



The 'Platformisation' of Domestic Work in South Africa:

A Shift Towards Marginal Formalisation and Deepening Informalisation of Domestic Work Employment

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Abstract

Digital platform technologies have brought about a new labour form in the occupation of domestic work, in which domestic cleaning work is now being managed and organised virtually through an online platform, or 'app', operated by private technology companies and provided to householders on a convenient and on-demand basis. This paper analyses the emerging impact of this new form of 'platform domestic work' in South Africa's domestic sector using an interpretivist case study done in Cape Town on ten platform domestic workers and

their platform companies. Using evidence obtained through in-depth interviews and analysis of published company discourse material, this paper argues that far from formalising and modernising domestic work through the twin forces of commercialisation and digital platform technology, the phenomenon of platform domestic work is deepening informalisation in paid domestic work as a form of insecure 'gig work', and also through the widespread practice of platform leakage by domestic workers on the platform.

Introduction

Digital platform technology has entered the paid domestic services market and is creating a new labour form in the domestic sector that can be referred to as 'platform domestic work'. Platform domestic work is a term I use to refer to commercial domestic work that is organised through internet-based digital platforms or mobile phone applications ('apps'). By commercial domestic work, I mean the form of domestic work whereby domestic workers' labour is directed and controlled, whether directly or indirectly, by a private company for commercial gain (Neetha, 2008). The company in this work arrangement derives a profit from the domestic worker's labour and typically provides the worker with access to a large customer base (Mendez, 1998; Anderson and Hughes, 2010).

Platform domestic work is a form of commercial domestic work where a platform-owning company (henceforth referred to as 'platform company') employs domestic workers as independent contractors to provide short-term cleaning services to its customers through its digital platform technology, and profits from the exchange. The service exchange between the platform domestic worker and the customer is organised through the digital platform, and allows for the instant matching of workers with customers in need of their cleaning services within a specified geographical location (Hunt and Machingura, 2016; Madden, 2015).

The takeover and restructuring of economic and social exchanges by digital platforms in the last decade or so have prompted the creation of what scholars term a 'platform economy', or a 'digital economy', where new digitally-based forms of work and commerce have emerged (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Vallas and Schor, 2020; ILO, 2021). Platform domestic work is therefore also a form of platform-based work in the platform economy that falls under the platform work category of 'gig work' or 'gig economy work' because it is a short-term, digitally organised form of service work.

As internet-based structures enable communication and economic exchanges, digital platforms are used by platform companies to either usurp and transform existing markets or create entirely new platform-based markets of their own (Vallas and Schor, 2020). In the home services market, the former is true: digital

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platforms that are being provided and run by platform companies are transforming already existing informal independent domestic work (or 'char') into a new commercialised and platformised form of domestic work. Platform domestic work, therefore, represents the platformisation of domestic work and it is the latest employment trend in paid domestic work that is building upon decades-long structural shifts from full-time employment to part-time work, self-employment, and employment through private agencies (see Salzinger, 1997; Ehrenreich, 2003; Rio, 2005; Neetha, 2008; Ally, 2009; Anderson and Hughes, 2010).

The platformisation of domestic work is a crucial issue that merits attention and critical study as we strive for better working conditions and decent work for domestic workers in South Africa and beyond. Studies on platform domestic work are slowly emerging, although much of the literature on commercial domestic work is lacking and in need of development. This is especially true for the domestic sector in the South African context. As platform domestic work takes hold successfully in the domestic sector, its transformation of the paid domestic work sector will have a significant impact on how domestic work is experienced by workers, and on the efforts and gains made toward formalisation and the reduction of exploitative employment practices in the South African domestic work sector (Hunt and Samman, 2020).

Based on evidence from a qualitative case study conducted on a select group of platform domestic workers and their platform company in Cape Town, I argue that while the platformisation of domestic work in South Africa does represent the formalisation and 'modernisation' of domestic work through commercialisation and technology, it is also deepening the occurrence of informality in employment relations of the South African domestic work sector. This adds further challenges to the discourse around the potential virtues of the commercialisation of domestic work as a modernising force in the occupation (Du Toit, 2013; Mendez, 1998; Ehrenreich, 2003). It also adds to the growing literature in South Africa about domestic workers' experiences of gig work in the platform economy.

