INTERNET POLICY REVIEW
Journal on internet regulation

Volume 11 **Issue** 1

Platform capitalism's social contract

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.14763/2022.1.1625

Published: 22 March 2022
Received: 25 November 2021 **Accepted:** 20 February 2022

Funding: This essay is made possible by an ERC Starting Grant for the research project Platform Labor (2018-2023).
Competing Interests: The author has declared that no competing interests exist that have influenced the text.

Citation: Van Doorn, N. (2022). Platform capitalism's social contract. *Internet Policy Review*, *11*(1). https://doi.org/10.14763/2022.1.1625

Keywords: Capitalism, Digital labour platforms, Digital platforms, Social policy, Inequality

Abstract: What kind of social contract underwrites platform capitalism? Based on findings from the Platform Labor research project, I discuss a number of ways in which platform companies are expanding their services and influence by identifying particular societal needs and marketing themselves as efficient solutions to workers, citizens and civil society organisations, as well as local governments. I argue that we are seeing the emergence of different gendered "platform fixes", connected to other types of "fixes" that have sought to overcome the limits of capital accumulation and attendant crises of social reproduction. The three platform fixes discussed in this essay each attempt to revise and rearticulate elements of the nation state's social contract, operating at the urban level: 1) Channeling migrant labour into on-demand domestic work; 2) Coordinating civil society's "altruistic surplus" to deliver social care; and 3) Promoting "home-sharing" as a way to finance the rising costs of social reproduction.

This paper is part of **The gender of the platform economy**, a special issue of *Internet Policy Review* guest-edited by Mayo Fuster Morell, Ricard Espelt and David Megias.

Introduction

What kind of social contract underwrites platform capitalism? As Pateman and Mills (2007; see Adkins and Dever 2016) have convincingly argued, a social contract is also a sexual and racial contract; a legal and normative device through which, in the Global North, the orders of worth shoring up white capitalist patriarchy are enforced and made sense of. I take the term "white capitalist patriarchy" (originally coined by bell hooks[1]) from Donna Haraway's Cyborg Manifesto (Haraway, 1985), which, despite its age, remains an exquisitely prescient and generative text. The Manifesto discerns how this regime is morphing into what she calls "the informatics of domination"; a "world system of production/reproduction and communication" that positions women in an "integrated circuit" encompassing "home, workplace, market, public arena [and] the body itself"—all of which are characterised by "a massive intensification of insecurity" (Haraway, 1985,pp. 82, 84, 90). It doesn't take much imagination to see platform capitalism as a contemporary iteration of Haraway's informatics of domination. To speak of platform capitalism is to emphasise that what others call the "platform economy" is fundamentally (part of) a *political* economy, whose unequal distribution of power, access, and ownership extends beyond the "properly economic" sphere of production into the broader field of social reproduction (Van Doorn, 2018). Platforms are redrawing the boundaries between the two, while experimenting with new ways to capture value from both.

I believe that a feminist political economy approach is best equipped to scrutinise the gender dimensions of these dynamics, linking processes of capital accumulation to modes of labour exploitation as well as attendant forms of social differentiation and subordination. Gender, in this approach, always informs such practices of valuation *and devaluation*, being thereby foundational to the construction and negotiation of social orders of worth. As new institutional forms, labour platforms are playing an increasingly prominent role in the rearticulation of such orders of worth, as they are accelerating the erosion of capital's short-lived social contract with labour in many nation states. Paradoxically, platform companies market the

1. bell hooks (real name: Gloria Jean Watkins) was an American author, professor and Black feminist activist whose work interrogated race, class and gender as intersecting systems of domination under capitalism.

insecurity of gig work as a flexible opportunity for women, who by and large continue to carry the dual burden of maintaining a livelihood as well as the life of their family and community. The "gig economy" ostensibly offers a solution to this challenge, allowing women to balance these diverging roles and responsibilities. Women are, in this sense, the quintessential gig worker, embodying all the contradictions and ambivalences of platform capitalism's sexual contract.

