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GIG WORK ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS

Case Study 3: SweepSouth – Platform-Based Domestic Work

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I. INTRODUCTION

Domestic workers have long performed piecework, working multiple “gigs” for multiple employers, to complete specific tasks at a piece rate. Piecework is typically associated with low wages, poor working conditions, and limited social and legal protections. Women have long been disproportionately represented in piecework because of low levels of education, care commitments, and the unavailability of suitable work opportunities. Domestic workers remain one of the most underpaid, overworked, and ill-treated section of workers.¹ According to the ILO, more than a third of domestic workers are not entitled to a minimum wage or maternity leave benefits, nor do they have a statutory limitation on the number of hours worked or stipulated weekly rest hours.² Given that the workers’ place of work is somebody’s home, regulating the sector has been a challenge, as is implementing the few regulations that do exist.

The growth of the gig economy has already caused many changes in the structures that govern work.³ As these technological interventions are introduced to a sector of work that is historically exploitative and undervalued, it could have the result of further entrenching exploitative practices. In many ways, gig work through digital platforms bears a structural resemblance to piecework. On the other hand, the domestic work sector, which has seemingly remained unchanged for generations, could stand to benefit from the opportunities that digital technologies offer. Technology can be leveraged to improve employment conditions for domestic workers through, for example, standardizing wages, improving employment conditions, and professionalizing domestic work.

¹International Labour Organization. (2010). *Decent work for domestic workers IV(1)*. Geneva: ILO. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_norm/@relconf/documents/meetingdocument/wcms_104700.pdf.

² Ibid.

³ Renan Barzilay, A., & Ben-David, A. (2017). Platform Inequality: Gender in the Gig-Economy. *SSRN Electronic Journal*. doi: 10.2139/ssrn.2995906.

2. RESEARCH QUERY

2.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In an effort to understand how platform interventions in job-matching affect employment conditions and worker rights in the gig economy, this study examines the impact platforms have had on the domestic work sector in South Africa. How are employment relationships and conditions changing? Have platforms enabled or improved access to quality work in developing countries? Do such labor platforms support or undermine workers' rights and ability to bargain for adequate wages, compensation, and terms and conditions of their labor?

This study examines the impact SweepSouth, an on-demand cleaning service platform in South Africa, has had on employment relationships, working conditions, wages, and the ability to collectivize and bargain.

2.2 ABOUT SWEEPSOUTH

SweepSouth is an on-demand cleaning service app which aims to offer clients “convenient, flexible, and reliable”⁴ services while providing “dignified, flexible work at decent pay to SweepStars.”⁵ “SweepStars” is the name given to domestic workers on the platform, which was established in 2014 and offers services in Cape Town, Johannesburg, Pretoria, and Durban, and has plans to expand to Ghana, Botswana, Kenya, and Nigeria. The platform is meant exclusively for women domestic workers and had 7,500 registered workers, over 150,000 app downloads, and 40,000 users in 2018, making it the biggest on-demand cleaning service app in South Africa. However, it represents less than one percent of domestic workers in the country.

Clients can book a cleaning appointment for a minimum of three hours and a maximum of eight hours per day on any day of the week, selecting the number of rooms or bathrooms that need to be cleaned. They can add tasks like ironing, dishwashing, interior window cleaning, and cabinet cleaning to be completed by the worker. Clients are charged upwards of 38 South African Rand (a little less than US\$3) per hour, along with processing fees. Clients can book recurring cleaning appointments and even select the workers they prefer.

On its website, SweepSouth states that providing training and digital and financial literacy are added benefits of the platform for workers. Workers, however, only receive one day of training on how to use the app and Google Maps. To join the platform, workers must fill out an application form and provide two reference letters from previous employers. Shortlisted candidates are called to the office to take a written multiple-choice test that covers tasks related to cleaning. Those who clear this test are then asked to participate in the training and get verified by law enforcement, after which they can start accessing work through the platform.

⁴ SweepSouth - Trusted, Reliable Home Cleaners. (2019). Retrieved 1 August 2019, from <https://sweepsouth.com/>.