In the sections that follow, this paper first discusses the methodology used in the case study of the selected group of platform domestic workers and their platform company 'SweepSouth' in Cape Town, South Africa. Next, the paper discusses the literature on the commercialisation and formalisation of domestic work and then compares it to the author's own findings about platform domestic work employment. The paper then moves into a discussion about the implications of the platformisation of domestic work for employment relations in the sector and concludes with further recommendations and the possible interventions needed.

Methodology

To better understand the emerging trends in domestic work's platformisation in South Africa, an interpretivist case study was conducted on a group of platform domestic workers in Cape Town, that had experience working under the popular South African platform domestic company 'SweepSouth'. The main objective of the case study was to uncover the ways in which this form of domestic work is structured and workers' subjective interpretations and experiences of platform domestic work as a new labour form in the domestic sector.

Semi-structured interviews with ten platform domestic workers and one expert interview with a SADSAWU union representative were conducted. A snowball sampling approach was used to select participants for this study. I identified and recruited

workers to interview in a variety of ways: through the platform itself as a service requester, through participants' recommendations of other interested parties, and through personal contacts and university colleagues. The resultant sample was a mix of both current and former platform domestic workers from SweepSouth.

Interview data collected were supplemented with extensive document research on SweepSouth that involved the collection and analysis of the company's published information such as its annual reports, terms and conditions documents, company website content, and publicly available interviews given by the company's CEO through various media forums such as news podcasts and several YouTube video interviews and presentations.

The Covid-19 pandemic and mandatory lockdown regulations in South Africa posed a significant challenge to the methodology of this study in that it made identifying and conducting interviews with participants difficult. Telephonic interviews had to be adopted in place of in-person interviewing to match social distancing rules and requirements. Attempts were also made to secure interviews with SweepSouth representatives but these were unsuccessful due to the company citing time constraints and Covid-19 disruptions as hindering factors.

Commercialising domestic work for better working conditions

Paid domestic work is an old occupation that traces its roots to practices of slavery, indentured servitude, and colonialism (ILO, 2010; Ally, 2009; Cock, 1980). It is an occupation that is described as 'pre-modern' in many ways because it is still a highly exploitative occupation, predominantly done by marginalised groups, mainly lower-class women, in informal and unprotected employment (ILO, 2010; Coser, 1973). It has been argued that the source of domestic workers' exploitation problem lies in the informal, private, and personalised character of the domestic work employment relationship, which makes it an occupation of servitude (ILO, 2010; Coser, 1973). The assumption, therefore, is that commercialising and bureaucratising domestic work employment will effectively formalise, rationalise, and depersonalise the employment relationship and hence allow for better

working conditions for domestic workers (Meagher, 2002; Mendez, 1998; Devetter and Rousseau, 2009).

Commercialisation as a modernising force in the occupation of domestic work is what many for-profit home services agencies or companies also use as part of their marketing discourse (Meagher, 1997; Mendez, 1998). Modernisation through commercialisation has also been a policy adopted by some governments, most notably in Europe, to 'industrialise' domestic work and provide employment using a variety of policy interventions that are meant to subsidise the financial and administrative costs of employing domestic workers (Devetter and Rousseau, 2009; Pérez and Stallhaert, 2016). In South Africa, policy interventions have sought to modernise domestic work mainly through the extension of employment and social rights to domestic workers (Ally, 2009; Fish, 2006). As a result, there has not been a direct or explicit policy initiative aimed at modernisation through the marketisation of care.

Private companies in the domestic sector have been rapidly growing in South Africa despite this lack of explicit marketisation policy intervention in the country's domestic work sector. This has led some scholars to argue that the formalisation initiatives by the state have not only extended rights to domestic workers in South Africa but have also created the demand for third-party agencies amongst householders that are better positioned to handle the growing administrative costs of hiring a domestic worker that has accrued because of formalisation (Tame, 2018; Du Toit, 2013). The continuing lack of a socialised, public care regime in South Africa also means that care services continue to be a private matter for households, that can only be addressed through the market or as a familial responsibility, thereby creating opportunity for private enterprise in the sector (Ally, 2009).