Yet obviously not all women are similarly integrated in the circuits that constitute today's informatics of domination. Neither are men, for that matter, with migrant and minority men being particularly vulnerable to the feminisation (i.e. the casualisation and degradation) of labour. As I have argued previously (Van Doorn, 2017), the gig economy's post-racial rebranding of on-demand service work in terms of colourblind economic empowerment and entrepreneurship hides the histories of gendered and racialised labour market segregation, which at once devalued and commodified this work. Labour platforms thereby disavow how their conditions of possibility are rooted in white capitalist patriarchy, which still casts a long shadow over the aesthetically pleasing surfaces of the apps through which the supply of labour interfaces with its demand. Still, as I elaborated there (2017), one can discern traces of this legacy in the strategies and techniques that on-demand platforms use to govern their workforce, which centre on ensuring immunity and control for the company while orchestrating the fungibility and superfluity of gig workers (ibid.).

At the time, like here, I wrote that essay as a position piece, staking out my conceptual and political perspective in anticipation of a larger research project I was hoping to conduct. To my great fortune, I received funding for this project, which is named Platform Labor and has been running since February 2018.[2] In this essay, I would like to take the opportunity to reflect on the research our team has been doing through the lens of this special issue theme. One major challenge of our research, which is rooted in ethnographic and other qualitative methods, is translating between the scale of structural transformations and systemic problems, on the one hand, and the scale of everyday life on the other. Can we investigate the social contract underwriting platform capitalism by examining how some of its tenets are articulated and problematised in the daily platform-mediated activities of individ-

2. Platform Labor is a 5-year research project (2018-2023) funded by the European Research Council. The project investigates how platforms are transforming labor, capital accumulation and social reproduction in post-welfare societies. Besides myself, the research team is composed of two PhD candidates (Eva Mos and Jelke Bosma), a postdoc (Aleksandra Piletić) and a student assistant (Darsana Vijay, followed by Natalie Kerby). For more information about the project, see https://platformlabor.net.

uals and (public and private) organisations?

To do so, it is first necessary to recognise that this social contract will vary across different jurisdictions. Second, we find it useful to employ a conceptual device that enables translations between the aforementioned scales, which for us has been the notion of "actually existing platformization" (Van Doorn, Mos, & Bosma, 2021). The latter follows Brenner and Theodore's analytical framework of "actually existing neoliberalism" (2002) insofar as it aims to show how platforms—despite being digital and frequently transnational in scope—become embedded in specific geographies and jurisdictions, thus treating platform capitalism as a variegated and contingent outcome rather than an ahistorical, immutable economic regime. In our project, we examine how platform capitalism is negotiated in Amsterdam, Berlin, and New York City—cities with a high platform density, embedded in (nation) states whose social contracts have been subject to varying levels of neoliberalisation over the past decades.

While space constraints prevent a detailed presentation of our research findings, I will discuss a number of ways in which platform companies are expanding their services and influence by identifying particular societal needs and marketing themselves as efficient solutions to workers, citizens and civil society organisations, as well as governments. As such, we are seeing the emergence of a variety of gendered "platform fixes", historically connected to "fixes" that have sought to overcome the limits of capital accumulation and attendant crises of social reproduction (Harvey, 2018; Dowling, 2021).[3] As the introduction of a platform fix becomes more accepted and broadly implemented, often first on an urban scale, this transforms existing relations between market, state and civil society actors. In other words, it tentatively revises and rearticulates a nation state's social contract. Below, I elaborate on three examples from our ongoing research, highlighting the gendered dimensions of the conditions under which these platform fixes emerged and of their (provisional) impacts.

3. To be sure, I use the term "fix" here in two ways. Following Harvey (2018) and Dowling (2018), a "platform fix" can be defined as the overcoming of limits to capital accumulation and the displacement of attendant social crises through investments in platform-based technologies and businesses, which are heralded as new frontiers for (the data-driven reorganisation of) value production and extraction. However, more colloquially, platform companies also promote themselves as offering a technological "fix" for particular societal problems or needs, whether real or imaginary. In this essay, I alternate between both meanings rather loosely.