⁵ SweepSouth calls their workers SweepStars and not cleaners or domestic workers in their bid to professionalize the sector and remove the stigma associated with domestic work.

2.3 METHOD AND LIMITATIONS

This study relied on semi-structured interviews with workers, both on and off the platform, and labor market experts. In total, 14 in-person and 3 telephonic interviews were conducted for this study. Gig work is an emergent field of study, particularly the effects for workers in the Global South. It is thus important to understand the priorities and experiences of workers. The semi-structured interview format enabled flexibility and adaptability, enabling participants to speak about the issues that mattered to them. The importance of interviews to qualitative research is not limited to the fact that they highlight subjective experiences, but also that participants are able to express themselves in their own voice and language. Much of this cannot be captured through conventional survey methods. The clear limitation of this approach is that the findings cannot be assumed to represent the experiences of a larger sector of SweepSouth workers or domestic workers in general. Wherever possible, however, we have corroborated our findings with available secondary literature on both SweepSouth and domestic work in South Africa.

Cape Town was chosen as the site because it has the most SweepSouth activity both in terms of workers and clients. The SweepSouth main office is also in Cape Town, and we hoped situating our study in Cape Town would facilitate access to the SweepSouth team. The experience in Cape Town is comparable to other large cities, but it does see larger internal and external migration—many workers we spoke to had migrated to Cape Town in search of work. We contacted two workers from nearby provinces, but they were still waiting to receive work through the application, which suggests that access to work and experience of workers is different in non-urban areas.

We recruited respondents primarily by booking services through the SweepSouth app in Cape Town. We contacted workers to inform them about the study and asked them to participate in a 40-minute interview on the day of the booking. We conducted five in-person, in-depth, semi-structured qualitative interviews with workers in this manner. We offered respondents a small compensation for participating in the interview. A collaborator from the University of Western Cape helped us identify additional SweepSouth workers through their Facebook page for domestic workers in South Africa. We reached three workers and conducted the interviews by telephone. All the workers we interviewed worked in the Cape Town area. We spoke to workers about a range of themes: previous work, employment conditions, wages, grievance redressal, safety, aspirations, and income security.

In order to be able to compare employment conditions of workers on and off the platform and the role that unionization plays in improving conditions and addressing workplace exploitation in the domestic work sector, we interviewed five members of the South Africa Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) in person. We offered compensation for their participation. We also interviewed four experts to help us understand labor market conditions and the domestic work sector in South Africa.⁶

⁶ Krish Chetty, Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC); Dr. Alexi Habiyaemye, HSRC; Fairuz Mullagee, Social Law Project, University of Western Cape; Myrtle Witbooi, South Africa Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union

SweepSouth management declined to participate in the study, citing prior commitments with other organizations on the same subject.⁷ We have supplemented the report with publicly available interviews and announcements from the platform in lieu of responses from their participation.

None of the workers on SweepSouth we spoke to were members of SADSAWU and all were unsure of how being a member of a union could help them. On the other hand, all the workers off the platform we spoke to were long-time members of the union, and some held offices as well. They were very educated about their rights and entitlements. In order to make a fair comparison of the experiences of workers on and off the platform, interviews with workers who work off the platform and are also not union members would be ideal. However, we were unable to make contact with workers who fit this profile. To compensate for this, we spoke with labor market experts who have been studying domestic workers on digital platforms.

We were allotted only five working days for the field visit, assumedly because of budget and time constraints. This limited the number of workers we were able to access and speak with, particularly as gig workers are dispersed and do not have a central point of contact or coordination. We contacted workers directly through the app, but many workers were reluctant to speak to us. SweepSouth instructs workers to limit interactions with clients, including avoiding conversation with them. This is to deter workers from taking on private work with clients they are matched with through the platform. We found some workers were reluctant to speak to us on account of this, while others shared their experiences more freely when we assured them that we were not associated with SweepSouth and the content of the discussion would not be shared with management. We contacted the SweepSouth management team hoping to access more workers, but they refused to participate in the study.

