

Matchmakers: Placement Agencies and Digital Platforms in the UK Childcare Market

Abstract

Households seeking childcare often turn to labour market intermediaries such as placement agencies and digital platforms to facilitate their search. This article draws on a qualitative research project to examine the respective roles played by agencies and platforms, comparing the structural power dynamics they engender between workers, clients, and intermediaries. First, it argues that digital platforms stand in an ambiguous position in relation to the formalisation of childcare. While they have contributed to reducing transaction costs and standardising processes, this has often been through the creation of more flexible and insecure forms of work compared with agencies. Second, in contrast with literature emphasising the disciplinary effects of platforms, we claim that they institute new forms of ‘constrained flexibility’, which have increased workers’ access to jobs, control over their schedule and communication with clients, while simultaneously subjecting them to increased market pressures and requiring higher levels of digital and entrepreneurial skills.

Key Words: care work, childcare, digital platforms, domestic work, placement agencies

Introduction

Many households today have complex care needs and rely on a combination of additional paid and unpaid workers to assist with domestic and caring tasks (Cox, 2006; Farris, 2020). Demand for domestic work has grown significantly over recent decades as women’s increased work outside

the home has combined with an ageing population, extended working hours, and a lack of effective work-family reconciliation measures or publicly provided care services (Gutiérrez Rodríguez, 2010: 74–87; Novitz and Syrpis, 2015: 107–8; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Since the late 1980s, the global care industry has expanded at a rapid pace leading to the commodification and marketisation of many aspects of domestic and care work (Busch, 2013; Cox, 2006; Schwiter et al., 2018). Domestic work has often occurred in an informal labour relationship and been devalued as a form of ‘invisible’ work that takes place in a private household, typically performed by and viewed as innate to women (Fetterolf, 2022; Hatton, 2017; ILO, 2010: 1–5). The tasks involved in domestic work are constructed as inherent to women and portrayed as ‘unskilled’ work that does not contribute to the economy (Hayes, 2017; Peroni, 2018: 97). Workers in the sector are frequently excluded from or inadequately protected by labour regulation, while the isolated nature of their work puts it outside the purview of labour inspection and increases power differentials (Cox, 2018; ILO, 2016b: 17; Mantouvalou, 2012; Baines, 2023). Domestic and care workers are also disproportionately migrant women, who are often on restrictive schemes or have irregular status, making them more vulnerable to exploitation (Addati et al., 2018; Parreñas, 2015; van Doorn et al., 2022).

While domestic work encompasses a variety of tasks in the home, including cooking, cleaning, laundry, and care for children and the elderly (ILO, 2010: 7), this article focuses specifically on the childcare sector and the role of labour market intermediaries, which households rely on to help them fill their childcare needs. It examines two forms of intermediary, placement agencies and digital platforms, which both connect workers with employers and clients, organising various aspects of their relationship and how tasks are completed (Aloisi and De Stefano, 2022: 133;

Meijerink and Arets, 2021; Wouters, 2021). It interrogates the respective roles of these two forms of labour intermediary in relation to the formalisation of childcare work, and the ways in which they alter the structural power dynamics between workers, clients and intermediaries.

Agencies play a significant role in matching workers to jobs in the care market, offering a range of working conditions and models depending on their modalities and the clients they serve (Elrick and Lewandowska, 2008; Farris, 2020; Martinez, 2021). Digital platforms are a more recent development often associated with the ‘gig economy’ model, where work is completed on a task-by-task or short-term, hourly paid basis (Aloisi and De Stefano, 2022; James, 2022). Over the past decade, platforms have grown within the childcare market and now compete alongside placement agencies for clients (Fetterolf, 2022; Flanagan, 2019; Mateescu and Ticona, 2020; James, 2022). Prior studies have provided important insights into the role of agencies in mediating labour, with some research comparatively exploring the roles played by placement agencies and digital platforms in general (Meijerink and Arets, 2021) or in the care work sector (Blanchard, 2021; Tandon and Rathi, 2022; Wouters, 2021). However, comparative research of this nature has been fairly limited to date, particularly as regards childcare. Given the increasing prominence of gig work in the broader economy and the important position many platforms now occupy in various markets, as well as the high social and personal stakes of ensuring proper care for the young, there is a further need to explore the interaction between these distinct forms of labour market intermediary and their respective impacts on formalisation and workers’ agency.

Drawing on the results of a UK-based qualitative research project involving interviews with childcare workers, policy experts, and representatives of placement agencies and digital platforms,

alongside a content analysis of platform and agency websites, this article makes two key contributions to the literature on platform-mediated childcare work. First, we challenge platforms' claim to be formalising the sector (Tandon and Rathi, 2022; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Disentangling distinct processes that are collectively referred to as formalisation, we argue that platforms could be viewed as *standardising* the sector through systems for verification, communication and payment. Yet at the same time they tend to create a more flexible and temporary workforce for on-demand work that contributes to a broader shift towards the casualisation and fragmentation of labour relations (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022). When viewed in relation to placement agencies, platforms represent a move away from the use of formal employment contracts and towards insecure and flexible work paid on an hourly basis.