Platform fix 1: Channeling migrant labour into on-demand domestic work

In a number of European countries, policymakers have sought to push back against informal domestic labour markets, largely by making it more appealing for households to hire domestic help 'on the books'. In 2006, the Dutch government introduced the *Regeling Dienstverlening Aan Huis* [Arrangement for Home-Based Service Provision]; a special employment regulation intended to expand the formal market for personal domestic services by reducing households' administrative and financial burdens. By relieving households of their obligation to pay taxes and social contributions, the arrangement effectively "extended the group excluded from social and employment protection to all directly employed domestic workers working up to three days per week per household" (Van Hooren, 2018, p. 12). Despite the inclusion of nominal requirements concerning minimum wage, paid holiday leave, and sick leave, a 2013 survey suggested that "in practice, three-quarters of employers are not aware of these obligations and only one in ten households complies fully" (ibid., p. 8). The government's justification for this exclusionary policy, which tolerates precisely the informal employment relations it claims to prevent, was that this kind of work mostly constitutes a side gig for individuals—assumed to be predominantly women—whose partner forms the primary source of family income (ibid.). Accordingly, the arrangement should be understood as an artifact of the patriarchal social/sexual contract enforced by the Dutch state, through labour market and welfare policies that perpetuate deep-seated gender inequalities in a society that continues to be praised for its cultural progressiveness (Knijn, 2018).

Helpling, the Berlin-based domestic cleaning platform that likewise projects an image of gender-neutral progressiveness, has jumped on the Arrangement for Home-Based Service Provision not only because it expedites its business operations by expanding its (potential) client pool in the Netherlands, but also due to the fact that it exempts the company itself from having to take on statutory employer responsibilities in the Dutch market. In other words, the arrangement provides Helpling with a measure of legal *immunity* in this market, which increases its profit margins while enabling it to publicly promote its platform fix: the value proposition of its platform business is that it offers households an ostensibly responsible, safe, low-fuss and on-demand alternative to procuring domestic services on the informal market. On the supply side, meanwhile, the company advertises its platform as providing an accessible opportunity to generate some extra income. While it does not address or represent this group explicitly, my fieldwork in Amsterdam (and in Berlin) found that Helpling is particularly popular among mi-

grant women and men. Migrants join Helpling mostly because they are experiencing difficulties finding work—especially the kind of work they have trained for. While they appreciate the relatively easy access to the platform and the ability to quickly start earning money, they also face the challenges and risks of Helpling's selective formalisation of domestic work—aggravated by their dependency on the platform and limited knowledge of the Dutch (and German) regulatory environment. Many migrants are not fully aware of their rights and responsibilities (such as paying income tax), which is something the company takes advantage of.

By selectively formalising some aspects of the job (e.g., payment, communication, hiring, work evaluation, and market intermediation) while perpetuating and in some respects intensifying conditions usually associated with informal domestic work (e.g., lack of social and occupational protections, minimal bargaining power, income insecurity, vulnerability to discrimination, opaque and/or volatile rules, and lack of professional advancement), Helpling reorganises the market for domestic services according to its own business interests and to the benefit of its clients (Van Doorn, 2021, see also Flanagan, 2019; Ticona and Mateescu, 2018). Although this market has always enforced the subordination of domestic workers, predominantly women of colour, the company reconfigures existing power relations at scale through a combination of punitive fees (e.g. for late arrivals or no-shows), client-supplied reputational indices (e.g. ratings and reviews), information asymmetries, and changing terms of service agreements. All of these techniques expand the *control* of Helpling and its clients, at the expense of its cleaners. Moreover, the platform positions cleaners as *fungible* commodities by creating an evaluative infrastructure in which they can be compared based on a common set of metrics (e.g., price, rating, number of cleanings, availability) that forms useful aggregated market information for Helpling's discerning 'customer class' (Van Doorn, 2021; Kornberger et al., 2017). Clients are thereby given a sense of abundant labour supply and are empowered to make informed customer choices, whereas cleaners receive very little information about the clients who have selected them or approve them after Helpling's match. They also fear becoming *superfluous* among all the other cleaners who offer the same service and are made to look alike—save for some personalised notes on one's profile.