2.4 PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

All the workers on SweepSouth were women between the ages of 26 and 47. Of the eight workers from SweepSouth with whom we spoke, five had emigrated from Zimbabwe in search of better work opportunities. Respondents' educational qualifications ranged from those having completed middle school to those with diplomas or undergraduate degrees.⁸ Workers who had emigrated from Zimbabwe tended to have higher educational qualifications. Most respondents had performed some form of domestic work before joining the platform, sometimes in addition to jobs in the hospitality or sales sectors. For most respondents, the platform was their primary source of income, supplemented by grants, most commonly childcare grants, from the government, or through other jobs. All the workers we interviewed had been working with SweepSouth for over a year. All the workers had at least one child for whom they were financially responsible, in addition to other dependents. Workers had varying degrees of caregiving responsibilities at home.

⁷ We contacted South African researchers associated with the other organization, Fairwork Foundation, but they also noted that SweepSouth had not been particularly cooperative; the same feedback was also received from other researchers from HSRC we spoke with, who were studying platforms.

⁸ In South Africa, 73.4 percent of women are reported to have completed the school-leaving examination, while only 28.5 percent had an undergraduate degree.

Education Series Volume V Higher Education and Skills in South Africa 2017 (2017) Retrieved 7 August 2019 from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-92-01-05/HigherEducationandSkillsSouthAfrica2017.pdf>.

The five members of SADSAWU we spoke to were also all women ranging in age from 55 years to 67 years old. SADSAWU members are thus, on average, much older than the platform workers we spoke to. They were all from South Africa, having moved to Cape Town in search of better opportunities. They had all left full-time jobs as domestic workers on account of their age, but still took on part-time work or reduced hours to make ends meet. Although all their children were grown, one worker was supporting her grandchildren and niece. They were all long-time members of the union, with the newest member having joined in 2012 after a dispute with her employer's partner.

3. LABOR MARKETS AND DOMESTIC WORK IN SOUTH AFRICA

The unemployment rate in South Africa reached 27.6 percent in 2019, a near 15-year high, with women's unemployment at 29.3 percent compared to men's at 26.1 percent.⁹ Women consistently face higher rates of unemployment and underemployment than men.¹⁰ Race also plays a crucial role in differential experiences of the labor market among South Africans, with stark disparities in unemployment rates between white, black Africans, and colored.¹¹

Government initiatives to develop industry focus on entrepreneurship, and small businesses and platforms fall under these initiatives. The high cost of internet connectivity via both data and broadband WiFi connections could be a prohibitive factor in the uptake of platform work and the development of the digital economy in general in South Africa.¹²

Domestic work in South Africa, much like other facets of society, continues to be impacted by the legacy of apartheid-era policies. Historically performed by African and mixed-race women, racial disparity in the sector continues to remain highly stark, with 91 percent of workers identifying as black African and nine percent as colored.¹³ Workers are usually from disadvantaged communities, while employers are predominantly white and affluent. The sector employs 14 percent of the workforce, and women make up around 97 percent of the entire sector.¹⁴ Many are internal migrants or immigrants from neighboring countries with little knowledge of their legal rights, having had limited access to formal education. While immigrants have work permits, they are not eligible for state-sponsored schemes or benefits such as the Unemployment Insurance Fund. Their vulnerability is exacerbated by the lack of

⁹ Quarterly Labour Force Survey Quarter 1: 2019. (2019). Retrieved 1 August 2019, from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02111stQuarter2019.pdf>.

¹⁰ Ndinda, C., & Ngandu, S. (2019). Winners and losers: gender disparities in the South African labour market. Retrieved 1 August 2019, from <http://repository.hsrb.ac.za/handle/20.500.11910/9714>.

¹¹ Interview with Alexi Habiyaremye (HSRC)

The stark inequality is partly a result of colonial and apartheid-era policies that placed black Africans and coloreds at a disadvantage, but also partly because of the failure of post-apartheid governments to radically transform the social structure to remove structural inequalities. For example, current government initiatives aimed at creating job opportunities are aimed at the mining, agriculture, and construction industries. While these may create jobs predominantly for men in low- and semi-skilled work in the short term, they don't take into account the structural changes required to create long-term impact. This would require restructuring the education sector to create a skilled workforce and investment to develop dynamic industries that can absorb these workers.

