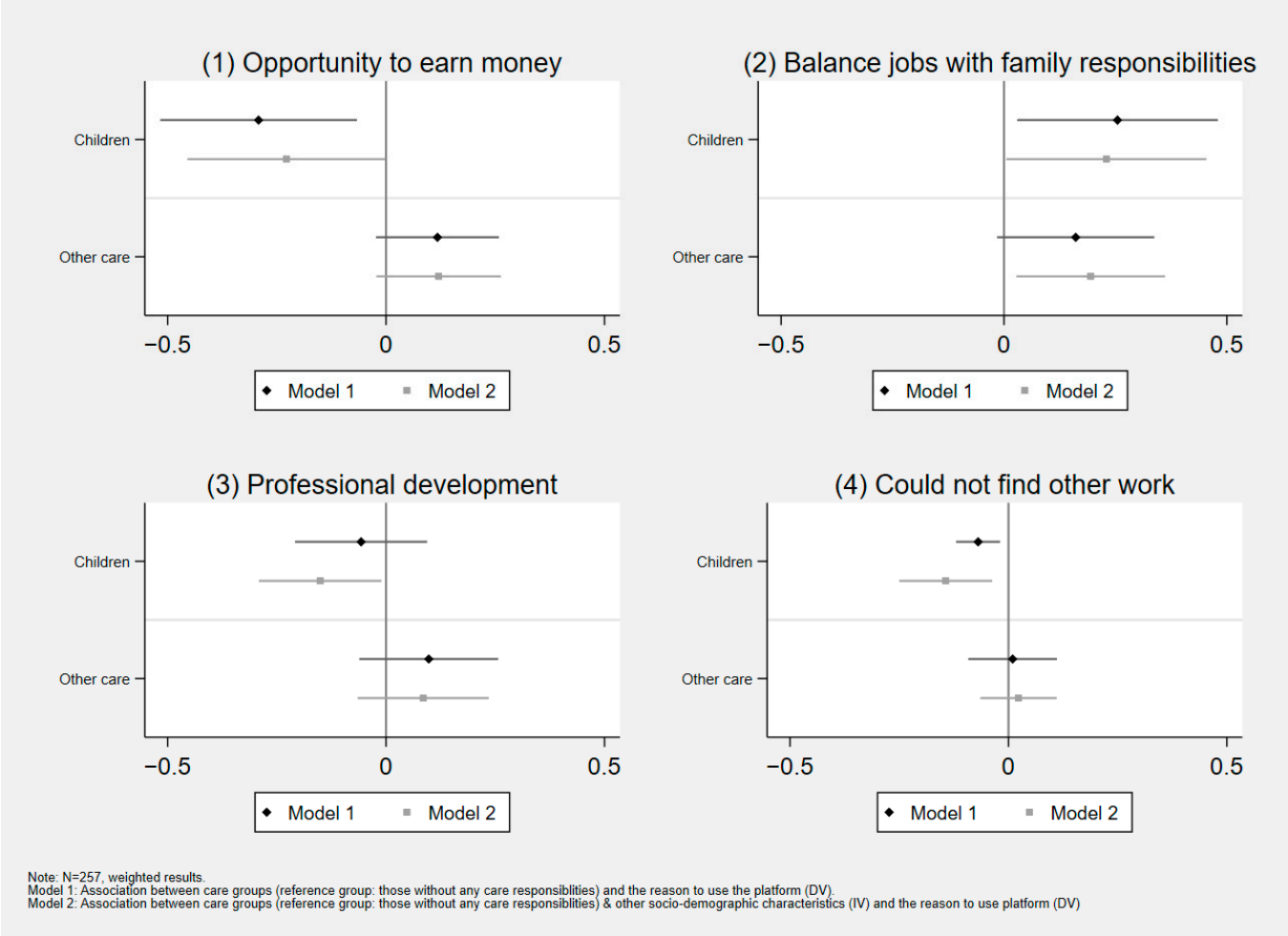


Figure 4. Coefficient plot.

Lastly, workers who lived with their children (under 18 years) were less likely to select the reason "could not find other work" than those without any care responsibilities at all (panel 4 in Figure 4). Workers with children were 14% less likely than the reference group to say that they could not find other work, when adjusting for various sociodemographic characteristics in model 2. Interestingly, there were only positive coefficients for the various age groups: older workers were more likely to choose they "could not find other work" than workers under 25. This was statistically significant for the age groups between 25 and 34 and 35 and 44 years (Table S10 in Supplementary Materials).

The different care groups did not significantly differ in selecting the reason that jobs could well be integrated into their personal schedules (Table S4 in Supplementary Materials). This suggests that all workers, regardless of care responsibilities, value general work flexibility equally. Not only those with unpaid care responsibilities but also other worker groups prioritize flexibility. This finding aligns with previous studies, which have identified flexibility as a primary motivation for platform-mediated care workers in Germany (Baum and Kufner 2021; Bor 2021), and it also aligns with findings on platform workers more generally (see Section 2.2). The results further showed that workers aged 25 to 34 years were significantly more likely to select this reason than workers under 25. Those with tertiary education were 26% more likely to choose this reason than those without professional qualifications. Counterintuitively, workers who were in paid employment were 24% less likely to select this reason than those who were not in paid employment.

Lastly, there was a positive relationship between workers' age and the reason that "It is important to me to be able to decide independently which jobs to accept or refuse": older age groups (25–34 and those aged 45 and older) were more likely to select this reason than those younger than 25 years (Table S7 in Supplementary Materials).