It should be reiterated that Helpling's business model and operations are enabled by the Dutch state's exclusionary employment arrangement, to which the company has in part developed a calculated response. Importantly, the low political salience of—and lack of resistance to—this arrangement is not just due to the consistent privileging of household employers' needs over the wellbeing of domestic workers,

nor can it be narrowly attributed to conservative gender ideology, but, more pertinently, "reflects how intersecting inequalities contributed to limited political representation of the low-educated female workers involved" (Van Hooren, 2018, p, 13). Many of these women are migrant and minority women whose voice is rarely heard on the national political stage. Although Helpling has made domestic work more palatable for higher educated migrant women and men (e.g. by offering an app-based "hands-off" approach to home cleaning that is easy to dip in an out of), the company continues to benefit from how gender, migration, and legal status become entangled in the precarisation of this work in the Dutch context. For instance, most interviewed Helpling cleaners who migrated to the Netherlands from another European country lack access to social assistance programmes because these are restricted for EU migrants without a permanent residence permit. When claiming benefits, this group of migrants is subject to "enhanced controls" by the Dutch state and faces the threat that these claims may result in the revocation of the right of residence, which together "appear to deter social assistance applications from Union citizens" (Kramer et al., 2018, p. 1509).[4] Since proof of one's economic self-sufficiency is key to the state's assessment procedure, quick 'on the books' income opportunities like Helpling and other gig platforms remain popular among EU migrants, despite numerous drawbacks such as a lack of labour protections.

Accordingly, we can see how exclusionary welfare policies constitute another condition that pushes migrants into the gig economy: because they are not included in the Dutch social contract, they resort to signing the contingent clickwrap contracts drafted by companies like Helpling. Helpling, in this sense, functions as an "employer"—or at least a labour market intermediary—of first *and* last resort, absorbing migrant labour in ways similar to other poorly regulated low-wage sectors. Indeed, this absorptive function should be seen as the company's second and unacknowledged platform fix, which embeds it into the broader political economy of managed migration (see Van Doorn and Vijay, 2021). Connecting both platform fixes, we can conclude that Helpling leverages the vulnerability of migrants as well as the gendered and racialised devaluation of domestic labour to meet the demands of time-strapped households looking for low-fuss domestic help. While gender may at first seem to have little bearing on Helpling's operations, beyond the obviously gendered nature of domestic work, on further notice it thus becomes co-articulated with a number of institutionalised forms of social stratification and sub-

4. As stated on the website of the Dutch Immigration and Naturalisation Service: "The shorter your right of residence in the Netherlands is, the greater the chance that a benefit will end your residence" Available: https://ind.nl/en/Pages/public-funds.aspx.

ordination that form the conditions of possibility for the company's opportunistic and ultimately predatory business model.

Platform fix 2: Coordinating civil society's "altruistic surplus" to deliver social care

Helpling, as the name suggests, proffers itself as a helping hand to households and, indirectly, to nation states and local governments seeking ways to manage recurrent (and deepening) crises of social reproduction. Like the terrain of social reproduction itself, the impact of these crises is "variegated, differentiated, and constitutively uneven" (Bakker and Gill, 2019, p. 504), even as it "is nevertheless increasingly shaped by the power of capital" (ibid.). As Dowling (2018, p. 334) notes, however, a feminist political economy analysis does not only bring into focus the "subordination of care and social reproduction under the demands of capital", leading to a crisis in which capital and care seem to be "counter-posed" (see Fraser, 2016)., More incisively, it interrogates how "reconfigurations of the relationship between production and reproduction" entail a "reorganization of the terrain of social reproduction and the social relations that comprise it" (Dowling, 2018, p. 334). This reorganisation constitutes a "care fix" (Dowling, 2018), which renders care and social reproduction directly productive of value through incorporation into an expanded field—or "integrated circuit"—of capital accumulation. In the words of Van Dyk (2018, p. 539), capital's care fix represents "the emergence of a new political economy of social value extraction and cost reduction" that generalises unwaged work beyond the household and "is accompanied by a moral economy that utilizes the emotional ladenness of voluntarism and community". If the social is a site of crisis, insofar as it is increasingly deprived of the means with which it can reproduce itself, it is also increasingly envisioned as a site of reparative potential waiting to be valorised. Platforms, unsurprisingly, are playing a growing role in identifying, organising, and monetising this potential, which is conceived as an underutilised resource embodied in citizens looking to "do good" and "contribute" something meaningful in places where their help is needed.