Second, we argue that the comparison between agencies and platforms in the childcare sector complicates prevalent narratives about the interventionist and disciplining nature of platforms (Flanagan, 2019; McDonald et al., 2021). Rather than a straightforward shift to a more pervasive system of surveillance and top-down control, our findings suggest that platforms often delegate control over many key aspects of the relationship to the transacting parties (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022). However, as the platforms' business model offloads the responsibility of organising transactions onto the parties, creating unpaid tasks for workers, the flexibility and convenience of using platforms are set against a less secure income stream, increased demands on workers' time and greater pressures from the market. We find a general trend towards platforms facilitating what we call a 'constrained flexibility' for the workforce, providing new opportunities and potentially a greater degree of autonomy, while increasing the fragmentation of labour relations.

Placement agencies and digital platforms as labour market intermediaries in childcare work

Labour market intermediaries can be understood as ‘entities or institutions that interpose themselves between workers and firms to facilitate, inform, or regulate how workers are matched to firms, how work is accomplished, and how conflicts are resolved’ (Autor, 2009: 1). Intermediaries may assist or undermine the formalisation of domestic work depending on their own features and the external regulatory context (Fudge and Hobden, 2018). On first glance, platforms and agencies appear to play a structurally similar role (Aloisi and De Stefano, 2022: 133). In the case of childcare, both play the role of ‘matchmaker’, fulfilling the critical task of enabling households to find the best candidate to care for their child. While digital platforms are not usually involved in brokering employment contracts, they do mediate between workers and clients and in some ways even determine their interactions – for example through algorithmic management and requirements for online profiles, ratings systems and identity checks (Kenney and Zysman, 2016; Mateescu and Ticona, 2020; Wood et al., 2019; Wouters, 2021). However, the method and intensity of this ‘matchmaking’ role differ significantly from agencies, which offer an experienced professional to mediate the process. Agencies act as a “middle-man” between parent-employers and caregiver’, seeking ‘to match the demand for in-home care with the available applicants to be nannies, domestics, and/or housekeepers’, and aiming to ensure a good ‘fit’ (Bakan and Stasiulis, 1995: 308–9).

Although it is difficult to establish precisely the size of the childcare market in the UK, it is evident that agencies are still widely used. There are around 10 specialised childcare platforms operating

in the UK, but a conservative estimate of the number of registered domestic and care work agencies has put the figure at over 500, with many small agencies offering specialised services in particular tasks and larger agencies offering a range of services (Farris, 2020). Placement agencies play a major role in facilitating job matching in the care market (Elrick and Lewandowska, 2008; Martinez, 2021; Schwiter et al., 2018), but have typically been an under-explored aspect of research on domestic and care work (Busch, 2013; Farris, 2020). Some studies have attended to childcare agencies' position in transnational networks of domestic work, finding that they often exploit migrant workers (Blanchard et al., 2022; Lindquist et al., 2012; Yeates, 2004), although sometimes agencies also assist workers to negotiate better working conditions or mediate transfers (Tan, 2022: 121).

In the past decade, domestic care work has undergone a shift through the increased use of digital platforms which mediate the relationship between workers and families in need of care. Figures show a rise in such platforms worldwide from 28 to 224 over the period 2010 to 2020 (ILO 2021, xvii). These platforms provide domestic workers with new opportunities to find jobs and earn extra income when longer-term prospects are not available, which is of particular importance for marginalised groups and those who find it difficult to access traditional labour markets (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018; van Doorn, 2017). The largest childcare platform in the UK is [childcare.co.uk](https://www.childcare.co.uk), which launched in 2009 and has 2.5 million users ([Childcare.co.uk](https://www.childcare.co.uk), 2023), while Bubble and KoruKids are also major players (Gebrial and Bettington, 2022: 47). This article will examine two major conceptual themes concerning the role of agencies and platforms in facilitating childcare: formalisation and agency, each of which we will now discuss in turn.

Platforms as formalising institutions

A central theme of the carework platform literature is that platforms attempt to formalise employment relationships between workers and families in comparison with more traditional processes for engaging childcare providers, e.g. through word-of-mouth. This would seem to be beneficial for workers, but scholars also caution that such attempts are often only partially fulfilled and may sometimes simply amount to promotional strategies for the platform. For example, the popular cleaning platform Helpling in Germany has presented itself as counteracting the dominance of informal labour in a way that emphasises convenience and security for the end user rather than better working conditions (Koutsimpogiorgos et al., 2023: 169). Ticona and Mateescu (2018: 4385) claim platforms ‘have created multi-sided markets for childcare services’ and that in contrast to ‘more traditional and informal networks’ platforms ‘urge more formal standards by equating professionalism with visibility to formal institutions.’ However, they find that the implications for workers are mixed: while carework platforms formalise childcare services to a degree by enacting payment interfaces and encouraging tax compliance, platforms are overly permissive with the types of employment relationships they allow. This makes individual workers more visible to clients in highly selective ways, exacerbating inequalities among workers (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018: 4385).