While it is difficult to estimate the number of domestic workers that are employed by agencies in South Africa, observations and research shows that agencies are becoming significant employers in the domestic work sector. SweepSouth alone claimed to have reached a milestone of 20,000 domestic workers working through its platform in the year 2020 (SweepSouth, 2020a). This shows that many domestic workers are turning to commercial agencies for

work opportunities in South Africa. Agencies can be divided into either direct service providers of home services, including home cleaning and other home maintenance-related services, or they can be classified as recruitment and placement service providers that are involved in the brokering of domestic workers to be privately employed by householders (Tame, 2018; Devetter and Rousseau, 2009). Direct home services providers enter into an employment relationship with domestic workers while recruitment and placement agencies do not. However, what they have in common is that they often assume the role of mediators in the triangular employment relationship between the householder, the domestic worker and themselves. Meagher (2002: 56) uses this fact to argue that what distinguishes agency-provided domestic work from informal domestic work is the existence of this third party in the employment relationship, creating a distinction between a 'mediated' and an 'unmediated' domestic work employment relationship.

Studies on the experiences of domestic workers in 'mediated' domestic work employment provided by commercial agencies are still eclipsed by those focusing on 'unmediated' and often informal domestic work employment between the 'madam' and the 'maid' (Du Toit, 2013; Devetter and Rousseau, 2009; Farris, 2020). Studies that report on workers' experiences of mediated domestic work that is commercialised and bureaucratised have mostly been conducted in the global North, with only a few studies emerging in South Africa in recent years. Since agencies in the domestic sector operate as either direct home service providers or as recruiters for placements, domestic workers' experiences will vary depending on their employment relationship with the type of agency they use.

Formalising the hiring of domestic workers using contracts and the legal registration of domestic workers seems to be the most obvious and important contribution of agencies in the sector (Tame, 2018; Meagher, 2002; Du Toit, 2013). Because of this, agency workers in the domestic sector have a better chance of obtaining employment rights, protections, and benefits from their employment than those in informal domestic work (Du Toit, 2013; Tame, 2018). This benefit is mostly observed among domestic workers hired by direct home service-providing agencies that enter an employment relationship

with their domestic workers, thereby entitling them to employment benefits and protections (Du Toit, 2013; Devetter and Rousseau, 2009). Agencies as employers of domestic workers are also observed to be more likely to seek to professionalise domestic work by training and upskilling domestic workers as employees of the enterprise (Devetter and Rousseau, 2009; Du Toit, 2013).

Studies also show that agencies as ‘mediators’ in the triangular employment relationship between workers and household employers do reduce the maltreatment of workers by mediating the service interaction between the worker and the householder (Meagher, 2002). However, this is again mostly observed in studies of direct home service-providing agencies where the companies often appoint ‘middle managers’ to oversee the service provision and to interact with the customer or householder on the worker’s behalf (Du Toit, 2013; Ehrenreich, 2003). Under this arrangement, the workload can also be better regulated through a service contract that highlights the terms of service, thereby reducing incidences of overworking and performing a ‘diffuse and non-specific servant role’ for the customer (Du Toit, 2013; Devetter and Rousseau, 2009; Coser, 1973: 32). Agencies also depersonalise domestic work employment relationships by reducing workers’ reliance on a single household employer for their livelihood (Du Toit, 2013). Recruitment and placement agencies are the most important in this regard because they assist workers in navigating better employment opportunities more easily than they can through informal networks of friends, family, and acquaintances (Tame, 2018).

Despite these positive benefits of commercialised domestic work, the literature also points to the negative side of agency-provided domestic work. Most significantly, studies show that while agencies are an important formal employment-making vehicle in the sector, wages remain low and part-time work is the prevailing employing practice, leading to severe cases of underemployment among commercial domestic workers (Farris, 2020; Pérez and Stallhaert, 2016; Devetter and Rousseau, 2009). Placement fees charged by recruitment and placement agencies have also been criticised as added costs to domestic workers seeking work, who often must register with multiple agencies to increase their chances of finding good matches with clients (Anderson, 2000). Others

have also taken a critical view of agencies’ tendency to commodify workers’ labour by adopting a unitarist management principle that is hostile towards trade unionism, and their problematic marketing practices to customers which often reinforce gender and racial stereotypes and misrepresentations about domestic workers and their occupation (Du Toit, 2013; Devetter and Rousseau, 2009; Tame, 2018; Maher, 2004).

These debates highlight the challenge of commercialised domestic work and offer a critical background for us to evaluate the latest iteration of this trend through digital platform technologies. The next section presents emerging insights about the experience of the platform-driven formalisation of domestic work and workers’ responses to this process, using findings from the case study of the popular South African platform SweepSouth and its platform domestic workers in Cape Town.