In summary, the coefficients for those with children under 18 in Figure 4 are negative, except in panel 2. Workers with children are less likely to select "money", "professional development", or "could not find other work" than those without care responsibilities. In contrast, the coefficients for workers with other care responsibilities are consistently positive, though not statistically significant. The exception is panel 2 where both groups—those with children and those with other care responsibilities—have positive and significant coefficients, indicating a greater probability of selecting the "balance of jobs with family responsibilities" compared to those without any care responsibilities. These results suggest that both care groups may differ in their decision-making rationale and their needs regarding paid and unpaid work. Other important subgroup differences were found for the various age groups. Comparatively older workers were more likely to select job independence and the balance between paid work and family life as motivations compared to workers under 25.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The present study has sought to characterize a new group of workers using digital platforms to offer and find care and domestic work in Germany. Addressing a lack of systematic analyses, it empirically contributes to the literature by analyzing workers' sociodemographic characteristics and motivations. By offering initial estimates, this research enhances a more comprehensive understanding of this workforce.

Data were collected in 2019 on one of the largest platforms in this sector. Using weighted survey data, the findings are generalizable to the platform's active worker population in Germany at the time. However, the sample (and findings) is limited to one platform, and the results—particularly in Section 4.2—are tentative and based on small sample sizes, requiring cautious interpretation. As platform workers often use multiple platforms to find work, these findings may bear relevance for care workers on other platforms.

Although the data were collected pre-pandemic, I argue that they remain relevant. While the pandemic significantly impacted workers at its peak (ILO 2021), it appears to have been exceptional circumstances. For example, Poblete et al. (2024) found that

working conditions for platform-mediated cleaners in Argentina have "largely normalized" to pre-COVID levels. However, collecting more recent data and comparing these findings would be valuable. Further research across platforms and country contexts is also needed to develop a more comprehensive picture.

Overall, the descriptive results revealed that platform-mediated care and domestic workers in Germany share similarities with both traditional care and domestic workers, as well as with other platform workers. Like traditional care and domestic work, gender segregation is prevalent, and workers exhibit a heterogenous age structure. The share of foreign-born workers was similar to the share of foreigners under the mini-job scheme in private households in Germany at the time; yet it was lower than expected from studies on platform work, suggesting that the notion of platform work as "predominantly migrant labor" (Van Doorn et al. 2023, p. 1099) might not hold true across all platform contexts.

Going beyond gender and migrant background, which are frequently discussed in the literature, this study further examined workers' family and household constellations. Most workers were single, had no children, and lived in one-person households. This aligns with findings on platform workers more generally but contrasts with studies on traditional care and domestic workers, as well as platform-mediated cleaners in South Africa or Argentina (Hunt et al. 2019; Poblete et al. 2023, 2024).

Importantly, an important share of the platform-mediated care and domestic workers faced a double burden of unpaid care responsibilities and paid care work, potentially reinforced by the fact that their platform work is often only an additional income. This also suggests a shift towards "double informalities": these workers are unpaid (informal) care givers at home while also engaging in potentially informal (undeclared) paid care and domestic work (see e.g., Poblete et al. 2024 on informal working arrangements). Since paid care and domestic work in private homes often remains undeclared, these workers might enter a new type of informality through platform work, enabling them to maintain their unpaid care responsibilities at home. Future research could explore the extent to which platform-mediated care and domestic work is informally organized (i.e., undeclared), and how workers with unpaid care commitments navigate between paid and unpaid forms of care and domestic work—possibly alongside another main job—to better understand the implications of this "double informality".

Another important aspect studied was the workers' socioeconomic situation. Although care and domestic work in private homes is often considered low-skilled work, most workers have a relatively high level of professional education. This aligns with what is generally observed for platform workers, and it has been argued that those with higher skills and education might be better prepared to navigate the digital world and possess digital skills (e.g., Poblete et al. 2024). Despite their education, their incomes were relatively low, highlighting the importance of platform work as a means to earn money.

In light of these findings, this study further explored workers' motivations for using the platform to find work. Consistent with other studies on platform work in general and platform-cleaners in Berlin (Bor 2021), most workers used the platform to earn money. Other important reasons included the desire for independence in choosing jobs and the flexibility associated with them, consistent with research by Baum and Kufner (2021) on elderly care takers in the German platform economy. These motivations are also similar to those of other platform workers more generally.

When examining these motivations across different sociodemographic groups, the study identified significant differences among age groups and workers with different care responsibilities, which are important factors to consider in future research. Notably, monetary reasons were less important for workers living with children compared to those without care responsibilities. In contrast, workers with children and workers with other care responsibilities were more likely to value the balance of paid work and family life. Interestingly, there were no significant differences in how workers with different types of care responsibilities valued job flexibility; it appears that general job flexibility is equally valued by all workers, regardless of their unpaid family commitments. The results also

suggest potentially different decision-making rationales among workers with different care responsibilities, as the coefficients of those with children and those with other care responsibilities largely moved in opposite directions. While this study provides insights into the motivational structures of platform-mediated care and domestic workers, future research could explore the extent to which these motivations can also be realized.

Supplementary Materials: The following supporting information can be downloaded at: https://www.mdpi.com/article/10.3390/socsci13120668/s1, Table S1: Sociodemographic and socioeconomic statistics (weighted estimates); Table S2: Worker motivations (weighted estimates); Tables S3–S10: Linear probability models.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: Data collection was approved by the Ethics Commission of the WZB Berlin Social Science Center (protocol code 2019/3/70, date of approval 11 June 2019).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this article are not readily available because the dataset includes proprietary data.

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Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] Age of the youngest child was used when respondents had several children under 18 in their household.

[2] The survey item asked about respondents' current main activity and included all categories shown in Figure 2, such as full-time and part-time employment (combined as "employed"), being in education, etc. (see also Table S1 in the Supplementary Materials).

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