



Centering the Agency of Women in Thailand's Platform-based Care Economy



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Foreword

Feminist scholars agree that care work is an issue critical to the achievement of gender equality, as women's unpaid care responsibilities often hinder their autonomy and access to economic opportunities. Yet, the topic is seldom included in solutions for women's economic marginalization.¹ However, with the advent of platform-based work and the rise of the gig economy more attention has been drawn to care work. With emerging digital platforms, businesses often present application-mediated “flexible” work as a potential solution for women and others who face obstacles to participation in the labor market. While shouldering unpaid care responsibilities at home, women often seek flexibility in their employment in the new economy.

The UK-based charity Oxfam estimates that unpaid care work performed by women and girls could add a minimal value of \$10.8 trillion to the world's economy, if ever valued and compensated for.² The International Labour Organization (ILO) acknowledges unpaid care work as an integral part of the world of work, yet our economies generally ignore or take it for granted. Globally, women are responsible for an estimated three-quarters of all unpaid labor.³ Such a disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work makes women and girls—especially in rural communities—more likely to work in precarious and low-paying jobs. However, care work has the potential to be an important avenue for salaried work, especially in the Global South and Asia in particular.⁴

As the labor relations scholars Rodgers and Zundl point out, any discussion about the future of work is incomplete without an examination of care work, including the impact of technology on such work.⁵ Motivated by a commitment to gender equality and women's fair and safe participation in the labor market, this research takes a close look at the lived impacts of labor platforms on Thailand's care workers.

This report is the product of researchers at Just Economy and Labor Institute (JELI), who spent over two years examining the policies and practices of digital labor platforms in domestic work and massage therapy—two of the most common sectors of care work in Thailand. We interviewed almost three hundred gig workers as well as several platform executives and managers to learn their respective perspectives and experiences. Despite nascent development in the platform care industry during the two years of our research, we witnessed a radical shift in how gig workers, mostly women, deliver their services.

¹ Baird, M., Ford M., & Hill, E. (2017). Women, work and care in the Asia-Pacific.

<https://public.ebookcentral.proquest.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=4790123>.

² Oxfam (2020), Time to Care: Unpaid and underpaid care work and the global inequality crisis.

<https://www.oxfam.org/en/research/time-care>

³ Ibid 28.

⁴ Tandon, A., and Rath, A. (May 2021). Fault lines at the front lines: Care work and digital platforms in South and Southeast Asia. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) Asia. <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/singapur/17840.pdf>

⁵ Zundl E. and Rodgers, Y. (2021) “The Future of Work for Domestic Workers in the United States: Innovations in Technology, Organizing, and Laws,” in Tobias Schulze-Cleven and Todd Vachon (eds.), *Revaluing Work(ers): Toward a Democratic and Sustainable Future*, LERA Research Volume. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, forthcoming 2021 (with Elaine Zundl)

This research aims to advance the debate around the future of care work in the political economy of care. The purpose is to offer a framework for the platform economy that ensures prevention against, and protection from, rights abuses and labor exploitation – a just economy for gig workers. We strongly add to current academic debates by grounding our research in the voices of care workers themselves. Within this framework, we emphasize the need to debunk the myth that individuals in our society are equally free, self-reliant and self-sufficient.⁶ In other words, people are by nature dependent on each other. The commodification of care, especially through platforms, not only renders workers more platform-dependent but also leaves them at the mercy of the market. For these reasons, state and social responsibilities are indispensable for the political economy of care.

⁶ Bolton, S., and Skountridakou, L. (2017). The medical tourist and a political economy of care. *Antipode*, 49(2), 499–516. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1111/anti.12273>

Executive Summary

This report looks at the impacts of online and digital labor platforms on Thailand's care workers, with a focus on worker precarity, gender issues, and women workers' agency in negotiating platform-mediated work in the gig economy. Based on survey interviews with over 298 domestic cleaners and masseuses, focus group interviews with selected workers, interviews with platform company executives and managers, and participant observation of platform company orientations for new workers, this report illustrates how the platform economy impacts the conditions of women already working in the country's existing (informal) gig economy.

Gig work is characterized by its contingency: non-permanent, non-standard, and casual. For example, domestic and massage work are often temporary and precarious, with workers unable to see contracts and agree to formal terms of work. In this report, we refer to “traditional” gig workers as those who depend on non-platform intermediaries such as placement agencies to find jobs, and we use “platform-based workers” to refer to workers who rely on digital and online platforms. Our survey and focus group interviews include both types of gig workers.

As an aging society and popular international retirement destination, Thailand is facing increasing demands for a larger pool of low-wage care workers. As such, the care economy is projected to be a key driver of Thailand's economy moving forward. As much existing care work in Thailand takes place in the informal economy, platformization of care work is not typically a process of precarization, through which gig work replaces so-called “standard work arrangements” of stable hours, job security, and social protections. Rather, gig work has always been informal and precarious, with platforms adding new dimensions of control along with purported benefits of “flexibility” and “professionalization” for women workers seeking to balance employment with unpaid care work at home.

Care workers in Thailand rely on multiple online and offline tools to find jobs. Care labor platform companies have largely evolved from an Offline-to-Online (O2O) model, building their businesses from existing roles as intermediaries (e.g., offline placement agencies) to online ones. Thailand's care work platforms include a) on-demand platforms like those for other services such as food delivery, b) online marketplaces that rely on free social media and messaging applications, and c) digital placement agencies that play a matchmaking role but leave work negotiations to customers and workers.

Our research highlights the following **key findings**:

1. Most platform-based care workers have low levels of formal education and are older than traditional gig workers. Of those surveyed, most platform-based workers have little formal education beyond the primary school (around 90 percent of migrant domestic workers in Chiang Mai lack education beyond the primary level) level and have low digital literacy. They are also older than traditional gig workers we surveyed, with most being 45 years or older. In comparison, 30 percent (the largest portion) of domestic workers with traditional agencies in Chiang Mai are between 25 and 34 years old. These workers, many of whom are migrants, have lower levels of education than their Thai colleagues, with the majority having less than a secondary school degree.

2. Platform-based care workers (as well as traditional care workers) are often the sole income earners in their families. This finding indicates a common precarious economic situation for these workers and their households. As both the sole earners and caretakers at home, many women are drawn to flexible work arrangements, which further weaken their negotiating power. Among cleaners, two-fifths of respondents have no family members with a regular income. The other three-fifths of the cleaners have at least one member with regular income. By contrast, over half of the massage workers (55 percent) say that none of their family members has regular income. The conditions and earning outcomes of women working in the care economy thus undoubtedly impacts the wellbeing of their households.