Relatedly, McDonald and colleagues (2021) found that digital platforms attempted to formalise care work through methods such as dictating certain contractual arrangements and monitoring the quality of workers’ performance, again with ambivalent consequences for workers. Many of these means of control were set out in non-negotiable terms and conditions of use that placed limits on how workers and clients engaged on the platform. Tandon and Rathi (2022) found that workers on

care work platforms in India had higher incomes and more professionalised jobs than those in the informal economy, and argued that this is related to certain elements of formalisation such as enabling digital payments and keeping records of financial transactions. Yet they noted that this amounts to only a ‘selective form of formalisation’ that fails to deliver job security or social security for workers (Tandon and Rathi, 2022: 2). The expression ‘selective formalisation’ encapsulates practices that lead to formalisation in certain respects while otherwise reinforcing the precarity generally seen in informal work (van Doorn et al., 2022: 1102). Together, these studies thus indicate that technical and procedural modes of formalisation encouraged by platforms may make some features of the care work market more predictable, while also reducing the ambit of free action for market participants and doing little to make employment and access to the means of living more dependable for workers.

Significant ambiguity remains in the literature over the meaning of ‘formalisation’ and its manifestation in the care work sector. Unni has identified two broad perspectives on the debate about formalisation of informal work: the ‘capital view’ that emphasises including businesses in formal tax and financial systems, and the ‘labour view’ that stresses social inclusion and social protection (2018: 92). The former perspective, which aims to include care work within taxation systems without associated employment and social benefits, may be better described as aiming at ‘normalisation’ of given employment relations (Unni, 2018: 82), while the latter raises the prospect of improving workers’ rights. From a labour perspective, the shift from informality can be understood as occurring along a continuum, with full formalisation including the recognition of labour rights associated with employee status and social security coverage; practical steps to incorporate workers into social security such as registration and contribution payments; and formal

employment practices like the provision of a contract with terms of employment and payment records (Fudge and Hobden, 2018: 6; ILO, 2016a: 1–3). In certain contexts, such as Argentina and the US, there are examples of platforms promoting awareness of workers’ rights and social security to some degree (Pereyra et al., 2023; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). An understanding of formalisation that focuses on entitlement to labour rights and social security protection contrasts with more basic conceptions addressing whether an enterprise is incorporated or registered with relevant authorities for social security and tax purposes (Hunt and Samman, 2023: 239–244). We argue that any claim to be ‘formalising’ the sector must be assessed against these broader goals.

Intermediaries and Worker Agency

A second leading narrative within the care work platform literature is that platforms have brought about a pervasive and tightly organised system of domination over workers. Through a historical analysis of conditions in Australia, Flanagan (2019) argues that the marketisation and commodification of care work has changed the nature of employers’ control over workers compared with the late 19th and early 20th century when domestic servants were closely observed in person and controlled through the threat of withholding references. While no longer subject to such close control by individual employers, Flanagan argues, workers now face a regime of ‘structural domination’ through labour market disciplinary mechanisms, including digital platforms’ rating systems and monitoring of workers’ actions, such as the times taken to respond to potential clients (2019: 71–2). McDonald and colleagues (2021) similarly find that platforms are designed in ways that prompt digitally-mediated control and surveillance of workers, while platforms’ setting of non-negotiable terms and conditions of platform use constitutes another way of disciplining workers (McDonald et al., 2021: 881).

Platforms' attempts to institute more intensive systems of control are not always successful, however, and can be undermined by workers as well as by platforms' competing business priorities. Kalla (2022: 660–661) argues that workers on the SweepSouth platform in South Africa make 'strategic use of the platform for their own ends' which include 'using the platform to find permanent work outside it'. Another recent study from Spain finds that domestic work platforms 'exercise indirect control' that focuses on only a few basic matters such as scheduling, while leaving much up to the clients and workers to settle themselves (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022: 630). McDonald and colleagues (2021: 879–881) also claim that platforms' strategies involve contractual measures that shift some risks and costs of doing business onto workers and clients, which necessarily reduces the platforms' direct control over the labour and hiring processes.

In sum, despite a growing literature in recent years, important issues remain to be studied regarding how platforms impact the formalisation of care work and the growth of disciplinary constraints on worker agency. We use 'agency' to refer to workers' capacity to make choices that shape their working lives and advance their own interests, recognising that this is always constrained to varying degrees by the surrounding structural circumstances (Castree et al., 2004: 159–60; McDonald et al., 2024: 363). On this issue and the question of formalisation, our study not only examines the situation on platforms but also compares platforms to agencies in order to illuminate more clearly how digital intermediation may be changing the labour market. The comparison offers new insights into structures that mediate workers' agency, particularly in relation to techniques of surveillance and control embedded in digital architecture, legal systems, and organisational protocols.