Whereas Helpling participates in the marketisation and commodification of care-related domestic services, volunteering platforms are thus "part of a larger European trend toward the privatization of social services through the introduction of nonprofit and voluntary activity" (Muehlebach, 2011, p. 65). Their mission is to optimise the provision of voluntary social services by operationalising civil society's "altruistic surplus" (Cunningham, 1996) and channeling it toward initiatives and organisations in the third (social) sector. As such, they aim to reduce the frictions in-

herent in capital's care fix, frequently imagined as transaction costs and other economic inefficiencies, while providing a digital infrastructure that expedites the offloading of social reproductive costs onto unpaid (aspiring) citizens in ways that remain deeply gendered and racialised (Dowling, 2018). Yet the platformisation of an emerging participatory society and its "culture of voluntarism" (Muehlebach, 2011, p. 60) is likewise "variegated, differentiated, and constitutively uneven" (Bakker and Gill, 2019, p. 504), as it is a process embedded in national and local institutional settings as well as welfare and social policy frameworks. The Platform Labor project compares the trajectories of this path-dependent process across our three field sites.

In Berlin, Mos (2021) encountered a social and institutional environment that was particularly conducive to social enterprises and startups looking to "innovate" in the voluntary sector. The city has a sizeable third sector, with approximately 24,000 "registered associations" and 1,000 foundations that to some extent rely on volunteers (Berlin.de, 2021a). This is possible since, according to one estimate, 37,2 % of the Berlin population is engaged in volunteering, while 64.8% of the non-volunteers indicates they are "definitely" or "probably" willing to engage themselves in volunteering (Kausmann et al., 2017, p. 87, in Mos, 2021). To cultivate and manage this volunteering potential, the city government appointed a "Permanent Secretary for Active Citizenship" in 2016 and, in 2017, founded a policy department within the Berlin Senate dedicated to "citizen engagement and democracy support" (Berlin.de, 2021b). Finally, in recognition of its "well-developed and sophisticated volunteering infrastructure", Berlin was appointed "European Volunteering Capital 2021" by the Centre for European Volunteering (CEV, 2019, in Mos, 2021). It is in this setting that GoVolunteer has been able to thrive since its inception in 2015, during Germany's "long summer of migration"—an event that boosted Berlin's long-established culture of civic engagement. In response to local governments' struggles to process the influx of refugees, a great variety of grassroots civic initiatives emerged to create an alternative infrastructure based on voluntary labour. Yet because, according to GoVolunteer's founder, people often did not know where to start or how to find each other, this budding infrastructure needed retooling by way of a digital platform that emphasised "transparency" and "coordination" as critical preconditions for effectively "matching" (potential) volunteers with projects and organisations in need of support (Mos, 2021).

GoVolunteer's platform, which was developed with the support of McKinsey Digital Labs (MDL), started out serving refugee solidarity initiatives but quickly branched out into other social causes such as "poverty & homelessness", "democracy and hu-