3. Entry into the platform economy is costly. Most platform companies impose entry fees, such as the requirement to purchase uniforms, equipment, and accessories that cost as high as 1,000 THB (approximately 30 USD), or around three times a legal daily minimum wage. While platform-based workers earn more income per month than traditional gig workers, they also bear more financial responsibility for such expenses, which used to belong to placement agencies or clients (e.g., equipment and supplies for domestic workers and cushions, oils, and towels for massage workers).

4. Platform gig workers adopt the platform companies' definitions of their employment status. Regardless of their work conditions, around 80 percent of masseuses view their work as independent or self-employed, while just 7 percent view themselves as temporary workers. Similarly, most platform cleaners (88 percent) consider themselves self-employed, while 8 percent identify as part-time and

2 percent as temporary workers. Our research found that workers experience varying conditions resembling both temporary work and full-time employment.

5. A major incentive for platform-mediated gig work is the quick turnaround time for payments. Respondents identify that the shorter time span in receiving earnings, as compared to traditional forms of employment, was an incentive for platform-based work. Quickly receipt of income lessens the financial burden of waiting for a monthly wage payment. In addition, some women report entering the platform economy because factory work no longer provided them with enough income, especially with cuts to overtime opportunities or temporary shutdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic.

6. Earnings generated by platform work are irregular and uncertain.

Platform-based care workers feel obliged to register with multiple platforms to access as many gigs as possible. Most do not receive a guaranteed daily income and lack pathways to legal protection that are available only to traditional forms of employment.

7. Platform gig workers lack understanding of the terms of their employment.

Platforms are the only party to change rules and regulations without worker consent, it is problematic to call this a contract. Most masseuses (72 percent) do not have an employment contract, and the rest think that they have a contract but are not sure about its contents due to such factors as language barrier and confusion over changing terms and conditions. Even more cleaners (92 percent) report not signing any contract (compared to 77 percent surveyed in the traditional gig economy). The few workers who claim to have contracts are not able to identify details or provide a copy, since the platforms do not share copies with them. Compounded with this lack of transparency, respondents say that platforms frequently change terms (e.g., commission or service fees, charges, and penalties) without prior notice, and most platforms also impose excessive fines for lateness, no-shows, or appointment cancellation fees. In addition, a third of the workers surveyed say a mismatch exists between work description and actual work tasks.

8. Platform-based workers have a high degree of uncertainty in working hours.

Generally, domestic work is routine work while massage customers demand services at any time. One benefit of on-demand platforms is that masseuses do not have to physically be present at the locations at all hours. Yet, as on-demand platforms make

services more accessible at the customers' convenience, such flexibility means less regular working hours and less predictability for both platform-based cleaners and masseuses. Platform gig workers also need to spend more time "on-line" than other workers searching for and being available for gigs, resulting in disillusionment about the promises of flexibility due to heightened senses of uncertainty, insecurity and being controlled.

9. Women gig workers are assertive in improving their working conditions and creating safe environments when platform companies do not. Despite the imbalance of power between platform companies and workers, we find that women workers have used several means to improve their conditions. To ensure a certain degree of certainty, for example, some women workers register on several platforms, build personal relationships with "good" customers to bypass platforms, and remain active both online and offline, such as, by maintaining relationships with massage parlors and traditional intermediaries or using personal social media accounts to seek customers.

10. Platform-based care workers face risks given the private and intimate nature of their work. Despite the continued feminization of care work by platform company practices, gender-responsive policies from companies are lacking. As a result, women often feel unsafe and are at risk of sexual harassment and abuse when entering private homes to clean or massage. It is often platforms themselves that expose women workers to greater risks of gender-based violence, particularly sexual harassment. Such risks are due to common platform policies that prioritize customers, and customer-centric review systems. Most masseuses (88 percent) say that platform companies are clear in prohibiting sex work, yet, despite this recognition that massage work can come with expectations of sex, platform companies offer no worker protection against customer sexual advances. Risks are also exacerbated by the failure of companies to establish effective grievance mechanisms.

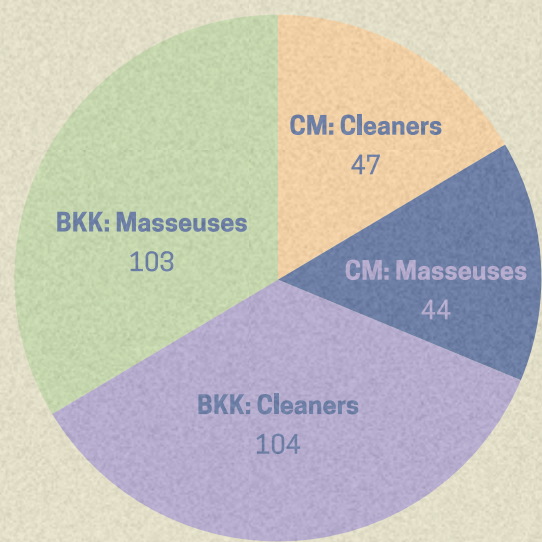
Research questions and methodology

This report explores precarity, gender-related challenges, and women's agency in negotiating work in Thailand's platform-based gig economy. It focuses on two major groups of care workers: those in the traditional gig economy, on the one hand, and those whose work has recently been transformed by emerging digital platforms. Specifically, it aims to understand experiences of the platform-based care workers by investigating 1) the recruitment, hiring processes, and workforce management in digitally-mediated care services, 2) the platform companies' gender policies and gendered labor processes, and 3) workers' situations and strategies in determining their working conditions. This research aims to center women's voices regarding both the positive and negative aspects of platform-based work and to strengthen their decision-making power in determining their employment and working conditions. Using a feminist framework, it also aims to raise awareness about the unique impacts of the gig economy on work flexibility, labor market access, and autonomy of women workers. It concludes with a set of recommendations on gender-responsive policies and collaborative empowerment programs for stakeholders.

This report responds to three main questions. First, how and to what extent do platform companies integrate gender concerns and women's empowerment into their design, policies, and operations? Second, how does platform-based work (as opposed to more traditional work channels) shape workers' experiences and economic situations? Third, from the workers' perspective, what would proactive gender-responsive platforms and policy ecosystems look like?

To explore these questions, we interviewed four major platform company managers (from two massage companies and two cleaning companies) on their labor and gender policies, attitudes, and employment processes. We also used participant observation during a cleaning platform company's job application process to understand its gender attitudes, as demonstrated through recruitment policies, job descriptions, hiring and screening procedures, and occupational training. We also paid particular attention to platform designs by focusing on how task assignment, performance ratings, and digital interface among workers, platforms, and customers operate. When possible, we used desk research to complement the platform management interviews.