¹² Chutel, L. (2018). Connecting to the internet costs more in Johannesburg and Cape Town than it does in New York and Zurich. Retrieved August 2019.

Sunday Read: Why data and transport costs are the biggest barriers for young job seekers. (2019). Retrieved 1 August 2019, from <https://www.fin24.com/Companies/sunday-read-why-data-and-transport-costs-are-the-biggest-barriers-for-young-job-seekers-20190512>.

¹³ International Labour Organization. (2013). Domestic workers across the world: Global and regional statistics and the extent of legal protection [Ebook]. Geneva. Retrieved from https://www.ilo.org/travail/Whatsnew/WCMS_173363/lang--en/index.htm.

¹⁴ How do women fare in the South African labour market? | Statistics South Africa. Retrieved 1 August 2019, from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=11375>.

organizations that ensure they enjoy basic rights as guaranteed by the constitution;¹⁵ their limited participation in trade unions;¹⁶ and the fact that their work isolates them to the private sphere because their place of work is usually the employer's home. Exact numbers of domestic workers are difficult to ascertain and differ across studies—this is probably due to the fact that domestic work is often hidden or unrecognized and a large part of the labor force is engaged in non-standard forms of work.

Domestic workers in South Africa are covered by several laws, most notably the Sectoral Determination 7: Domestic Worker Sector, 2002 (SD7), which keeps the definition of domestic worker broad enough to include independent contractors as well as employees.¹⁷ SD7 stipulates the basic conditions of work and includes provisions for wages, working hours, and leave policy. Additionally, other laws like National Labour Relations Act 1995 (LRA) and Basic Conditions of Employment Act of 1997¹⁸ make provisions for workers to organize and collectively bargain. LRA has also been used to address disputes regarding unfair dismissal. However, there are glaring gaps in the protection of domestic workers, as they have been excluded from the scope of two acts: Compensation for Occupational Injuries and Diseases Act (COIDA) and the National Minimum Wage Act (NMWA). The latter sets the minimum wage at 20 South African Rand (R20) per hour, but domestic workers' minimum wage continues to stand at R15.

¹⁵ Mullagee, F. (2011). Domestic Workers in South Africa. Organising for Empowerment.

¹⁶ SADSAWU has membership of around 30,000 of the reported one million domestic workers in South Africa.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 FEW JOBS, FEW OPTIONS

Workers joined SweepSouth for a number of reasons: lack of alternative employment opportunities; potential for higher earnings; distrust of traditional recruitment agencies; and the hope of using SweepSouth as a means to find permanent work. SweepSouth requires workers to submit reference letters from previous employers and to clear a police verification process, so it is unlikely to provide employment opportunities to those without proper paperwork.

Some workers were previously employed in the service sector—in shops, as security guards, in restaurants, or for professional cleaning services. They left their jobs either because of low wages, irregular pay, long hours of work, care responsibilities, or because their contracts had not been renewed. Unable to find alternative jobs in the same field, they joined SweepSouth. Those who had been in domestic work previously turned to SweepSouth because their employers left Cape Town or they needed to increase their earnings. Many did “char” work previously, i.e., domestic work across different homes; such work was found either through acquaintances or job boards like Gumtree,¹⁹ but was not regular or reliable.

“I used to advertise on Gumtree but there people don’t want you to come every day. Some of them became regular clients but they don’t always call.”

All of the workers we interviewed joined SweepSouth hoping for steady and higher earnings. The system of weekly payouts on the platform was an important feature for workers. For the workers who migrated from Zimbabwe, domestic work was one of the few viable options for employment in South Africa. They had difficulty finding jobs that matched their qualifications and skill levels, and they felt they were discriminated against because of their migrant status. One of the workers had a degree in mortuary science and had worked in a funeral parlor, another was a trained hair stylist, and another had worked in a hospital for ten years. They left Zimbabwe because of the dire economic situation—high inflation rates and a crumbling economy meant that even if they were employed, they didn’t receive salaries for months at a time.

“Most places I apply to don’t want to hire me because I’m a foreigner. They have to hire someone from South Africa first and not people from outside.”