man rights", "online volunteering", and "seniors". In all these areas, the fundamental challenge to be "solved" is framed in terms of a lack of efficient coordination rather than systemic inequality or exclusion, which expresses a *logistical* approach to tackling social issues by way of efficiently managed crowdsourcing. Yet before this crowd of volunteers can be allocated to fitting social causes and initiatives, it first has to be energised and recruited—activities relying heavily on "the production of good feeling" (Muehlebach, 2011, p. 61), especially gendered affects such as compassion. Ongoing recruitment is important given that the public funding GoVolunteer receives is tied to specific initiatives it (co-)develops, rather than to the platform itself.[5] Without volunteers driving these initiatives, this funding would dry up. Accordingly, the platform's logistification of volunteering is also articulated in its concern with operational agility and experimentation, which should allow it to quickly anticipate and act on societal "trends" (Mos, 2021). There is reason to be critical of such topical "just-in-time" logic, however, if only because it invites questions regarding the durability and scope of volunteer-based social care: will a focus on perceived urgency and "hot" social issues entail a waning of voluntary resources once these issues no longer appear in people's head- or timelines? And what happens to social groups whose needs are marginalised or otherwise considered less worthy of people's time and empathy?

Here we should take to heart Van Dyk's reminder that "the basic principle of social rights is the institutionalised rejection of the idea that compassion and pity are a solution to social inequality" (2018, p. 536). If, in a welfare state, social care is a citizen's unconditional and universal right, the post-welfare social contract shored up by GoVolunteer relinquishes such state-sanctioned rights in favour of a moral appeal to civic responsibility that is replete with repurposed feminised sentiments. What GoVolunteer's logistical approach adds to the conditional and intermittent nature of social care provision in this "voluntary post-wage regime" (ibid.) is a concern with rapid scalability (driven by "trends"), replicability across cities ("best practices"), and the fungibility of volunteers as resources or "platform assets" to be mobilised "on-demand". Moreover, by promoting the idea that everyone who cares about an issue can chip in, this approach "challenges standards of professionalism and furthers the de-skilling of reproductive activities beyond private households" (ibid.). This weakens the position of paid care and social workers, many of whom are (migrant) women whose labour has been rendered increasingly precarious and

5. While, as a non-profit "registered association" with a "public utility" designation, it is allowed to engage in commercial activities (as long as it reinvests any profits into its public-serving activities), GoVolunteer nevertheless still depends on public resources in the form of subsidies as well as partnerships.

cumbersome due to waves of welfare reform and the ongoing commodification of care (Schwiter and Steiner 2020; Marchetti et al., 2022).

Finally, for all the debate about automation in the field of logistics, a significant part of GoVolunteer's daily operations are decidedly human-powered. More specifically, they rely on the unwaged labour of a relatively large and revolving group of mostly young female interns, who create the conditions of possibility for the start-up's success. Growing both sides of the platform's volunteering marketplace requires significant amounts of "relationship labor" (Shestakofsky and Kelkar, 2020) in the form of promotional activities and targeted user "acquisition", which is to a large extent done by interns "writing blog posts and engaging in online 'community management', as well as searching and recruiting new organisations via e-mail and telephone" (Mos, 2021, p. 325). Moreover, these young women also respond to user queries via the platform's helpdesk, while serving as its public face in promotional photographs accompanying blogs and social media posts (ibid.). Crucially, then, GoVolunteer does not only depend on an institutionalised culture of voluntarism and a robust third sector, but would not be able to scale without the unremunerated and highly gendered affective labour of its intern workforce. These are the party obscured "boundary resources" needed to realise the extractive business model behind the platform's progressive interface (Van Doorn, Mos, & Bosma, 2021).

PLATFORM FIX 3: "HOME-SHARING" AS A WAY TO FINANCE THE RISING COSTS OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION

While capital's "care fix" has generalised unwaged (affective) labour beyond the domestic sphere, the home nonetheless remains a central locus of social reproduction. It is a gendered workplace that has become more crisis-prone as housing has taken up an exceedingly large share of household incomes, especially for tenants. Whereas housing was another social right of the welfare state, it is "increasingly understood as a commodity and subjugated to market over broader social interests" (Ronald and Dewilde, 2017, p. 1). Moreover, in post-welfare regimes, "the housing equity held by owner-occupiers has been eyed by governments and policy makers as not merely an enhancement of, but integral to, welfare self-provision across the life course and a means to compensate for diminishing public provision more generally" (ibid.). This "housing-based welfare" approach coincides with the rapidly rising price of real estate as a result of its ever more prominent role in global capital accumulation, which has increasingly focused on speculative asset purchases. It is partly within this context that our research project examines plat-

form-mediated "home sharing", or "short-term rental" (STR), as a set of techniques that extract value from the private home as a particular asset class.