Overall Questionnaires Conducted



Intermediary	Occupation	Numbers	Locations
Digital and online platforms	domestic work	104	Bangkok
Digital and online platforms	massage	103	Bangkok
Placement agency	domestic work	44	Chiang Mai
Massage parlor and socual media (i.e. messaging applications)	massage	47	Chiang Mai
Total		298	

Table 1: Number of care worker survey respondents

Second, we used our comprehensive survey questionnaire, which we developed collaboratively with our research partners,⁷ to gather data on socio-economic backgrounds (e.g., education, ages, household incomes) of research participants. The questionnaire covered a wide range of topics, such as past and current working experiences, evaluations of working conditions, and desired changes. We used this set of data to understand the economic situations of the women workers who had recently entered the digital workforce, deepening our analysis of the circumstances that shape workers’ experiences and agencies.

⁷ Our research partners include MAP Foundation and Empower Foundation, both located in Chiang Mai and recognized as crucial organizations working to protect women workers in Thailand. MAP works mostly with migrant workers and Empower works with women workers in the entertainment sector. In this study, MAP was responsible for collecting data from traditional domestic workers, while Empower collected data from traditional masseuses in Chiang Mai. Both organizations used their staff and volunteers to collect questionnaire data and conduct focus group interviews.

Third, following the survey questionnaire, platform company interviews and observations, we conducted worker focus group interviews to fill remaining gaps. In this process, we provided women workers a safe space to collectively reflect on their situations. The focus group sessions were tremendously helpful in providing an understanding of the gendered aspects of their work. Most importantly, these interviews helped us better understand gender-based violence and other issues related to the gendered division of labor. The women workers were also central in analyzing whether the digital platforms enable or preclude workers in determining aspects of their work (e.g., location, time, and day of the week).

We used our comprehensive survey questionnaires to interview 298 women workers total, consisting of 148 domestic workers and 147 massage therapists. Since the survey interviews were conducted in two main locations, Bangkok and Chiang Mai, we grouped women workers into four major categories (see Table 1).

In Bangkok, we interviewed 104 domestic workers and 103 massage therapists who used digital and online platforms. In Chiang Mai, we interviewed 44 domestic cleaners and 47 massage therapists who used basic mobile-based messaging applications and traditional intermediaries. Our design thus has a double comparison that provides analytic leverage to assess the impact of digital platforms on different types of gig work in Thailand—between two sectors: domestic cleaning and massage, and between workers using online platforms and those using more traditional ways to access gig work.

Conceptual and empirical background

1.1 Defining care work and the platform economy

Research often places domestic work and massage therapy in the same, broad category—care work—to emphasize the relational, embodied, and interactive natures of both occupations. Home-based domestic workers and massage workers are both involved in upkeep: for the former, of customers' apartments and living conditions, and for the latter of body and physical conditions. As their work becomes professionalized and more demanding, customers and labor platform companies expect the workers to show carefulness and attentiveness. For this reason, workers who are considered friendly and caring by customers succeed in developing long-term relationships and do well with rating-based platforms. Care work can be unpaid responsibilities within households that are outside of the market relationship or low paid work informally done outside of standard employment relations. We emphasize the complex and contradictory aspects of care work as paid work performed informally in the formal economy. The formalization of this type of work, caused by platformization, raises serious and growing questions about its regulation and the protection of workers.

This section offers a brief review of the relevant concepts useful for understanding commonalities between domestic and massage work. They are similar, for example, in that they do not fit neatly into established work categories, such as reproductive vs. nurturant work or unskilled vs. affective labor. Unpaid domestic work may be considered reproductive (or non-nurturant) work, but commodification of the work in the market renders it more professional. The advent of the platform economy formalizes the work even more, but to what extent such formalization enhances professionalism of the work remains an important question. Platform-based work also complicates the clear line between unskilled and affective labor. With platforms outsourcing more interactive work, domestic workers are required to perform a larger degree of affective and emotional labor. Lastly, both domestic and massage work are labor intensive, and they blur the boundary between direct and indirect care work. Both domestic work and massage therapy require co-presence, meaning they cannot be done remotely. Although domestic work is not understood to be as intimate as massage therapy, platform-based domestic workers are often obligated to interact with customers in private and enclosed spaces. One distinction here is that massage work is relatively more intimate and massage labor often borders what scholars call body/sex work. Yet, home-based domestic workers and massage workers may be similarly subject to gender-based violence.

Care work as work

Care work, traditionally perceived as “women’s work” by nature, is associated with attributes of femininity and expected to be performed by women out of love and duty.⁸ Feminist scholars argue that women, especially those from low-income families, carry the biggest burden of dependency work in our society.⁹ The understanding of care work as a labor of love offered in the gift economy erodes its financial rewards in the exchange economy.¹⁰ Nancy Folbre calls such erosion or devaluation “care penalties.” As a result, care as an economic good is under-compensated and care workers are underpaid.

As such, scholars have advocated for the concept of “care work as work.”¹¹ For instance, Paula England and Nancy Folbre argue that while care is highly valuable to our economy because it creates good for the public, market mechanisms fail to recognize its contribution and value.¹² Because of the gendering and undervaluing of care work, waged care workers are underpaid. Following this line of thought, this

⁸ Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The managed heart: commercialization of human feeling*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁹ *ibid.*; Kittay, E. F. and Feder, E. K. (eds) (2002) *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*. New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

¹⁰ McDowell, L. (2009). *Working bodies: interactive service employment and workplace identities*. Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, p. 82

¹¹ England, P., and Folbre, N. “The Cost of Caring: Emotional Labor in the Service Economy.”; England, P. (2005). *Emerging theories of care work*. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 31, 381–399.

¹² *Ibid.*

research uses the concept of care work to highlight the importance of waged work and the relationship between paid and unpaid care labor.

Moreover, this research intends to advance the debate around the future of care work in the political economy of care. Within this framework, we emphasize the need to debunk the myth that individuals in our society are equally free, self-reliant and self-sufficient.¹³ In other words, people are by nature dependent on each other. Commodification of care, especially through platforms, not only renders workers more platform-dependent but also leaves vulnerable and dependent members of society at the mercy of the market. For these reasons, state and social responsibilities are indispensable for the political economy of care.



13 Bolton, S., and Skountridako, L. (2017). The medical tourist and a political economy of care. *Antipode*, 49(2), 499–516. <https://doi-org.proxy.library.cornell.edu/10.1111/anti.12273>

Reproductive labor vs Nurturant labor

Care work is defined in a variety of ways and used in conjunction with other terms such as care labor. Mignon Duffy distinguishes two major strands of care work: reproductive labor (or non-nurturant) and nurturant work.¹⁴ Reproductive labor encompasses unpaid care traditionally performed by women outside the market or inside households. Such work is increasingly being replaced by paid domestic work. On the other hand, nurturant work refers to the professionalism and skills of health care and education workers such as nurses, doctors, teachers, child-care workers, social workers, psychotherapists, and personal care attendants, among others.