Methods and data

The research design for this article consists of a content analysis of 40 agency and platform websites combined with a qualitative analysis of 45 interviews with key stakeholders including childcare workers, owners of domestic work agencies and digital platforms and policy experts (see Appendix 1 for further details). Between June 2022 and March 2023, we conducted two rounds of interviews, one in the summer of 2022 with 18 childcare workers on digital platforms and/or agencies and a second in February-March 2023 with 18 childcare workers and 9 other stakeholders. In the second round of interviews with childcare workers, student researchers assisted by conducting these interviews under the research team's supervision.

All participants were located in Greater London, which was selected as an ideal location for a UK-based project because it is a wealthy and global city located at the centre point of global care networks (Anderson, 2007; Farris, 2020), with a few participants also providing information on the surrounding counties. The UK tends to have smaller family units than other European countries, which means there are fewer family members present to share unpaid caring with parents and more opportunities for families to purchase paid care from the market (Chung et al., 2018). London has a diverse market for childcare in the home, which includes informal childcare and babysitting, specialist nannies, 'au pairs' who perform some childcare that is supposed to take place alongside a linguistic or cultural exchange, and overseas domestic workers who complete a range of tasks in a family home that may include childcare (Busch, 2013; Cox and Busch, 2018; Mantouvalou, 2015). The latter group is somewhat distinctive because the Overseas Domestic

Worker visa requires workers to enter the country with an employer they already worked for abroad and is generally limited to a six-month non-renewable period (Home Office, 2024). By contrast, other categories of childcare workers such as nannies, au pairs and babysitters may be recruited via diverse mechanisms that include platforms, agencies, online job boards, social media groups, local ads, and word of mouth. London has a higher concentration of childcare work than elsewhere in the UK and a much larger number of agencies and platforms catering to clients' needs. Worker interviewees agreed that London is the centre of the UK childcare market and offers higher wages and better conditions than other cities, attracting workers from across the country and other parts of the world.

Interviews with workers were semi-structured. We devised an interview protocol consisting of questions about how they used different types of intermediaries to gain work and what their experiences were in using them. Some workers only had used either a platform or an agency; others had used both. We asked about various elements of the labour process, from onboarding procedures, to finding and securing work, completing tasks, forming relationships with clients, and engaging with ratings, security and grievance processes. We found worker participants by leaving short messages on relevant social media groups such as 'Nannies in London', 'Nannies and Babysitters UK', and 'Nanny Jobs in London', and through 'snowballing' by asking interviewees if they knew anyone else whom we could interview. After searching for terms including 'nannies', 'childcare', and 'babysitters' with different geographic locations in and around London and selected Facebook groups with the largest number of members (over or around 5,000), we posted messages in groups where the moderators allowed researchers to post requests for participants. If our initial request did not generate enough leads for participants, we also

reached out to active individuals who had recently posted in the groups by sending them a private message with a personal invitation. These methods allowed us to overcome ‘serious challenges of accessibility for researchers’ that exist in making contact with these workers (Kampouri, 2022: 20), although it meant we could not be prescriptive in seeking interviews only from those on certain platforms.

For other relevant stakeholders, we conducted an analysis of known agencies and platforms that operated in London and compiled a list to invite a representative from each organisation to conduct an interview. We sent an invitation to all known childcare platforms operating in London and the 40 specialised childcare agencies whose websites we analysed. Those who agreed to be interviewed were primarily from smaller and newer agencies and platforms. This constitutes both a limitation of our study in terms of its range, and a benefit because of the insight it provides into lesser-known types of organisations. We asked each agency and platform manager about their role in the organisation, their procedures for managing workers, and their business model and marketing strategy. We also consulted with policy experts identified from the literature review to ascertain their knowledge of the childcare industry and any insights they had about the comparative effects of placement agencies and platforms on the childcare market.

Interviews lasted roughly one hour, and interviewees were given a £25 voucher following the interview as compensation for their time. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The interview data results were analysed using a ‘thematic analysis’ approach (Fossey et al., 2002: 728–9). Initially, we used the interview notes to prepare a list of key themes, following which the transcripts were analysed to refine these themes and extract relevant quotations and details. This

was combined with content analysis of 40 agency and platform websites, concentrating on those services that specifically provide childcare work. We employed a content analysis approach to determine services that were offered, pricing, marketing and business strategies and the nature of the business' self-presentation to workers and clients.

Findings

Childcare platforms: an ambivalent relationship to formalisation

Our findings suggest digital platforms stand in an ambiguous position in relation to the formalisation of childcare. When compared to informal networks of personal contacts, care platforms attempt to create more formalised structures through the establishment of convenient systems of verification, communication, and payment that can provide benefits to workers and households. However, when analysed in relation to placement agencies, platforms represent a shift towards normalising an insecure and flexible workforce which undertakes short tasks and are paid an hourly wage without a fixed contract or employment rights. While platforms have contributed to reducing transaction costs and standardising processes for workers and households to connect, this has often been through a move away from standard employment relationships towards more flexible and insecure forms of work.