Formalising domestic work through digital platforms? An overview of emerging findings

In the platform economy, several forms of labour and employment relationships exist. I use the typology of platform workers presented by Vallas and Schor (2020) in their discussion of platform economy and platform-based work. According to this typology, workers in the platform economy can be divided into two broad categories of workers: the creators of the platform, and those workers that approach the platform as ‘users’

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to find short-term work opportunities or 'gigs' (Vallas and Schor, 2020: 276). Workers that are the creators of the platform include the platform's founders and CEOs, its architects, and designers. These workers tend to be limited in numbers, are employees of the platform, and oversee the setting of working conditions on the platform for other workers as users of the platform to follow. This category of labour in the platform economy is also highly skilled, and performs high-end, and innovative work as 'venture labour' or 'entrepreneurial labour' that is highly paid as observed in the literature (Neff, 2012; Neff, Wissinger and Zukin, 2005; Kenney and Zysman, 2019). Workers that are users of digital platforms are in a much higher supply than platform creators and are also quite diverse (Vallas and Schor, 2020). The kind of work they receive from the platform is regarded as 'gig work' because it is short-term, flexible, and non-standard in nature (De Ruyter and Brown, 2019). These workers are part of a 'gig economy', working as independent contractors exchanging their services for a fee from customers on the platform (Rogers, 2015; Prassl, 2018; De Stefano, 2016; ILO, 2018). Gig work can either be location-based, where it is performed in-person in a specified geographic location such as with home services work, ride-hailing, and delivery; or it can be cloud-based work performed by freelancers online offering a variety of professional services to customers from anywhere in the world (De Stefano, 2016; ILO, 2018). SweepSouth's Platform domestic workers are 'users' of digital platforms, and therefore fall into the category of location-based gig workers.

Like other platform companies offering gig work in the platform economy, platform domestic work companies such as SweepSouth are operating an open-employment model that allows the platform to expand access to work for thousands of domestic workers at a time (Vallas and Schor, 2020). The platform is not liable for employment-related costs for domestic workers and can therefore engage an unlimited number of domestic workers as desired, with SweepSouth reporting to have reached the milestone of 20,000 domestic workers working through their platform in 2020 (SweepSouth, 2020a).

Easy access to work opportunities is certainly a positive for domestic workers because the domestic sector is a significant employer of women in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2022). There are an

estimated 823,000 female domestic workers in South Africa (Statistics South Africa, 2022), and the dominant profile of domestic workers in South Africa remains that of lower-class, Black African women, and increasingly migrant workers from rural areas of South Africa, neighbouring countries and elsewhere in the continent where there's socioeconomic strife (Tame, 2018; Gama and Willemse, 2015; Fish, 2006; Ally, 2009). Therefore, platform domestic work as a large-scale job creator in the domestic sector is bringing employment relief to many marginalised women in South Africa.

Platform domestic workers as users of digital platforms are classified as independently contracting domestic workers by their platform companies (see SweepSouth, 2020b). Rather than an employer of domestic workers, SweepSouth platform's CEO describes the company's digital platform as a marketplace where domestic workers and those purchasing their services are in a customer-vendor relationship with each other. The CEO's reasoning is as follows:

So, SweepSouth is a marketplace. We deal with domestic workers on the one hand, and clients on the other hand, and we are really passionate about offering value to both sides of the marketplace (CEO Aisha Pandor, YouTube Presentation 02 August 2017).

Independent domestic workers as sellers of a service are not new to the occupation of paid domestic work. 'Chars' or 'independents' have been documented across the literature to be self-employed domestic workers working for multiple households at a time and charging a service fee based on a work-by-task arrangement with each customer (Anderson and Hughes, 2010; Ally, 2009; Rio, 2005; Ehrenreich, 2003). Contrary to the platform-based independent domestic work offered by platform companies like SweepSouth, 'traditional' independent domestic work is often done by domestic workers working informally on their own (Rio, 2005). Digital platform domestic workers, however, are independent domestic workers in formal work with a formally registered company that is organising and supervising their labour even though they are not employees of the platform, nor are they employees of the customer requesting their short-term services on the platform (SweepSouth,

2020b). This is a critical problem and the South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) identifies it as the main disadvantage of platform domestic work. Gloria Kente, a SADSAWU organiser and union representative, outlines this problem as follows:

Yes, it is good because now workers can get a job for themselves, they can go on that 'app' and apply for a job. But our main problem is they are not going to get a UIF, they are not going to get the benefits when they are pregnant, do you understand? Because they don't have one employer, they work three hours here, and they must move, on the same day, to another employer, and another employer. So, who is going to be the employer of these four people? That is the main thing that we want to sit down and talk about it, that at least the domestic workers must benefit from the rights of domestic workers in South Africa. (Gloria Kente, Interview 08 June 2021).