According to Duffy, nurturant care work consists of three elements: meeting personal needs, existing in a relational context (i.e. a face-to-face relationship), and having affective and emotional responses. These elements set apart low-paid, non-nurturant care workers such as domestic cleaners, from higher paid (albeit still underpaid) professionals such as nurses and healthcare workers. Interestingly, massage therapists may straddle these two categories, as they perform their work face-to-face and attend to personal needs just as nurturant care workers do. However, they are often underpaid, even as trained professionals. In this respect, massage work is a form of reproductive labor but commodified and highly undervalued.

Similar to Folbre's idea of 'care penalties', which highlights devaluation from the market perspective, Duffy et al. (2015) foreground care deficits when arguing, "care is labor intensive and dependent on interpersonal relationships, it is less responsive to the supply and demand mechanism of the market, leading to shortages in both the quality and quantity of care provided by paid workers."¹⁵

Feminist geographer Linda McDowell postulates two main types of domestic work.¹⁶ The first is concerned with basic, unskilled, and manual work such as cooking and cleaning to upkeep the home. The second type is affective, embodied work to care for others, such as that carried out by a nanny or caretaker for the elderly. These two activities are sometimes known as either indirect or direct and personal care work, but the two are understood to overlap. The overlaps here problematize a neat delineation between non-nurturant and nurturant care work. In practice, domestic workers are sometimes expected to perform both types of work, especially when they reside in their employer's home. A bias exists against viewing care work as skilled because women are assumed to already perform both types of work at home.

¹⁴ Duffy, M. (2011). *Making care count: a century of gender, race, and paid care work*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, p.6

¹⁵ Duffy, M., Armenia, A., & Stacey, C. L. (Eds.). (2015). *Caring on the clock: the complexities and contradictions of paid care work*. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, p.4

¹⁶ McDowell, L. (2009). p. 82

The reproductive labor framework is apt for our analysis of domestic cleaning, while the nurturant definition is appropriate for home-based masseuses or caregivers. Empirical studies focusing on care work in the Global North identify a class and racial or ethnic divide between the two groups, where black and brown workers as well as migrant women are concentrated in domestic work. A class component underlies the three groups of care workers we studied in Thailand, , but the gender and class-ethnic components are more evident. For example, platform companies tend to seek women caretakers from Northern ethnic hill tribe communities for home-caregiving while discriminately avoiding workers from the South because they are considered “indelicate”.

Places matter: vulnerable conditions of platform-mediated employment and home-based work

British labor geographer Linda McDowell argues that the location of care work matters. For example, working in a home carries certain meanings and assumed relationships. Domestic work performed inside the home, which is associated with privacy and intimacy, may subject the workers to certain forms of surveillance, exploitation, and harassment. McDowell also argues that other types of care work such as beauty salons are feminized occupations that tend to be just as poorly paid.¹⁷ Massage therapy fits into this category. As massage is performed directly on care recipients' bodies, it is slightly different from domestic work in that massage has a higher degree of intimacy and physical interaction. In this sense, massage therapy is closer to what scholars call “body work”, conceptualized as work on others' bodies. Massage therapists and home-based caregivers have this aspect of work in common.

Massage work as body work: bordering sex work

Body work and care work overlap in many respects. For example, massage therapists and caregivers who use touching as an essential part of their work share the goals of improving their care receivers' emotional and physical states of being. This sort of touching often causes false intimacy and unsolicited sexual feelings. By contrast, it might be true that domestic workers do not work directly on or with their customers' bodies, yet their conditions of working in a private space render them vulnerable to similar threats of sexual harassment and abuse. This parallel is confirmed by our interviews with the two groups.

¹⁷ *ibid.*

As the concept of body work focuses on intimate, embodied and sexualized labor, we prefer to use the more general term “care work” as an umbrella for domestic work and massage therapy.¹⁸ In this report, “care labor” may be used interchangeably with care work to foreground the embodied labor of workers.

Care work and labor placement agencies

Placement agency companies offering cleaning services to both large public institutions and private organizations are nothing new. Agency work in organizing domestic work predates the gig economy by centuries.¹⁹ Agencies have facilitated the commodification of anonymous services beyond individualized employment contracts.²⁰ McDowell suggests that an agency allows the customers—what she calls ‘end employers’ or real employers of the domestic workers, who are mostly women, to have a guilt-free relationship with the cleaners. A common issue that app-based domestic workers share with those in traditional agency work is that they have to pay a big commission to the middlemen. However, while workers with an agency are more likely to have a code of conduct and uniform, platform-based gig workers are subject to different sets of disciplinary rules which are sometimes more subtle.

Care work and the digital economy

The growing roles of digital platforms in mediating paid care work provokes the central question of whether platformization can lead to the formalization of this line of work and, with it, better working conditions. While research projects on care work are still wanting, a growing body of literature now emphasizes the need for understanding the situations of women workers in the care economy, particularly of those in the Global South. Our research finds resonance with the insightful report from India titled “Platforms, Power, and Politics,” which postulates that digital platforms reconfigure labor conditions in that they could empower and/or exploit workers in ways different from non-standard work off of the platform.²¹

Kaine and Josserand (2019) recently called for researchers’ attention to the lived experiences of gig workers, and particularly to gig work’s gendered dimension, which deserves more academic attention.²² This report follows this call to foreground gender and gendered aspects of gig work experienced by women in care work.

¹⁸ Cohen, R. L., Hardy, K., Sanders, T. and Wolkowitz, C. (2013). The Body/Sex/Work Nexus: A Critical Perspective on Body Work and Sex Work. In: Wolkowitz, C, Cohen, RL, Sanders, T and Hardy, K (Eds.), *Body/Sex/Work: Intimate, embodied and sexualised labour. Critical Perspectives on Work and Employment*. (pp. 3-27). Basingstoke: Palgrave; Twigg, J. (Ed.). (2011). *Body work in health and social care: critical themes, new agendas*. Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell

¹⁹ Flanagan, F. (2019). “Theorising the Gig Economy and Home-Based Service Work.” *Journal of Industrial Relations* 61, no. 1: 57–78.

²⁰ McDowell, L. (2009), p.84

²¹ The Center for Internet and Society (2021), “Platforms, Power, and Politics: Perspectives from Domestic and Care Work in India,” authored by Rathi, A. and Tandon A., In collaboration with Domestic Workers Rights Union. <https://cis-india.org/raw/platforms-power-and-politics-pdf>.

²² Kaine, S., & Josserand, E. (n.d.). The organisation and experience of work in the gig economy. *Journal of Industrial Relations*, 61(4), 479–501.

Studying care labor platforms in Australia, Flanagan argues that digital platforms “are instruments of a fundamental shift in the governance of home-based service work, from a system of ‘dyadic’ to one of ‘structural’ domination.”²³ Flanagan highlights the roles of platforms as intermediaries in aggregating data about “workers’ responsiveness and speed that enable market-based disciplinary mechanisms to operate without reference to public law and across a much larger spatial context.” This is in comparison to the dyadic system where domination exists just between the care receiver and caregiver.