One way in which platforms help streamline employment processes in the sector is by facilitating the provision of a clear framework for which tasks are considered within the scope of a childcare workers' responsibilities. Many platforms allow for specifications of the precise duties a job

involves, providing greater certainty and transparency about working conditions and allowing workers to filter out jobs with vague or inappropriate demands. One worker interviewed explained that she would avoid clients on platforms who asked her to be ‘flexible... a “muck-in” kind of girl’, explaining that this means ‘you’ll do everything, you’ll unload the dishwasher... you’ll go and take the dry cleaning... you know... things that aren’t in your job description’ (W16).

This aspect of digital platforms generates working conditions that compare favourably with those that have characterised traditional domestic work roles, which often require the completion of an undefined number of tasks in the home (Cox, 2012: 45–6; de la Silva et al., 2019: 8). Utilised strategically, platforms can benefit workers by limiting the potentially expansive sphere of their possible duties and providing clarity about what they are paid to do, especially in comparison to the blurred expectations associated with securing work through informal networks. Platforms can thus reduce workers’ exposure to the general devaluation of paid domestic work and its conflation with work that would otherwise be provided for free by women in the family home (Cox, 2012: 45–6). However, work through informal networks is not the only relevant comparison, as placement agencies can also define and limit a childcare role. One agency owner noted, ‘I feel like a lot of it is me educating the families if they’ve not had nannies before, you know, what their expectations might be and what the process is like’ (A2). She noted that most professional childcare workers did not want to be ‘nanny/housekeepers’ who also cleaned and took care of other duties around the house. meaning that a limitation of the tasks involved can also be undertaken by agency staff, sometimes going further than platforms by personally explaining matters to clients.

Digital platforms can also be viewed as formalising the sector by standardising and automating payment processes, our research indicates, yielding further benefits for workers and employers alike. Managers underscored the advantages of these systems to families. ‘You’ve got everything at your fingertips’, recounted one platform owner we interviewed, who argued that the app enables clients to browse, book and pay online, adding: ‘it’s a lot slicker and more transparent, everything is a lot easier’ (P2). This also leads to a clearer and more reliable structure of compensation for workers which assists them with problems of unpaid work. An online payment system saves workers from negotiating pay directly with families, particularly in instances where the specificities of the job change upon arrival or when parents return late. Whereas many workers reported the difficulty of advising parents who returned home 40–60 minutes late that they would be charged more for the sit, the Bubble app times the exact duration of an ‘active sit’ to the minute and charges parents accordingly. An expert interviewee viewed this as a significant advantage for workers, comparing favourably to work through informal networks (E3). Here it is difficult to make a direct comparison with placement agencies because childcare organised in this manner generally results in an already formal employment relationship between the family and the childcare worker.

Another aspect of formalisation, as discussed above, is adherence to taxation law and obligatory processes for calculating and paying income tax. An automated payment process does not necessarily mean a payment is declared for tax purposes. As an expert interviewee explained, ‘even if it’s cash in hand, the person... can still declare it. And even if it is a bank transfer, it doesn’t mean that it’s going to get reported as a service payment’ (E1). Ticona and Mateescu (2018: 4385) note that in the US, care work platforms encourage clients and workers to register with the US

Internal Revenue Service. Yet the situation in the UK appears distinct, with greater taxation compliance likely for work secured via agencies. For example, families employing a nanny directly are obliged to pay tax on their behalf through the PAYE scheme (tax deducted at source, as standard for employees) alongside national insurance contributions (Gebrial and Bettington, 2022: 50).

By contrast, in platform work that follows the ‘gig economy’ or ‘on-demand’ model, workers are classified as self-employed and thus outside the PAYE scheme, and they are thus required to report their earnings individually to HM Revenue and Customs on a tax return. Our content analysis suggested that most UK platforms largely left this up to workers without encouraging reporting of earnings. While platforms did emphasise to clients the safety and trustworthiness of the matchmaking process and of workers on the system, a discourse of tax compliance was not central to the platforms’ typical strategies for highlighting the professionalism of their services. There were some outliers, such as [Childcare.co.uk](https://www.childcare.co.uk), which operates a specific nanny service. In this case, the company offers its clients a discount to ‘Nannytax’, a third-party provider which runs payroll services for nanny employers and helps them manage their obligations regarding tax, national insurance and other deductions, following a similar model to placement agencies. Yet in most instances of platform-based childcare, platforms cannot be said to be ‘formalising’ the sector with regards to taxation issues, particularly when compared to agencies.