This exclusion of platform domestic workers from legislated employment and social security protections due to their vague employment status on the platform is an issue that is of crucial concern (Sibiya and Du Toit, 2022; Hunt and Machingura, 2016). South Africa has one of the most extensive labour rights and protections for domestic workers, including independent domestic workers and those in part time work through Sectoral Determination 7 of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act (BCEA), but in this new triangular platform domestic work employment model, these are rendered mostly unattainable for platform domestic workers.

Despite this exposure to the harsh realities of self-employment, platform domestic workers in South Africa are utilizing the platform in record numbers according to SweepSouth. The findings regarding their approaches to platform domestic work raise the concern that these employment models may intensify informality in the domestic sector, which contrasts with platform domestic work companies' rhetoric about modernising informal domestic work arrangements using digital technologies. The platform domestic work company SweepSouth identifies its mission on its website and in public interviews given by its CEO, Aisha Pandor, to be to 'modernise'

domestic work through its platform technology and address informality and the maltreatment of domestic workers (Pandor, 2017). The excerpt below is taken from one such interview by the CEO regarding the platform company's mission in the informal domestic work market:

We also realised that the industry was very, very old school. It had not progressed probably since democracy. I mean some people didn't even have contracts and people were still being treated very badly. In short, we saw a big problem and thought to try and solve it through technology and by building an app and a platform that would help people get access to decent work at good rates (SweepSouth CEO Aisha Pandor Interview, cited in Mkele, 2020).

The company, therefore, believes that through digital platform technology, domestic work employment relations can be formalised and decent work extended to domestic workers in South Africa. Such an important mission should be weighed against platform domestic workers' actual reported experiences on the platform. As already stated, the SweepSouth platform allows for the instant matching of domestic workers with customers in need of their services. It has therefore proven itself to be a large-scale job creator in the domestic sector because it is providing workers easy and instant access to a large pool of customers in need of domestic cleaning services (Sibiya and Du Toit, 2022). It is not surprising then that platform domestic workers interviewed cited unemployment and the easy access to a reliable supply of work opportunities on the platform to be the main reason for joining the SweepSouth platform:

I recommend it [SweepSouth] a hundred percent because it's reliable! if you want to do something you can go to SweepSouth! (Tatenda, Interview 26 May 2021).

Of the ten platform domestic workers interviewed, six had prior experience as informal domestic workers in private households before joining the platform while the rest were new entrants to the domestic sector through the platform. None of the platform domestic workers interviewed had experience in informal 'char' or informal independent domestic work.

Table 1: Participants' work histories prior to becoming platform domestic workers

Pseudonym	Type of job before working for SweepSouth
Lucia	Beauty therapist
Sarah	Retail employee
Patricia	Live-in domestic work
Nosipho	Live-out domestic work
Sindi	Live-out domestic work
Buhle	Live-out domestic work
Rose	Live-in domestic work
Linda	Receptionist
Tatenda	Informal trader
Angela	Live-out domestic worker

Platform domestic workers, therefore, reported experiencing difficulties and frustration with adjusting to the job of being an 'independent contractor' in the domestic sector. Difficulty adjusting to the service demands and personalities of different platform-provided customers each day and the exhaustion from extensive travelling to multiple customer locations was raised as a regular issue. The interview responses below capture these adjustment difficulties to independent domestic work that workers experience:

In a private family, they tell you the first day that they want you to do 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, and then that's your daily routine. But with SweepSouth, you meet different people and every day you go to a different person, and they want different things to be done (Nosipho, Interview 16 May 2021).

I advise people to go there, but SweepSouth, wow it's too much! It's too much! It's never the same, today you'll be going to a two-bedroom house or two-bedroom flat, but then tomorrow, you'll be going to an eight-bedroom place. So sometimes you are so tired and you're late, and when you're late, they don't understand! (Sindi, Interview 18 May 2021).