Intermediaries match households to workers for profit— a practice which predates the digital platform economy. They play a significant role in controlling working time, worker discipline and surveillance, and the workers’ career path and “biddability”. They also propagate and reinforce certain ideologies of home-based work. Flanagan calls for the historicization of intermediaries which match workers to employers: who the caregiver is often matters just as much as how the care work is done.

As Flanagan rightly points out, the nature of personal care work is not subject to such a high level of fungibility as is the case with ride-sharing or digital crowdwork. Flanagan cites Kittay’s 3 C’s—care (tending to others in a state of vulnerability), concern (it sustains ties of intimacy and trust) and connection (sustained by affectional ties even when an economic exchange is involved).²⁴

²³ Flanagan, F. (2019). “Theorising the Gig Economy and Home-Based Service Work.” p. 57

²⁴ Flanagan, F. (2019). “Theorising the Gig Economy and Home-Based Service Work.” p. 60

1.2 Gig work and platform-based gig work

The term “gig economy” is common in today’s popular discourse, largely due to the growth of digital platforms. According to Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham, the gig economy refers to “labor markets that are characterized by independent contracting that happens through, via, and on digital platforms.”²⁵ Gigs as a form of temporary or piece-rate work, however, have long existed and predated the digital economy. In the Global South, where the informal economy is large, gig work as a major source of income for many people has always dominated. How the emergence of digital platforms complicates already-existing gig work in economies dominated by informal sectors such as Thailand is one of the questions that our findings address.

We define gig work as the kind of work characterized by its contingency: non-permanent, non-standard, and casual. For example, domestic and massage work tend to be temporary and precarious while workers are unable to see contracts and agree with formal terms of work. In this report, we use “traditional” gig workers for those gig workers who depend on non-platform intermediaries such as placement agencies. On the other hand, we use “platform-based workers” when referring to the workers who rely on digital and online platforms.

1.3 Context of Thailand’s care economy

In Thailand, home-based services are carried out predominantly by women whose employment falls under the category of informal work, characterized by a lack of written contracts and without access to social security. Unlike in societies of the global North, which have experienced a retrenchment of the welfare state and an erosion of social protections associated with the shift from “standard” to more precarious work arrangements, in Thailand and other locations of the global South, much work has long taken place in the informal sector without any such protections. Workers thus often lack access to public and financial services, among other market barriers and structural obstacles.²⁶ Accordingly, home-based workers, including domestic workers, are excluded from legal protections and are vulnerable to multiple kinds of abuses.²⁷ This is also the case in many other Asian countries. Raising the importance of these issues, a report by the ILO (2016) based on research conducted in Thailand and Malaysia suggests that more women are expected to enter the growing care economy in the future.

²⁵ Woodcock, J., & Graham, M. (2020). *The gig economy: a critical introduction*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press

²⁶ Reed, S. O., Oganda, A. C., Tulaphan, P. S., Samantrakul, C. and Towalukpanich, P. (2017). “Informal Workers in Bangkok, Thailand: Scan of Four Occupational Sectors.” WIEGO and HomeNet Thailand, Bangkok.

²⁷ See Tang, E. (June 2016). Interview by Natalia Figge: Asia scores low on labour law protection for domestic workers. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Asia.; Picot, M. O., and Spath, K. (2020), “Women and the future of the digital economy in Asia”. Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung Asia; The Center for Internet and Society (2021), “Platforms, Power, and Politics: Perspectives from Domestic and Care Work in India.”

Care work responsibilities in intergenerational families is also more common in Asia than in the West or global North.²⁸ With less government-provided child and elderly care support, care responsibilities are unevenly distributed to women. For example, women are often expected to care for elderly family members following the traditional Thai value of gratitude. Lacking state welfare for Thailand's elderly population often makes this a necessary burden that women must carry alongside their work and childcare responsibilities.

Thailand's economy has increasingly demanded a larger pool of affordable care workers. As of 2016, the number of people over 65 years of age was over 11 percent, or around 7.5 million people, compared to 5% in 1995.²⁹ By contrast, the birth rate has dropped from 6 to 1.5 children per woman from 1960 to 2017.³⁰ In other words, the rapid increases in the senior population, coupled with a declining birthrate, have made Thailand an aging society. Added to this trend is the fact that foreigners, Asian and Western, perceive Thailand as a retirement destination—a result of the government's promotion. With its known great climate and affordable living costs, Thailand has attracted not only retirees looking to relocate but also companies looking to invest in care service.³¹ In this context, the care economy in Thailand is anticipated to be a key driver of the economy moving forward,³² raising concerns about the promotion of care worker's rights, well-being, and protections.

Domestic work in Thailand: falling through the legal cracks

Approximately 21.5 million domestic workers—or 41 percent of the global total (the largest)—are employed in Asia.³³ Because domestic work falls under the informal sector in Thailand, an official record is unavailable. However, according to an ILO (2016) report using a 2013 Thai labor force survey, there were at least 250,000 domestic workers. In Bangkok alone, it was estimated that there were 120,000 domestic workers in 2017, of which approximately 100,000 were women.³⁴ As domestic work is looked down upon in society as manual labor, a major part of this workforce is low-income women and migrant workers. Due to a lack of accurate statistics, the number of migrant workers is unclear but expected to exceed the number of Thai nationals. In general, domestic workers and the larger group of home-based workers are employed outside of contractual relations, thus working without legal

28 Picot, M.O., and Spath, K. (2020), "Women and the future of the digital economy in Asia". 29 World Bank (June 2016), "Thailand economic monitor: aging society and economy." (<http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/830261469638312246/Thailand-economic-monitor-aging-society-and-economy-June-2016>)

30 World Bank (2017). Fertility rate, total. (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/sp.dyn.tfrt.in>)

31 Reuters (2018). "In aging Thailand, developers race to supply locals and elderly expats," reported by Chayut Setboonsarng and Panarat Thepgumpanat, April 10, 2018. (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-ageing/in-ageing-thailand-developers-race-to-supply-locals-and-elderly-expats-idUSKBN1HH3KI>)

32 Healthcare IT News (2019). "An overview of Thailand's healthcare sector," reported by Dean Koh, January 13, 2019. (<https://www.healthcareitnews.com/news/overview-thailand%E2%80%99s-healthcare-sector>)

33 ILO (2016), "Worker, Helper, Auntie, Maid? Workers conditions and attitudes experienced by migrant domestic workers in Thailand and Malaysia." International Labour Organization, p.2

34 NSO. (2017). "The Informal Employment Survey 2016. National Statistical Office, Thailand Ministry of Digital Economy and Society." Accessed online at: http://web.nso.go.th/en/survey/lfs/data_lfs/2016_iep_Full_Report.pdf.

limits on their hours of work, and with no guarantee of minimum wages or collective bargaining rights.