From a perspective of improving workers’ rights and conditions, the most pertinent aspects of formalisation are employment rights, social security coverage, and providing terms of employment in a contract. In line with a previous study (Gebrial and Bettington, 2022: 49), our findings do not

show that UK platforms promote labour formality in any of these respects, since the business model common to most platforms presupposes that each will act as an intermediary between independent contractors and their employers rather than establishing employment contracts. A person performing work in the UK can be classified in one of three ways: an ‘employee’ is entitled to all statutory employment rights; a ‘limb b worker’ occupies a hybrid position that benefits from certain rights including minimum wage and working time, health and safety protection and collective bargaining rights, but not remedies for unfair dismissal (Employment Rights Act 1996, s230(1)-(3)); while a self-employed ‘independent contractor’ is not entitled to employment rights. Most platforms allude to the third status of independent contractor, referring to workers as self-employed and not mentioning any of the rights associated even with ‘limb b’ status. Significant judicial decisions have found platform workers to be limb-b workers, most famously the 2021 Supreme Court case *Uber v Aslam* 2021 UKSC 5. However, this case turned on specific facts regarding aspects of working conditions that do not necessarily map well onto the childcare sector, such as the level of control exercised by the platform and the lack of direct communication with clients. More recently, the Supreme Court declined to find Deliveroo riders to be workers for the purposes of collective bargaining rights, primarily because they are permitted to send substitute riders (*IWGB v Central Arbitration Committee* [2023] UKSC 43). This reinforces the fact that successful challenges to classification as a self-employed independent contractor turn on specific details of the way the platform organises work, and will often be difficult for workers to win unless their circumstances meet specific legal criteria.

Therefore, even if work engaged through platforms is formalised in the sense of having more transparent hiring processes and standardised payment systems, it lacks formality in the sense of

entitlement to legislative protections of employment rights or to the provision of employment contracts defining terms. One interviewee commented that agencies were ‘definitely a lot more professional in the sense that you are guaranteed to get more money, because there's sort of like a bar that they expect their clients to sit above,’ although this also required a higher experience level to begin with (W29). By contrast with platform-based jobs, the longer-term placements arranged by agencies would usually amount to a formal employment contract with associated rights, thus recognising workers’ achievement of a certain quality threshold. As another worker explained, ‘I think sometimes with the platforms, parents are sometimes a bit more likely to take the mick and not have contracts... Whereas if you go with an agency... they would have a... contract sent to you before you even start’ (W33). Others commented on the lack of support from platforms after a worker had been placed in a role: ‘once you work for a family, it’s between you and the family. There isn’t let’s say, HR, or if you need any extra support with anything, there is nothing’ (W20). By contrast, interviewees often (although not always) valued the support offered by agencies, with one noting: ‘if I feel like this place is not working for me, I can call them and we can maybe decide... like change me or place me with another place... there are people who are listening’ (W26). In short, both in terms of the lack of a contract and the absence of support for workers doing jobs in progress, a serious gap in formalisation exists for UK childcare workers who use the platforms.

Worker agency and platform workers’ constrained flexibility

A second major finding of our study was that the affordances of digital platforms – including mechanisms of increased worker surveillance – tend to increase workers’ agency in certain

respects, rather than only constraining it. While acknowledging the variations that inevitably exist between different jurisdictions and platforms, our interviews offer a basis for questioning a line of argument in the platform-based domestic work literature that digital platforms institute a ‘regime of structural domination’ with strict means of control (Flanagan, 2019). Instead, we identified a trend of digital platforms instituting what we call ‘constrained flexibility’ for workers. By this we mean they increase workers’ access to jobs, control over their schedule and direct communication with clients, while at the same time reducing their security, subjecting them to increased market pressures and requiring higher levels of digital and entrepreneurial skills.

One important way in which platforms provide flexibility is by allowing workers more control over their job choices and scheduling. Like other companies facilitating on-demand work, the Bubble (2023) platform promises workers ‘flexibility, convenience and transparency’, allowing them greater autonomy to set their own prices and availability and to make informed decisions about which jobs to take by reading other workers’ reviews of parents. While such pronouncements should not be taken at face value, our interviews suggest that workers greatly appreciated the flexibility of the work and fast access to jobs; they emphasised that they could choose jobs at their convenience and decide not to work for long periods when needed. One worker on Bubble noted that ‘it makes it easier for you to find jobs, especially when you have never done something like that when you’re starting out’, whereas she thought that an agency would be more controlling in telling her when she needed to be available (W22).

This added control thus allowed some workers to be more discerning and selective about which jobs they accepted in order to best suit their needs, rather than being limited to the opportunities

offered to them by a placement agency. One worker did not believe agencies always ‘took into consideration’ personal needs such as preferred location (W20). Another interviewee who worked via platforms reported that she was ‘very fussy about which jobs I apply for on there. I read the reviews very carefully... And I also pay attention to location. I don’t want to travel an hour and a half across London’ (W1). This interviewee found the experience of searching through ads and choosing the best one ‘very liberating’ for her and that the ‘no strings attached’ aspect of the work meant there was no obligation to continue if she didn’t feel comfortable with the family.