Airbnb, globally the largest STR platform, has likewise repeatedly (albeit sometimes implicitly) referred to this context in promotional output that highlights its value for women hosts. For example, in a 2017 "news" item, the company announced that it was "proud that women Airbnb hosts have earned over $10 billion through our platform" since its inception in 2008 (Airbnb News, 2017). Accordingly, it claims to "serve as a powerful way for women to independently achieve greater financial, professional, and social empowerment" (ibid.). In particular, its own study estimates that "over 50,000 women around the world have used Airbnb income to support entrepreneurship for themselves", while "62 percent of single mother hosts report using their Airbnb income to help afford their home" (ibid.). Framed in this way, STR can be conceived as the platformisation of housing-based welfare (Van Doorn, 2020), allowing women-led households to compensate for stagnating overall wages, gender pay gaps, as well as job insecurity, and thereby ameliorate the rising costs of living in urban areas. Approached from a different angle, however, STR has also been shown to shore up gentrification and the broader commodification and assetisation of real estate (Cocola-Gant and Gago, 2019; Grisdale, 2019; Fields and Rogers, 2021), which have had a particularly deleterious impact on single mothers and other economically vulnerable groups. Although it is usually treated as a class issue, gentrification is a highly gendered process insofar as it "is also a product of, and invariably involves changes in, gender relations and the production of gender inequalities" (Sakizlioglu, 2018, p. 205).

Such gender inequalities pertain not just to wages but to wealth, as the gap between labor- and asset-derived incomes continues to expand and class position becomes ever more contingent on one's ability to monetise asset portfolios (Adkins, Cooper, and Konings, 2020). Indeed, like the relation between gender and gentrification, the gender wealth gap is another understudied form of stratification, even though available evidence "demonstrates that women systematically have less access to wealth" (Deere and Doss, 2006) and that "women's lower levels of wealth are mostly attributable to lower lifetime earnings, discontinuous labor trajectories, and family obligations" (Waitkus and Minkus, 2021). This begs the question if the women hosts Airbnb publicly champions actually *own* the home they are "sharing". Or are they perhaps (co-)hosting for the owner of a listed property, who could be a (business) partner, or for a property management firm listing multiple homes on Airbnb? Alternatively, are they engaging in STR on a more precarious basis, as tenants (illegally) subletting their apartment? Airbnb's report does

not specify this information, yet research on the gender wealth gap suggests that the 21 percent of women hosts who, according to a recent Airbnb survey (Airbnb News, 2020), consider hosting their primary occupation are more likely to derive their income from hosting labour than from the rents generated by their housing assets.

Although a listing's host and owner are often conflated (in research) on Airbnb, Bosma (2022) found that the platform actively develops services and strategies that foster the *professionalisation* of hosting, which is frequently enacted through the owner's outsourcing of feminised hosting labour—from the "dirty work" of cleaning and other menial tasks (Duffy, 2007) to the affective labour of accommodating guests. More specifically, he identifies two distinct modes of professionalisation: one asset-based and the other labour-based. Asset-based professionalisation leverages tools that enable the optimisation of short-term rents generated by housing assets marketed on the platform, such as dynamic pricing software, Airbnb's API, which allows for integration with external property management systems (PMSs), and its own Protools suite, whose purposes is to "make it easier than ever to manage listings and reservations at scale" (Airbnb.com, 2019, n.p., in Bosma, 2022, p. 11). Meanwhile, labour-based professionalisation is enabled through Airbnb's co-hosting and Superhost programmes: the former allows hosts to take care of other people's homes and guests, while the latter confers a regulated status on "experienced hosts" who are "most dedicated to provide outstanding hospitality" (Airbnb Help Center, n.d.). The fewer housing assets one owns, the more one depends on hosting labour to professionalise and earn more income. Yet, as Bosma's research shows, Airbnb's policies produce a growing inequality between asset-rich and asset-poor hosts. As he concludes, "the unequal opportunities to professionalize on Airbnb seem to further reinforce the inequalities generated by the capacity of capital and wealth to generate larger income streams than labor" (Bosma, 2022, p. 11).