Thailand's Labor Protection Act does not adequately provide legal protection for domestic workers because several aspects of the work, which are different from standard employment, make it hard to enforce the law. For example, many domestic workers are live-in, and their working hours are much longer than a standard workday. An ILO study found that migrant domestic workers in Thailand worked up to 15 hours per day.³⁵ Taking into account the extremely long working hours, even though domestic workers in Thailand are entitled to the legal minimum wage, most of them do not actually receive proper compensation for their work.

One of the ILO's major recommendations is to strengthen laws regulating domestic workers to be in line with international standards such as the 2011 ILO Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189). The ILO Convention 189 set global standards for domestic workers, defined as those performing work in a household or households within an employment relationship. Many domestic workers, the majority of whom are women and girls from disadvantaged backgrounds, are vulnerable to a wide range of rights abuses and labor exploitation due to the invisible nature of their work. Under the Convention, domestic workers are entitled to the same basic rights as those available to other workers in their country regarding normal working hours, overtime, compensation, periods of daily and weekly rest, annual paid leave, and social security protection, including maternity benefits. Ratifying governments are obliged to protect domestic workers from all forms of abuse, harassment, and violence, and shall do so by regulating private employment agencies and ensuring legal protections for domestic workers. It is worth noting that the Thai government has not yet ratified this ILO convention.

Massage work: Workers facing stigma and sexual harassment threats

It is important to note that, due to several reasons, women's personal care work such as massage therapy is often perceived as associated with sex work. Two related reasons for this are that, first, Thai massage involves touches and contact with body parts, which break social norms, and that, unlike medical work such as physical therapy, is not fully professionalized. Moreover, due to the coupling of relaxing massage and sex work in specific kinds of services catered to men in Thailand, women who

³⁵ ILO (2016), "Worker, Helper, Auntie, Maid? Workers conditions and attitudes experienced by migrant domestic workers in Thailand and Malaysia." International Labour Organization, p.xviii

perform massage often face stigma and want to disassociate their professional work from sex work.



Although the Thai government promotes massages and spas, along with traditional medicine, health and cuisine as national attractions for tourists, Thai traditional massage is underfunded. The government's goal is mainly to regulate the industry by prohibiting foreigners from performing traditional massages. However, massage work is generally undervalued, and massage therapists are underpaid, overworked beyond their job description, and under-protected.

Like the situations of women across Asia and the Pacific who are prone to harassment and discrimination, women workers, especially migrants, in Thailand's care economy are vulnerable to sexual abuses.³⁶ In Thailand, home-based women workers are also faced with other gender barriers, especially in terms of access to information communication technology (ICT) due to the masculine culture of technology.³⁷

³⁶ ILO (2016), "Worker, Helper, Auntie, Maid? Workers conditions and attitudes experienced by migrant domestic workers in Thailand and Malaysia."

³⁷ Intaratat. K. (2016). Women Homeworkers in Thailand's Digital Economy. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 18(1), 87-103. Available at: <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol18/iss1/7>

The significance of care and reproductive work cannot be overstated. As some scholars remark, because of its inherent vulnerability and precarity, domestic work is originally gig work and domestic workers are one of the first kinds of gig workers.³⁸ Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Hochschild explain that domestic work is degrading work not only because it is manual labor but because its origins are “embedded in degrading relationships and inevitably served to reinforce them.”³⁹ For her, housework is about power and the “symbolic enactment of gender relations.”⁴⁰ Looking at housework from a class perspective, Ehrenreich and Hochschild call into question relationships between middle-class women who can afford to hire other women to perform housework in their place, and the women hired from this labor market.

Our survey findings confirm that domestic workers, like many workers in Thailand, are no strangers to the gig economy, as they are familiar with insecurity and lack of protection in informal employment. This research sheds light on how the platform economy compounds the situations of women already working in the existing gig economy. As recent research argues, the gig economy overall represents a continuation rather than a disruption of flexible labor processes and the casualization of work, perpetuating “long-standing structural and gendered inequalities.”⁴¹

³⁸ Geymonat, G., Marchetti, S., & Kyritsis, P. (2017). “Out from the shadows: domestic workers speak in the United States.” OpenDemocracy. Cited by CIS (2021) ³⁹ Ehrenreich, B., & Hochschild, A. R. (2002). *Global woman: nannies, maids, and sex workers in the new economy*. New York: Metropolitan Books, p.88

⁴⁰ Ibid. p. 88

⁴¹ Hunt, A. and Samman, E. (2019), “Gender and the gig economy: critical steps for evidence-based policy,” ODI. <https://odi.org/en/publications/gender-and-the-gig-economy-critical-steps-for-evidence-based-policy/>

Care labor platforms in Thailand

At a glance, a wide range of technical and administrative features of various platforms appear to reflect practical choices and design preferences. When we take a closer look at how different features shape worker interaction with both platforms and customers, however, we start to understand the implications of these designs and policy choices on the labor process. This chapter, based mainly on interviews with platform executives and managers, presents the structures, practices, and characteristics of care labor platforms in Thailand. It serves to contextualize the survey data, presented in the next chapter, within the country's new care work gig economy.

Care labor platforms differ from more widely-known labor platforms in food delivery in many ways, especially in that they tend to operate as marketplace platforms, which impacts the hiring process through ranking, sorting and rendering the workers visible.⁴² As Ticona, Mateescu and Rosenblat point out, early studies of labor platforms tended to focus on a specific model of gig work, or what is called “Uberization.” Although Uber’s ride-hailing and food delivery models have become exemplary of gig work in the digital platform, research on gig workers based on such models is biased

⁴² Ticona, J., Mateescu, A. and Rosenblat, A. (2018), “How Tech Shapes Labor Across Domestic Work & Ridehailing,” *Data and Society*, p.3. https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Data_Society_Beyond_Disruption_FINAL.pdf

toward male dominated sectors. However, in care work that is traditionally female dominated and highly gendered and racialized, platforms operate differently, especially in the context of large informal economies in the Global South.

In Thailand, care and reproductive workers rely on multiple online and offline tools—messaging applications for their communications with companies, social media platforms for job posting and networking, and offline tools such as phone calls with their customers. Our interviews with both platform managers and gig workers show that dominant platforms prefer using mobile phone-based messaging applications because most women workers are already familiar with them, and, equally important, are cheaper to invest and maintain. In other words, instead of developing their digital platforms (i.e. applications), the majority of platform companies use messaging applications to assign work to individual workers.