Platforms also supply workers with expanded opportunities to exercise personal agency by enabling them to communicate directly with parents. Many workers reported this as a key advantage: it helped them gain a better understanding of the job, negotiate with parents, and clear up ambiguities and potential sources of misunderstanding ahead of time. One worker who had worked for both agencies and platforms complained that the agency inserted itself ‘in the middle’ of the parent-carer relation and took too long to pass information between the parties (W23). She described communication through the platform as ‘quick and easy’ and do-able ‘at your own pace’ without the hassle of an intermediary providing only certain types of information. Another interviewee thought that with agencies ‘there are steps you have to go through’, whereas platforms enabled a much faster transaction: ‘sometimes you can... talk with someone, and then they tell you that you can come tomorrow, maybe like for the interview, and then hire you the next day’ (W26). The points made in the above section about workers using the platforms strategically to delineate their specific tasks within the household also demonstrate the exercise of agency.

Additionally, our findings complicate the view that ratings consistently act as disciplinary mechanisms over workers. On the one hand, this idea was supported in our interviews by a general sense that positive ratings could help raise the visibility of a workers' profile on the platform (e.g. W10). As expressed by one worker: 'I guess the more better review[s] you get, the more likely you are to get the next job. If you get some bad rating, I don't see all parents could trust you and want you to look after the child' (W20). Likewise, some felt they needed to be extra cautious to avoid negative ratings, pointing to a disciplining effect of the ratings system, or that not having sufficient good reviews made them less visible. Managing this process might become an additional part of their role: 'You have to tell them that, okay, so this platform works like this. If it gives you a good rating, like a five star, I'll be hired for more jobs, so please do this for me. And they do it' (W22). Some workers expressed frustration at difficulties contesting negative reviews (e.g. W7).

On the other hand, the disciplinary impact of ratings was neither as ubiquitous nor as unique to platforms as might have been expected. Several workers expressed ambivalence about the practical effects of ratings, viewing them as one aspect of managing their online profile, but not necessarily decisive over their ability to find decent work or to appear visible on the platform (e.g. W27, W31). Some believed other factors such as their relevant experience and qualifications would be more important than ratings on the platform. One stated, 'I've never needed to have anybody leave a review to be honest.... I don't need five stars. I still get recommended' (W18). Another critique in the literature is that reviews work only in one direction, allowing employers / end users to rate workers but not vice versa (Choudary, 2018: 16; Wiesböck et al., 2023: 267). While our findings confirm that this is generally the case, several interviewees mentioned approvingly that the childcare app Bubble allowed them to leave comments on clients' profiles after a job and to contact

other workers to ask why they had given a particular review. Nor is it the case that agencies, by comparison with platforms, are free of disciplinary effects from employer feedback: one worker noted that ‘You might make a mistake or a client, one of the clients might complain, and then the agency starts assuming you are not good at what you're doing’ (W22).

Nevertheless, despite the advantages of flexibility and direct parent contact that workers associated with platforms and the non-uniform impact of ratings, our interviews also reveal that the platforms impose several important constraints on workers’ agency, especially when compared to labour engagement through agencies. The purpose of the platforms that follow an on-demand model is to facilitate the constant availability of a workforce for families with care needs. As one platform owner reported, ‘when people need to book last minute, right, the platform can send someone to you in as little as two hours. In fact, we've even bypass that and done it in as little as 45 minutes’ (P2). Workers are therefore encouraged to respond quickly to messages, with interviewees often finding that this required them to prioritise the demands of families and to arrange their daily lives around when clients wanted them to work. Platform managers reported that the ranking of workers in the algorithm was determined by a range of factors, but that these included worker response time to messages, so clearly the platform architecture prompts workers to make themselves perpetually available for hire. Reflecting this, one worker noted that the only jobs she managed to get on a childcare platform were those sent out ‘at the last minute’ (W3). This could mean that although workers had greater elasticity in their schedules, the flexibility promised by platforms could work more in the interests of clients than workers.

Seeking employment through platforms also exposed workers to increased market pressures through more direct competition with other child carers, in ways that manifested through numerous forms of unpaid work that our interviewees had to perform with a competitive ethos as well as through heightened demands on their time. Other scholars have found that, in general, the platform economy's dynamics create pressure on workers to respond to job opportunities instantaneously, at inconvenient times, and under the force of market-based competition (Keller, 2022: 141; Wiesböck et al., 2023: 268). Our interviews confirmed the existence of these pressures for UK childcare workers who use platforms while also clarifying further competitive practices in which workers felt compelled to engage. Managing their own schedules and advertising themselves to families required that workers invest more time in setting up their profiles and customising them with unique details about their personalities, caring styles and other factors that would encourage parents to select them for jobs (see Figure 1 below). To complete this process, workers had to develop extra digital skills. This ability to manage one's own self-presentation online and to successfully respond to the needs of diverse clients necessitates what Ollier-Malaterre and colleagues have called 'digital cultural capital' (2019), namely the skills and knowledge required to navigate these online systems. Other research suggests that there is reason to see such requirements as tending to exacerbate racial, gender, and class inequalities between workers (Fetterolf, 2022; Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Although we were not able to analyse this issue systematically, our research underscored how filling in an attractive profile and chatting with potential clients are telling examples of the skills – and time – required by platform-based workers on top of their normal work competencies and hours. While some interviewees described their profiles as very brief, others reported spending substantial time to craft extended descriptions of the worker's personality, experience, and history. One worker

reported, for example, ‘I also put sometimes like, a bit of my interests... a lot of families like healthy eating and fitness and things like that. So that is actually my interest anyway, but I put that down’ (W8). This takes place within the context of market/competitive pressures, and such efforts are also preliminary to the further burden for platform-based in terms of adeptly negotiating work arrangements directly with clients.