Some workers joined the platform hoping they would find regular, permanent employers through the app. The platform provided a way to make quick cash while looking for full-time work.

“It’s a good way to make cash quickly because we get paid every week. And you might find regular clients.”

Others said that even though they had been drawn to the platform earlier, their experiences on the platform had made them re-evaluate; they would now prefer a traditional job with a single employer as it was more stable and predictable.

¹⁹ Gumtree is a job-matching website where workers and employers can advertise their services or needs.

“On SweepSouth things keep changing. One week you get many bookings for three or four hours. Other times, you get long bookings for just one day. It makes things hard.”

Workers were also distrustful or skeptical about the utility of traditional recruitment agencies. Agencies, they noted, didn’t pay workers fairly, cutting a significant amount in agency commission.

“You work hard but they (recruitment agencies) benefit, not you. So that’s why I chose SweepSouth.”

4.2 INCREASED EARNINGS BUT IRREGULAR WORK

Workers joined SweepSouth hoping to earn a higher and steadier income. However, the irregularity of work combined with the costs of transport and data, both of which are borne by the worker, significantly reduced their earning potential on the platform.

Workers on SweepSouth are paid an hourly rate depending on how long they’ve been on the platform. New recruits receive R25 (a little less than US\$2) per hour, which is well above the minimum wage of R15 for domestic workers in South Africa. Per appointment, workers can earn between R75 to R200. However, there are significant hidden costs for the workers—they typically need to spend around R50 (around US\$4.50) on transport per booking, and upwards of R35 on data and airtime per week. These hidden costs often amount to as much as R350-400 per week. High transport costs also reflect the spatial segregation of Cape Town, with clients and workers typically living in different parts of the city. Thus, while SweepSouth guarantees pay above the minimum wage, these additional or hidden costs severely constrain earnings.

Upon completing 400 hours of work on the platform, the hourly rate increases to R32 (about US\$2.50) per hour. Most workers we spoke to stated that it took them about five to six months to complete 400 hours of work. This acts as an incentive for workers to stay on the platform. However, many of the workers we spoke with reported only a marginal increase in earnings—while there was an increase in the hourly rate, the number of jobs seems to have declined.

“I don’t know if my earnings have increased much, maybe about five percent in total? The number of jobs has gone down. Before, I was getting more bookings.”

The reasons for this were not clear—whether it was intentionally designed by SweepSouth to allow other workers to reach higher rate slabs, whether it was a calculated business strategy to keep company costs stable, or whether it was just worker perception. As we were unable to speak to the platform, we could not clarify this information.

Most workers sought to work more hours, or perform more gigs, than typically offered on the platform. As a result, most avail the “Earn More” feature offered by SweepSouth, which is for last minute appointments. Workers can check for jobs under this category only after 7 p.m. for appointments the next morning.

“If I don’t have enough bookings for the week, I use Earn More. You have to be quick because others are also looking for bookings there.”

The platform encourages all monetary transactions take place over the platform, and even tips to SweepStars are processed via the app. However, it reportedly deducts a percentage of this tip amount as a processing fee.

4.3 AUTONOMY AND FLEXIBILITY ARE OFTEN ONLY NOTIONAL

Despite the promise of greater autonomy and flexibility associated with gig work, in practice, these are severely constrained for most workers. Certain design features of the platform limit the control workers have over the terms of their work, privileging client or customer concerns over those of workers. For one, there is information asymmetry between clients and workers. Workers on SweepSouth have a profile which displays their photo, ratings, and a note that details some biographical details along with positive comments from previous employers or clients. This allows clients to pick workers based on the ratings and worker profile. Workers, on the other hand, are not shown any details of clients they are matched with and are penalized for not accepting jobs.

Rating systems can also function as a form of reputational control.²⁰ Clients rate workers on a scale of one to five stars and have the option of leaving additional comments. Workers are encouraged to maintain a rating of 4.75. Low ratings prompt warnings from the platform and three consecutive ratings of less than two stars results in worker accounts being deactivated. Workers have little say in challenging or negotiating these ratings.