Importantly, care workers have distinctive working conditions and diverse experiences that make it difficult to generalize findings. No matter how we attempt to design a uniform survey questionnaire to capture core similarities among the groups, we have learned that this is an impossible task. Therefore, we decided with our partners to strengthen our data collection by increasing our use of qualitative research methods (i.e., focus group discussions) to highlight such diversity among the respondents. Based on this insight (as well as the partners' concerns), we broadened our research focus to include a larger group of workers, who not only work with digitally-mediated platforms (in a narrow sense) but are also involved with hiring agencies that behave like marketplace and/or use online tools such as social media. In this way, our research can better capture the complexity of the local market while at the same time reflect emerging realities on the ground.

2.1 Types of care labor platforms

Care labor platforms in Thailand have largely evolved from an Offline-to-Online (O2O) model and built their business model on existing roles as intermediaries. In other words, many platforms came from the background of being placement agencies or an operating offline marketplace. Within this purview, digital and online platforms are used to facilitate intermediary roles through a wide range of ways. In general, we categorize care work platforms into three major types: on-demand platforms, marketplace platforms and digital placement agencies.⁴³

⁴³ CIS (2021), p.14

According to Aayush Rathi and Ambika Tandon, marketplace platforms are very similar to virtual job boards that function to share worker profiles and facilitate the hiring process. Whereas the on-demand platform relies heavily on workforce management by algorithm and instant dispatch, marketplace platforms impact the hiring process through ranking, sorting, and rendering the workers visible⁴⁴.

Different from their more visible counterparts such as food delivery workers, domestic work and massage platforms often operate like digital placement agencies rather than “on-demand” labor platforms which match caregivers and customers in real time.⁴⁵ Digital placement platforms often simply play the role of matchmaker, leaving customers and care workers to negotiate working conditions between themselves.

By contrast, dominant platforms offering domestic work and massage services usually operate as “on-demand” platforms. To a certain extent, domestic workers and massage therapists on these platforms have labor processes like other on-demand workers such as their food delivery peers. For this reason, Thai massage therapists sometimes call themselves “delivery masseuses”.

The typology of care platforms proposed by CIS (2021) is fundamental to our understanding of care labor platforms in Thailand. We find that marketplace platforms in Thailand are mostly labor platforms that rely heavily on available and free online tools, including social media and messaging platforms such as Facebook and Line – the most popular messaging application in Thailand.

Instead of using an advanced algorithmic allocation system, this type of labor platform employs designated persons (so-called “admin” persons) to assign gigs for individual workers. Examples of these platforms are MyTHERAS and Wongnai, which are well known massage platforms. An executive explained that there were several supporting factors for this design choice. For example, the programming cost is much lower with this setting. From the executive's perspective, they believed that while women workers, in this case massage therapists, have difficulty using a Smartphone application, customers are more likely to communicate through existing massaging applications such as Line on their phone rather than downloading a specialized application for the service.

⁴⁴ Ticona, J., Mateescu, A., and Rosenblat, A. (2018), p.3

⁴⁵ Ibid.

We mainly use Line to contact our customers, but we have no plan to build our own application. That is because we target the medium-high niche market that values the customer's quality and retention rate over the quantity of customers. If we invest for an application – let's say half or a million Baht – that means we have to expect more customers to compensate for our cost, but we are not interested in catching the mass market.

*Walee Piriyaongsak
founder of myTHERAS*

While labor platforms such as those for food delivery are known to use additional earning as a mechanism to incentivize gig workers to work longer hours, care work platforms use different approaches. Due to their lower exertion of technology, we find that cleaning and massage platforms generally rely on administrative persons to manage unpopular or unwanted gigs—gigs that are not desired by workers. They do so by having “admin” personnel directly contact the workers either to convince or coerce them, occasionally offering a small incentive such as a “commuting expense”.

Care labor platforms tend to focus less on technological designs and development than on-demand platforms such as food delivery platforms, which is often our point of reference. This characteristic has a major implication on the nature of platform-worker relationships. Rather than relying on algorithmic control, platforms tend to use interpersonal relationships and peer pressure as a control mechanism. From the workers' perspective, conflicts between platforms and workers thus appear as individual biases at personal levels, rather than platform's designs and organizational choices.

While a few dominant care service platforms function as advanced, algorithm-based on-demand platforms, many operate rather as marketplace platforms with hybrid features (such as using a combination of basic online tools and phone-based intermediary). Such a system of operator-based gig distribution has caused many problems for workers, mainly because of frequent human errors, personal prejudices, and favoritism on the part of the staff. Moreover, like the situation of food delivery workers often cited in the literature, these women care workers also have major concerns about a lack of technical support and grievance mechanisms available to them.

Care labor platforms function differently depending on design choices (see table below). For example, both MyTHERAS and Wongnai platforms used a staff, known as ‘admin personnel’ (administrative personnel) to assign tasks or gigs to masseuses. However, because Wongnai has a system of guaranteed earnings and required working hours, masseuses face penalties (e.g. deactivation or charges) if they reject a gig. MyTHERAS, on the other hand, which aims to target high-end customers, chooses to have an admin person to help assign their masseuses. This is apparently to prevent a “mafia of all workers” accepting jobs only to reallocate them to other workers behind the platform’s back.

Another major platform, Or’Ease, allocates opportunities to several masseuses who can respond by choosing the gig if they are interested. We consider this system an allocation rather than an assignment. One interesting feature of this platform is that when several masseuses show interest in a gig, the customer has the final say about which masseuse receives the gig. In this sense, we consider both worker and customer as decision makers, but the customer still has the final say.

Platform	Service	Worker Profile Details Available to Customers					
		Name	Profile Picture	Age	Experience/ Certificate/ Verification	Personal Contact (e.g. telephone number)	Customer Reviews/ Evaluation (e.g. star level)
My Theras	massage	/	/	-	/	n/a	/
Wongnai	massage	/	/	-	-	not shown in profile but revealed when worker contacts to confirm order	not in details but customer can give the heart emoticon (like) to the worker
Or’Ease	massage	/	use icon instead	-	/	not shown in profile but revealed when worker contacts to confirm order	/
Seekster	cleaning	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	/	/
Knockdoor	cleaning	/	/	n/a	n/a	/	/
BeNeat	cleaning	/	/	n/a	/	n/a	/

Table 2: Worker Profile Details Available to Customers / =Yes, - =No

Platform	Service	Worker Profile Details Available to Customers					
		Name	Profile Picture	Age	Experience/Certificate/Verification	Personal Contact (e.g. telephone number)	Customer Reviews/Evaluation (e.g. star level)
My Theras	massage	/	n/a	n/a	/	n/a	/
Wongnai	massage	/	-	-	/	/	/
Or'Ease	massage	/	-	-	/	/	/
Seekster	cleaning	/	-	-	/	/	/
Knockdoor	cleaning	/	/	-	/	/	/
BeNeat	cleaning	/	/	-	/	/	/

Table 3: Customer Profile Details Available to Worker

Features	MyTHERAS	Wongnai	Or'Ease
allocation system	admin personel	admin personel	admin personel
decision makers	admin personel and workers	admin personel	workers and customers

Table 4: Massage platforms' allocation system

2.2 Recruitment

In general, massage platforms require the following documents of their workers in their application process:

- Proof of identification: national identity card; house registration; bank account book
- Credentials: certificate of professional training (normally 150 hours); massage registration license (SPS 14); other training certificates
- Criminal record verification
- Identification photos
- Application fees and security deposit

Apart from the official documents required, each labor platform requires different applicant qualifications and has a wide range of selection practices. For example, during our research, Or'Ease required an application fee of THB1,000 (around USD31-32) before an interview. Wongnai, which had a distinctive shift

system that required masseuses to work for obligatory hours, had an interview session in which interviewers supposedly verified applicants' physical appearance and made sure that they were able to travel to work. Applicants were also required to make a deposit of THB3,000 for massage equipment such as oils, cushion, and uniforms, which would be renewed without charge.