Again, such growing class inequality is also thoroughly gendered. During Bosma's fieldwork in Berlin and Amsterdam, he encountered numerous asset-poor women hosts who embraced the domestic and affective labour of hosting despite also experiencing its limitations and dealing with precarious conditions. Rather than straightforwardly being empowered by Airbnb, these women hosts saw hosting as an appealing income opportunity but also noted how their professionalising aspirations ran up against a ceiling defined by their lack of housing assets. The only way of expanding their "business" was by taking on more listings owned by others, yet this strategy was obviously constrained by their physical capacities as well as

by other (care) responsibilities. Moreover, although their affective investments in the wellbeing of guests was highly valued in terms of ratings, reviews, and Superhost status, it was difficult to monetise this added value when co-hosting, given that most of the returns accrued to the owner's bank account. These owners, it turned out, were mostly men. It should also be noted that the growing prevalence of property management firms and hospitality services on Airbnb has led to the emergence of a hosting "cottage industry" whose novelty belies its traditionally gendered division of labour. Once hosting labour is outsourced to these businesses, it is segmented into platform-based management activities, on the one hand, and largely physical "daily operations" on the other—the latter being further downloaded to cleaning staff or service contractors, often (migrant) women. Although their feminised labour cannot be automated, unlike many of the management tasks, it can nevertheless be tracked and optimised using the software tools that Airbnb and other companies make available to multi-listers looking to streamline and scale up their enterprise (Bosma, 2022). Ultimately, as we have argued elsewhere (Bosma and Van Doorn, in press), the increasing share of these commercial hosting enterprises on the platform results in the gradual gentrification *of Airbnb itself* and thereby threatens to displace (e.g. through reduced visibility in search results) regular "home-sharing" hosts, including the women Airbnb claims to empower.

Concluding remarks

To answer the question this essay started out with: platform capitalism is underwritten by a neoliberal social contract that assumes and fosters the self-sufficiency of households and communities, whose social reproductive activities and needs are increasingly incorporated into the "integrated circuit" of capital accumulation. The three platform "fixes" discussed here can be understood as strategic and situated responses to such reproductive challenges, which have become endemic to post-welfare societies. Each provisional "fix" takes shape through the "actually existing platformization" of three sectors in which the boundaries of production and social reproduction are routinely transgressed: domestic cleaning services, the third/social sector, and short-term home rental. In these sectors, platforms come to mediate relations between market, state, and civil society actors, perpetuating or indeed intensifying some dynamics while recalibrating others. Given that such relations are stratified along lines of gender, race, class, and legal status (among others), actually existing platformisation is a process of uneven development likewise marked by these social hierarchies—of which I have highlighted gender for the occasion of this special issue.

While it has been noted how the platform economy is embedded in broader historical legacies and political economies (e.g. Grabher and König, 2020), the critical role of gender, race, and class in the platform-governed reproduction of capitalist social relations has yet to be properly appreciated (but see Schor, 2020; Altenried et al., 2021). This is why platform scholarship would benefit not only from ethnographic methods that give face to such embeddedness, but also from (intersectional) feminist approaches to the study of political economy. On the one hand, such approaches offer necessary analytical perspectives with which to elaborate a more comprehensive critique of platform capitalism. On the other hand, moreover, they can also provide a way forward politically. As Haraway (1985, p. 82) wrote in her manifesto, "[o]ne important route for reconstructing socialist-feminist politics is through theory and practice addressed to the social relations of science and technology, including crucially the systems of myth and meanings structuring our imaginations." Today, as these socio-material relations have become infrastructural to the functioning of daily life, one essential lesson of a socialist-feminism reconstructed for the 21st century is that platform policy—where theory meets practice—is also *social policy*. Our collective future will depend on how (soon) governments act on this lesson and the extent to which we can develop democratic ways of curbing corporate platform power.

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