“If our ratings go down, SweepSouth won’t show us our bookings. And clients also pick those with high ratings. When a client gives a low rating they don’t think about it, but it affects us very badly. They should tell us if they are not happy with the job so that we can fix it. How can we know if they don’t tell us and then they give us a low rating?”

The focus on ratings is intended to give clients confidence as they invite strangers into their home. Yet, it can have a negative impact on the worker’s ability to get jobs. Clients often don’t understand the rating system, and their ratings are often based on a whim, or deeply ingrained racial and class stereotypes. Workers are also unaware how ratings are calculated and the criteria against which they are being evaluated. The one-sided nature of the ratings systems creates a structural domination of the platform over workers that is dependent on workers fungibility.²¹ Although workers can also leave ratings for clients, the workers we spoke to did not seem to feel that this was of much consequence to worker experience. Workers do not have the option of picking their clients or declining those with low ratings.

“We cannot choose clients so even if they have a low rating we still have to go. Sometimes you don’t know what they’re going to be like but we still have to go.”

Nor do they have the option to freely cancel appointments—SweepSouth deactivates their account if they cancel more than four appointments in a month. Workers are also unlikely to cancel bookings

²⁰ Vallas, S. (2018). Platform Capitalism: What’s at Stake for Workers? *New Labor Forum*, 28(1), 48-59. doi: 10.1177/1095796018817059 and van Doorn, N. (2017). Platform labor: on the gendered and racialized exploitation of low-income service work in the ‘on-demand’ economy. *Information, Communication & Society*, 20(6), 898-914. doi: 10.1080/1369118x.2017.1294194.

²¹ Ibid.

because of the loss of earning potential. Autonomy is thus constrained both because of platform design and broader labor market conditions.

The same is true of the promise of flexibility. Flexibility on the platform is supposed to work in two ways: workers can choose the areas and neighborhoods in which they would prefer to work, and the days of the week they prefer to take bookings. In practice, however, high transport costs and spatial spread in Cape Town and the surrounding suburbs mean that it is often unviable for workers to take on gigs over vast areas. Moreover, the paucity of gigs also means that workers end up taking whatever booking comes their way, even if it is not in their desired time slot.

Although technically workers can choose which bookings to accept, disciplinary tactics employed by the platform keep them at risk of having their accounts deactivated. For example, workers are allowed to cancel bookings with 72 hours of notice, but this is an unreasonably long time, as workers are often notified of a booking only 24 hours before the appointment. The opacity of algorithmic monitoring makes it difficult for workers to plead their case in times of genuine difficulty like for an illness. One worker recounted:

“I was really ill and couldn’t go to a booking so I contacted support through the app in the morning. No one answered me. The client called me at 9:30 to ask me why I wasn’t there yet for my appointment and I realized SweepSouth had not contacted the client or addressed my request at all. Later, this was included in my cancelled booking even though I was genuinely sick.”

4.4 LITTLE TO NO BARGAINING POWER

The most discernible difference between workers we spoke to who were on the platform and workers from the union was in their knowledge of their legal rights and entitlements. Those involved in or helped by the union were aware of their legal protections and were able to recognize and tackle exploitative behavior or ill treatment from their employers. Domestic workers in the union spoke of taking their disputes with their employers over severance pay or serious verbal harassment to the Commission for Conciliation, Mediation, and Arbitration, or in other cases, union members helped some workers mediate their disputes with employers. Members of the union were politically active, attending demonstrations with the union and eager to help other domestic workers facing disputes with their employers. Union members that we spoke with also did not see SweepSouth as an attractive proposition because they already had full-time or regular work, and this was seen as preferable to gig work. Most union workers were also much older, and this might limit their interest and capacity in gig work, preferring employment in a few houses rather than having to move from gig to gig.

In contrast, workers on the platform reported having few avenues for meaningful grievance redressal on the platform. The app allows workers to make complaints, but the platform is responsive only when complaints relate specifically to tasks expected of work—for example, if the client expects workers to complete more tasks than is reasonable in the number of hours booked, the platform requests clients to increase the duration of the appointment or to include the tasks required on the bill. However, complaints against harassment and rude behavior from clients aren’t adequately addressed, and even dismissed as being characteristic of domestic work. This arguably has the effect of normalizing exploitation associated with domestic work. One worker spoke of her experience:

“Sometimes a client will be very rude, or they’ll have dangerous pets like snakes or spiders. It’s not safe and I complained. But SweepSouth just said to me ‘you know, this is how domestic work is, just keep working.’”

