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[TEAM 2019](#) [SPEAKERS](#) [PROGRAM](#)

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➤ [MAIN THEATRE](#)

CARE ON DEMAND? DIGITALLY-MEDIATED CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK

Submission to the conference “Reshaping Work”,
division “Sociology&Humanities”

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ABSTRACT

Care work is a highly gender segregated segment of the labour market in Germany and beyond. Whereas the share of female employees was as high as 81% in nursing and 85% in elderly care in Germany in 2016 (Statistik der Bundesagentur für Arbeit, 2018a: 6), it amounted to 94% in childcare in 2017 (Statistik der Bundesagentur für Arbeit 2018b: 10). This female-typed work has been termed devalued (England 2005) and is characterised, among other things, by comparatively low pay and high part-time rates, contributing to a persistently high gender pay gap of 21% in Germany in 2018 (Destatis 2019).

With a growing need for care and domestic services, an informal care market has evolved that complements formal institutions such as child care facilities. Care and domestic workers privately work and care for people in need in other people’s homes.

With the emergence of a great number of digital labour platforms, the organisation of this type of

care and domestic work – that is the mediation between care workers and care seekers – has been partly shifted online. Platforms such as *Care.com*, *hallobabysitter*, *caregaroo*, *helping*, *book-a-tiger*, *pflegix*, *pflegetiger*, etc. help organise care and domestic work arrangements today by facilitating the sorting and matching processes between care providers and care seekers.

This phenomenon provides ample opportunity to examine an *invisible* workforce. Despite a high number of digital labour platforms where highly gendered, i.e. typically “female-typed” work, is organised today, little is known about the service providers or the online sorting and matching processes. Concretely, online platforms for care and domestic services have been quite underrepresented in both current public discussions and the academic literature surrounding the platform economy thus far.

Following a conceptual distinction between crowdwork and gig work introduced by Schmidt (2017), I understand gig work as platform-mediated work that is – in contrast to crowdwork – explicitly provided offline and often in other people’s homes. In this regard, the gig economy

subsumes platforms such as *Uber*, *Deliveroo* or *TaskRabbit* but also *Care.com* or *helping*.

While different platform types and platform workers' working conditions have been well explored and discussed (see for example Leimeister et al. 2016 for crowdwork in the German context), gig work in general has only recently been paid more attention to (e.g. Huws et al. 2018, Schmidt & Kathmann 2017). The first studies that explicitly focus on care and domestic work arrangements organised online have significantly contributed to the literature by providing qualitative ethnographic insights into the working experiences of online care workers (Ticona & Mateescu 2018; Ticona et al. 2018) or by placing platform-mediated care work in the historical context (Flanagan 2019). This research has outlined, among other things, the specific nature of care work and the cross-sectional role of gender and ethnicity still characterising care and domestic work today.

However, it still remains unclear whether these findings generalise across platforms and country contexts and there is a striking lack of quantitative contributions explicitly capturing digitally organised care workers. Furthermore, it is

questionable whether platform-mediated care and domestic work should be conceptually defined as on-demand gig work because the inherent nature of care work runs counter to the concept of “worker fungibility”, which has been named characteristic of gig work (see Flanagan 2019).

By providing novel insights from a standardised survey including data from online child care providers, senior care providers and housekeepers, I will set out to address this gap with the proposed presentation at Reshaping Work. Who are the workers using care platforms and what are their reasons for using the internet for work? What are their working conditions and do they depend on their platform work?

New quantitative survey data will be presented to describe a large number of workers in terms of their socio-demographics, and to discuss whether existing inequalities in terms of gender and origin are perpetuated. I will further explore the concrete working realities of care providers and discuss workers’ self-perceived job satisfaction, job quality and concrete working arrangements, as well as their motivations and reasons for using those platforms. Furthermore, similarities and differences of digitally-brokered

care work with “typical” gig work will be discussed.

For comparative purposes, findings from Germany will be supplemented with data collected in Australia, Denmark, Spain and the UK. Possibly existing differences will be discussed in light of different institutional set-ups and labour market characteristics in the respective countries.

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