Adjusting to the demands of 'self-employment' as independent domestic workers on the platform servicing multiple customers in differing locations and with differing service requests can be a difficult and costly adjustment for platform domestic workers doing independent domestic work for the first time in their careers. Connected to this adjustment difficulty was the finding that platform domestic workers are using the platform as a 'networking tool' to gain access to more regular customers to work offline, under informal and self-negotiated working conditions. The literature on platform work calls this practice 'platform leakage' and most platform domestic workers interviewed were found to be engaging in platform leakage alongside work provided by the platform (See Nhleko and Tame, 2023).

Table 2: Participants' reported participation in 'platform leakage'

Pseudonym	Currently a platform domestic worker	Sourcing private clients from the platform ('platform leakage')
Lucia	No	Yes
Sarah	Yes	No
Patricia	Yes	Yes
Nosipho	No	Yes
Sindi	Yes	Yes
Buhle	No	Yes
Rose	Yes	Yes
Linda	Yes	No
Tatenda	Yes	Yes
Angela	Yes	Yes

Platform leakage occurs when platform workers and customers on the platform opt to conduct their service exchange outside of the platform once matched (He et al., 2020). Platform leakage has been observed to be due to a variety of reasons such as the desire by platform customers and gig workers to avoid platform service fees, augment incomes for the worker, and the desire to secure regular service exchanges with

a trusted worker or customer from the platform (He et al., 2020; Madden, 2015). A similar reasoning and motivation for engaging in platform leakage were observed among SweepSouth's platform domestic workers. Platform domestic workers in this case study explained that platform leakage was always initiated by customers on the platform and that it made it possible for them to negotiate for better pay and working conditions, and to also avoid service fee deductions by the platform, all of which meant earning higher incomes than otherwise received from the platform. Angela, a platform domestic worker interviewed, explains the negotiation process under platform leakage as follows:

No, we negotiate. Like this other customer last time, I said no. The client was saying I must come privately, right? I said 'How much are you going to pay me, from 8 am to 4 pm?' And then they said, 'It's going to be R200'. I said no because it's the same; on the app, it's also R200. You want me to come privately and it's for R200? It's not going to work (Angela, Interview 06 April 2021).

Most crucially to note is the finding that platform leakage-provided work occurs under an informal agreement between the platform domestic worker and the platform customer. The employment relationship here is therefore unmediated by the platform and is more akin to informal live-out or part-time domestic work. As Table 2 indicates, platform leakage occurs alongside formal platform-provided work. So far from being a formalising agent in the highly informal domestic sector of South Africa, digital platforms are being used by domestic workers as a reliable matching agent to secure both formal and informal employment opportunities in the domestic sector. Given these findings regarding the employment relationship between platform domestic work and workers' adjustment and approaches to platform domestic work, it is important to consider the implications of these trends for the sector.

The impact of 'platformisation' on domestic work employment

The platform economy is reorganising markets and social exchanges (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Vallas and Schor, 2020). More specifically, the reorganisation and appropriation of informal markets seem to

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be a key target for platform companies because many platform companies thrive in sectors of the economy that are characterised by high levels of informality, especially in the Global South (Athique and Parthasarathi, 2020). In South Africa, this can mostly be seen in the transport sector – with key players such as Uber, Bolt, DiDi, and InDriver – and in the domestic sector, where platform companies such as SweepSouth and getTOD are gaining a stronghold. As has been shown so far, the platform domestic work company SweepSouth firmly identifies its mission as formalising domestic work employment and thus extending decent work to domestic workers through platform technology.

Platform domestic work as a new work model in the sector is indeed an effective provider of work opportunities for many domestic workers and is attempting to offer above-minimum wage payment rates on its platform (Sibiya and Du Toit, 2022; The Fairwork Project South Africa, 2022). However, it is the quality of work that is an issue on the platform. As a form of gig work, the platform domestic work model provides short-term, insecure work, that is without access to employment protections, and that has no evidence of collective representation on the platform as workers (The Fairwork Report South Africa, 2022; Hunt and Samman, 2020; Sibiya and Du Toit, 2022). As pointed out in the emerging scholarship on platform domestic work in South Africa and my own research findings, it is becoming evident that the current

platform domestic work model being pursued by private platform companies is undermining key decent work pillars such as access to social protection, workers' rights, and social dialogue and tripartism. Further, the widespread practice of platform leakage by platform domestic workers may deepen or reinforce informality in domestic work employment in the long-term (ILO, 2010; Ghai, 2003). Using the concept of informalisation by scholars Theron (2010) and Slavnic (2010), I further argue that the platform domestic work model is instituting 'informalisation from above' that is instigating and allowing workers to respond with an 'informalisation from below' strategy through platform leakage to better cope with their precarious condition as self-employed gig workers on the platform.