Another shared with us:

“When we complain about a client they tell us they will not match us with them again. Or that it is part of domestic work and we should just do our work properly. But what happens to the next lady who has to go work there?”

Workers from the union regularly socialized with other workers and learned from each other’s experiences. In contrast, workers on the platform had little interaction with other workers. Although SweepSouth management created a WhatsApp group for workers on the day they received their training consisting of workers in the same training group along with their manager, most reported that they were inactive in the group. They felt that the presence of the manager prevented them from speaking to each other freely. The one exception we came across was through a worker from Zimbabwe who told us about a WhatsApp for Zimbabwean workers on SweepSouth. The limited interaction between workers makes it hard to form friendships or solidarities. The fact that domestic work functions in the private sphere makes it difficult for workers to interact. However, in traditional domestic employment, workers are still able to meet through other means. For example, it isn’t uncommon for nannies to make friends when taking their wards to the park or the nursery. Families may sometimes hire a separate nanny for childcare responsibilities.

None of the workers on SweepSouth were members of the SADSAWU. Although some knew about the union, they weren’t sure how it could help them. The unpredictability of gig work also makes it difficult for them to attend union meetings; union members firmly believe that in-person contact is required for strong union membership. This might also suggest the difficulty in creating offline platforms for organizing workers when the work is mediated through online, algorithmic, systems—workers are dispersed, do not have regular, or the same, working hours, and the limited regular interaction between workers makes it harder to develop bonds of solidarity and loyalty.

4.5 SOCIAL PROTECTION, BOTH FORMAL AND INFORMAL, ARE BEYOND REACH

Workers on SweepSouth are classified as “independent contractors,” thus absolving the platform of responsibilities associated with formal employment. SweepSouth has, however, partnered with a local financial technology company to offer workers disability and life insurance coverage. This is available to workers after completing 400 hours on the platform. However, none of the workers we spoke with had availed of this and were unclear on the eligibility requirements.

Workers also said that SweepSouth had assured workers that they would be signed onto the national Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF). The UIF is a government scheme, introduced in 2003, that provides workers with maternity benefits, health benefits, and unemployment pay. Workers can access this fund to help absorb the shock if they are dismissed from their job. Employers must register their workers and make a contribution to the fund every month.

Workers who inquired about being enrolled into UIF were told by SweepSouth management that they would have to satisfy a few conditions. The UIF requires workers to complete 24 hours of cumulative employment with one employer to be registered. Rather than SweepSouth registering itself as the employer, the onus is shifted onto workers. Workers say they were told that they would only be eligible once they had completed 24 hours of cumulative work with one client. However, workers cannot choose their clients and are assigned clients by an algorithm, making it almost impossible to fulfill this criterion. At the same time, workers also report being told that they would have to give the platform a guarantee that they would continue to be engaged on the platform for an extended duration for SweepSouth to consider extending this coverage to them. The message conveyed to workers was that SweepSouth would be making an investment by enrolling workers to the UIF and would only do so if they knew workers would stay on.

“They said to me, we don’t know if you are going to stay or go. And we can only give you UIF if we know you’re going to stay.”

Domestic workers have long worked without any legal or social protections. In the absence of formal avenues of social protection, workers have often sought and received informal forms of protection from their employers. This was borne out by interviews with workers associated with the union. While they were often dependent on “good employers” to treat them well, they also spoke of bonuses received during Christmas, help with a child’s education, or assistance with medical bills. This only applied to domestic workers off the app. While it is important not to romanticize these forms of informal social protection, many of which can put workers in a situation of constant indebtedness to their employers or make them more vulnerable to exploitation, such informal social protection can nonetheless provide temporary relief and security to at least some workers.