Our interviews thus underscored how the self-branding process could add significant unpaid labour for childcare workers, confirming previously observed tendencies regarding the economic and social work needed to access and sustain jobs via platforms (Pulignano et al., 2023: 2). On platforms, it is mostly up to the worker to attract clients and convince them that the individual has the necessary skills to do the job. By contrast, this unpaid labour would not usually be the worker’s responsibility in an agency setting. As one worker noted ‘with an agency... someone is going to be doing all the work for you, they’re going to be matching you. Whereas obviously with a platform, you’re finding all the work yourself, you’re then emailing the parent, or the parents emailing you. So yes, you you’ve got a lot more work’ (W31). Although there is no guarantee of obtaining gigs and the labour is in any case casual, the platforms still require workers to consent to a high degree of one-sided transparency and exposure and to invest significant digital and social labour when setting up a profile and interacting with prospective clients.

[FIGURE 1 here]

Discussion and Conclusion

Our study has explored the operation of digital platforms in the childcare employment market through interviews with workers, owners and experts together with a content analysis of company websites and with comparisons to job-seeking via agencies and informal networks. Our findings contextualise the question of whether platforms are formalising the childcare sector by considering the way they compare to agencies as distinct labour market intermediaries. While Flanagan (2019) characterises newspapers and placement agencies as the primary entities in an outdated model of intermediary organisations that contrasts with a new system dominated by digital platforms, our study shows how agencies and platforms operate alongside one another in a more complex childcare employment ecosystem. Rather than one replacing the other as a new mode of intermediation, they can be seen as operating in different, but overlapping, spheres of the market in terms of services performed and needs fulfilled (alongside informal networks that continue to function alongside agencies and platforms).

The article has carefully untangled different notions and features of formalisation, showing how although some aspects of the new working arrangements brought about by digital platforms standardise the labour and job-seeking processes, they tend not to bring with them the guarantee of employment rights and protections. While the notion of ‘selective formalisation’ has been noted in previous studies of the platform economy (Van Doorn 2017; Ticona and Mateescu 2018), this study has provided a more detailed theoretical discussion of precisely how selective formalisation operates in one specific sector of the gig economy, which adds clarity and complexity to our understanding of formalisation processes more generally. When assessed against an understanding of formalisation that includes entitlement to labour rights and social security protections, it is

difficult to sustain the argument that platforms are ‘formalising’ the sector – particularly in comparison to the effects of traditional agencies.

On the question of worker agency, our study has complicated the thesis that platforms create a new form of structural domination, finding that digital platforms have led to a more complex two-sided flexibility that can both benefit and harm workers depending on a range of factors. Our research indicates that platforms tend to play a less interventionist role in certain respects than agencies and enable workers and households to have more open lines of communication for negotiating their own arrangements, leading some workers to feel a greater sense of agency working through platforms. Our findings also suggest that platforms’ algorithmic management systems, such as ratings and reviews, do not have a consistently significant disciplinary effect on workers, at least to their knowledge. These understandings must be analysed with caution, bearing in mind the serious lack of transparency over the functioning of algorithmic management (Atkinson and Collins, 2024). At the same time, platform workers experience constraints on their autonomy through other impacts of the platform, such as a requirement for extensive unpaid work, the need to develop and deploy digital marketing skills, and workers’ subjection to market-based pressures of competition. Importantly, these conditions also have concrete negative impacts on workers’ earnings potential, both in terms of their hourly rates and the extent to which they are paid for all hours of labour (McDonald et al., 2024: 373).

We therefore find that digital platforms institute a model of ‘constrained flexibility’, which facilitates some gains in workers’ control over their schedule, work assignments, range of tasks, and communication with clients, especially compared with agency placements, while also leading

to increased demands on workers' time and the loss of secure labour contracts. Compared with informal networks, platforms tend to clarify workers' duties and responsibilities, which is important given the way that an undefined series of domestic tasks is bound up with the devaluation of domestic work. Platforms also provide workers convenient methods for communication with, and payment by, clients. However, platforms do not generally promote more basic aspects of 'formalisation' such as tax compliance, leaving workers classed as self-employed and responsible for their own tax return. Platforms are even less oriented towards the labour-based elements of formalisation – employment rights, social security coverage and registration, and formal employment practices like providing terms of employment in a contract and support while jobs are in progress. Platforms also move away from a formalised model in a labour-oriented sense by generating substantial unpaid work that lies outside any contractual terms. Without safeguards in place to protect standards for workers, platform childcare work therefore risks increasing such work's precarisation through the fragmentation of work and the proliferation of jobs with limited security, labour rights, and social protections.

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