Informalisation as a concept is defined by Theron (2010: 91) as 'a process whereby economic activity takes place outside the scope of formal regulation'. Informalisation from above is a concept that denotes the practices of work casualisation and externalisation in formal enterprises that leave workers in these enterprises without full coverage under formal labour protections and standards (Slavnic, 2010: 4; Theron, 2010: 90). Workers hence find themselves in formal employment but without access to full employment rights and protections as prescribed by state labour legislations. Platform domestic workers are in a similar condition with their platform company: they are in formal, 'registered' employment with a formal enterprise but are without access to full labour protections. This is due to there being a triangular employment relationship between them, their customers on the platform, and their platform company that only recognises itself to be a 'marketplace' for domestic cleaning services. This model of a vague and disguised employment approach is very typical of many other forms of gig work in the gig economy and has prompted the critique that platform companies are disguising and reclassifying existing service work employment as entrepreneurship (Prassl, 2018). This undermines historic gains made in attaining workers' rights and the decommodification of labour under capitalism (Wood et al., 2019; De Stefano, 2016; Aloisi, 2016).

Informalisation from below refers to the variety of informal, survivalist economic activities performed by marginal groups, in response to their precarious living conditions (Theron, 2010: 91; Slavnic, 2010). In the platform domestic work model, the occurrence

of platform leakage is a survivalist strategy and an act of informalisation from below by platform domestic workers. Platform leakage is platform domestic workers' attempt to cope with the costs of self-employment on the platform by combining formal, short-term work provided by the platform with informal, self-negotiated work with platform-provided customers offline. This allows domestic workers to augment their incomes and to seek out better, self-negotiated, and managed work opportunities. While platform leakage is not permitted by platform companies including SweepSouth, it will most likely continue to be an inherent feature of platform domestic work as workers try to cope with the insecure working conditions on the platform due to the informalisation from above instituted by the platform itself (SweepSouth, 2020b; Madden, 2015; He et al., 2020). As argued by Kumar (2020: 275), initiatives aimed at formalising the informal economy through 'platformisation' cannot be successful nor completed without the provision of formal labour protections and fair employment practices for platform workers. This includes the domestic work sector that remains largely informal in South Africa, and as the finding of platform leakage indicates, formalisation of the sector through digital platformisation risks perpetuating this feature even further by not extending full employment rights and fair practices.

Lastly, the informalisation from above and from below that is occurring as a feature of platform domestic work also challenges the idea that the commercialisation and industrialisation of domestic work are sufficient to address informality, exploitation, and lack of decent work in domestic work. This supports the many studies done by care work scholars over the years that show commercialisation in the domestic sector is not sufficient to bring about decent work to domestic workers because growth and profits are the primary objective of capitalist domestic work agencies and are dependent upon the commodification of domestic workers' labour and identities as care workers (Mendez, 1998; Maher, 2004; Meagher, 1997; Ehrenreich, 2003).

Concluding remarks

Like other forms of commercial domestic work, platform domestic work is providing more work opportunities for domestic workers. However, the quality of employment is an issue of concern. Evidence suggests that the platform domestic work

model is deepening informalisation in the domestic sector. There is an informalisation from above being instituted by the platform because workers on the platform are designated as independent contractors without access to sufficient employment protections and benefits on the platform. As a coping response to the risks of self-employment on the platform, platform domestic workers are engaging in informalisation from below tactics, mainly through the act of platform leakage to secure better incomes and self-negotiated work opportunities with platform customers outside of the platform. Digital platforms in the domestic sector are a great tool for the instant and secure matching of domestic workers with customers but they do not guarantee full decent work for domestic workers. Digital platformisation in the domestic work sector must be accompanied by fair employment practices and labour protection coverage for platform domestic workers if it is to achieve the desired effect of modernising domestic work.

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