5. CONCLUSION

SweepSouth appears to be creating new opportunities for paid work, particularly relevant in a context of high unemployment among the black African and colored population, and for migrant workers from Zimbabwe. However, whether this is “good work” is highly debatable. What is striking in this regard was the expressed preference for regular or standard forms of work over gig work; many workers hoped that working on the platform would enable them to find permanent employment.

The Fairwork Foundation, a University of Oxford project focused on measuring the best and worst practices of the gig economy, rates the platform as a seven out of ten based on the following criteria: the platform providing at least the minimum wage; the existence of policies to minimize the risks to workers while at work, including insurance; clear terms and conditions accessible to workers through the app; and processes through which workers can communicate and share concerns with workers.²² From this perspective, it would seem that SweepSouth is improving employment conditions for domestic workers who have traditionally been in an exploitative sector.

However, our conversations with workers suggested otherwise. Many of these policies and schemes for workers were not understood or availed of, and only existed on paper. Further, even though workers receive more than the minimum wage, work is irregular and incomes are variable. Minimum wage is in itself a very low benchmark and does not indicate whether earnings are commensurate with a living wage. Further, workers have little control over the terms of their work or their time, despite the promise of autonomy and flexibility offered by the platform. As independent contractors, they are also not eligible for state-sponsored insurance schemes. For most workers, regular work with a single employer remains preferable.

How does one reconcile these two perspectives? It would seem there is a disconnect or gap between principle and practice—much of what the platform promised was not realized in practice. This was confirmed by South African researchers who work with the Fairwork Foundation—they too had difficulty accessing SweepSouth management and much of their information about the formal policies of the platform were inferred from press coverage. From their own field work, they too found that worker experiences diverged significantly from this formal narrative.²³ This discrepancy also highlights the value of an ethnographic approach to understanding changing employment conditions that puts the lived and everyday experiences and concerns of workers at the forefront.

But such outcomes are not inevitable. Both design choices within the platform and alternative types of platforms can serve workers better. SweepSouth has leveraged the architecture of the platform to benefit the client. Most of the practices that have been discussed have been put in place to ensure that clients are satisfied and return to the platform. It doesn't seem to concern itself directly in improving working conditions. However, the platform has the potential to improve working conditions, standardize domestic work, and professionalize the service, were it to change its priorities to address workers' perspectives. For example, Domestly, SweepSouth's competitor, is designed so that workers

²² Fairwork. (2019, July 15). *Fairwork Ratings: SweepSouth*. Oxford Internet Institute. Retrieved from <https://fair.work/ratings/sweepsouth/>.

²³ Fairwork has only published their rankings of the platform, not any detailed studies.

are hired on a regular basis, either weekly or fortnightly. This addresses one of the key concerns for workers around regular work and enables building long-term relationships.

Alternative platforms are also possible. Researchers at the University of Western Cape are building a cooperative platform for domestic workers owned and led by workers themselves. They plan to engage domestic workers who are willing to buy into the platform for an initial period of three years to design the platform. Some of the initial challenges they're facing include finding strategies to involve and engage domestic workers, convincing clients to use the platform, scaling responsibility, and making the platform sustainable without turning to investment funding.

Exploitation of domestic workers is not new and continues to persist around the world. Workers on and off the platform share similar experiences of racial and gendered discrimination. In this sense, the platform is merely reflecting and reproducing existing structures of exploitation. Yet, it is also important to recognize the differences that arise from the digital and algorithmic intermediation of domestic work. Domestic work involves not only physical work but also affective labor—it involves relationship-building, trust, and negotiation. The intimacy involved in domestic work is different from many other domains—taking a taxi is not the same as having work done in one's home. The latter involves intimacy, relationship-building, and negotiation. It might also generate informal relationships for social protection, though imperfect. Much of this is rendered impossible with work mediated through digital platforms. While the terms of engagement between employer and domestic worker still remain hierarchical, the difference now is that they are embedded in an impersonal structure which reduces space for negotiation and bargaining. Finally, it is important to recognize how platforms are structured to fragment labor. Workers have little interaction with one another, the platform, or clients, resulting in little to no opportunities to exchange experiences and grievances. The contrast with union members was striking in this regard; they used the union to negotiate harassment and unfair terms of work, and perhaps even more importantly, address alienation and build friendships.

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