Platforms have a range of recruitment strategies. To give an example, MyTHERAS did not openly accept applications but relied mainly on peer referral. Or'Ease also uses the peer referral system that incentivizes their workers to systemically recruit five more workers, take care of the new workers, and earn the title of "team leader" with modest compensation.

During the orientations we observed, applicants were also asked to have a massage test, or "hand test" (more below). If the test was passed, they would be told to deposit cash into a personal account, with minimal credits to keep the account active. In return, applicants would receive only a t-shirt with a platform logo that they could wear as a uniform as well as an ID with a photo taken at the site. Or'Ease was the only company using the credit system which was cancelled later due to the masseuses' confusion.

Wongnai, another main company in the gig massage market that went out of business in November 2021, recruited around 30 workers for their "hand test". The workers who passed were asked to pay 3,000 THB deposit as a "damage insurance" in return for a uniform, a cushion, oil, and other items that could be refilled or renewed throughout their working period. The deposit could also be reimbursed once the worker stopped working and returned their uniform and items.

Another platform that also went out of business in 2020, MyHappiness, charged a fee of THB1,000 in exchange for essential oils, a changing skirt, and a compact blue-tooth speaker.

Whether or not the fees were referred to as application fees, we noticed that major platforms required workers to purchase uniforms, equipment and accessories including cushions, essential oils, and towels, especially at the entry stage. We estimated that the total costs could be at least as high as 1,000 THB, as indicated in the table below.

Items	Cost (THB)
uniform (company t-shirt)	250
cushion	500-700
oil and massage balls	200-300
towel	50
other items (not required but may affect customer retention) e.g. small speaker, body scrub	300+
Total	1,300+

Table 5: Required purchasing list for a masseuse

Unlike the big platform companies, small ones may have informal application procedures. For example, applicants only take a photo of their documents and send them via messenger application. No hand test or submission of paper documents was necessary.

Cleaning platforms:

In comparison, cleaning platforms appear to have a simpler application process with less required documents. Most platforms only require a copy of a personal ID, house registration, and bank account booklet. However, one general practice is criminal record verification, which platforms in logistics and care work have in common. Normally, companies request a criminal verification document for the application while some major platforms verify the criminal records for applications and charge a certain fee for its service. The application fees vary across platforms and can change depending on marketing strategies. For example, platform companies lower application fees to attract more applicants.

In general, cleaning platforms frame the fees as financial costs for necessary tools rather than application fees. In their language, platforms focus on gig workers' benefits after being part of the platforms, which means going through the training, paying fees and owning basic gear such as apron, t-shirt, cleaning tools and backpack provided by the companies. They also convince the workers to use tools with the company logos or specifications that the company recommends.

Platform	Seekster	Knockdoor	BeNeat
Fees (THB)	500-550; plus 400 training fees	250-400	400-500
Terms used	no application fee but for uniforms	no application fee but for uniforms	no application fee but for uniforms
Merchandised received	company t-shirt and apron	company t-shirt and apron	company t-shirt
Conditions to start gigging	1-day training; readiness of gear	1-day training; (can be waived if trained before)	deposits for damages caused during the work

Table 6: Cleaning platform’s application fee

2.3 Orientation and training

Before being able to receive tasks, most masseuses (77 percent) were required to attend an orientation. The platform-based workers who received the orientation were those who registered with major on-demand platforms. The orientation mainly covered technical issues including procedures of platform mediation such as how to take and upload verification photos, GPS navigation and withdrawal of payment. According to our participant observation, orientation is concerned largely with standardization of services, such as masseuse comportment, rather than technical skill development. During the orientation sessions that our researchers observed, companies like Or’Ease addressed issues ranging from the functioning of its digital application to the dress, behavior, and standard massage techniques of masseuses. It was clear that the company, not unlike the others, emphasized femininity and deference as preferable traits.

The masseuses indicated that re-training was not necessary for them because they were already trained. Therefore, observed orientations slightly enhance workers’ digital skills, but applicants who do not have adequate digital and internet literacy are more likely to be rejected in the first place. With that said, at least three platforms from our research, Or’Ease, MASGO and EasyDay, offer massage training for inexperienced masseuses or masseuses who want to improve their massage skills or who want to perform specific services allowed only by those who paid and passed this test. Although this kind of training is deemed useful by the masseuses, it is not free of charge.

Nine out of ten cleaners from our survey were required to attend a similar one-day orientation. Our researchers observed one major platform's orientation in which the trainer, who was called "mentor" mentioned a wide range of issues, including on-site operations, comportment, and the online assignment process. One main goal was to standardize the cleaning process so that all the workers had a similar procedure. The mentor showed candidates how to clean a bathroom and toilet bowl by using a hand and sponge rather than a brush, and the candidates had to demonstrate that they could clean the same way.

The mentor also emphasized that this platform put customers at the center of the service, saying that "customers are like God," and cleaners should always yield to demanding customers even if it meant that they had to perform tasks outside of their duties. They were also instructed about how to dress, greet, and answer customers. Therefore, another goal was to mold the women into compliant workers. We note that at this orientation, our researchers saw an elderly woman being sent home prior to the start of the meeting because she had trouble downloading the platform's application on her device.

Three major platforms offered a one-day orientation such as this and most women surveyed were on at least one of the platforms. Small platforms tend to accept women who were instructed or trained by the major platforms without having to organize their own orientation.



Observations from a gig cleaner orientation

During a 1-day orientation observation, the trainer and former cleaner of Seekster, one of the main cleaning platforms in Bangkok, emphasized the qualities of “a good online housekeeper” as being humble, polite, and devoted to the “customer’s messiness” by cleaning thoroughly, with one’s bare hands if needed.

Apart from training workers to clean toilet bowls by hand and to use chemical solutions for various types of stains, the trainer instructed workers to look fresh and cheerful, to “not upset the customer”. She also asked workers to “remain silent and invisible” while cleaning so that they would not bother their customer in case the customer was inspecting them. According to the trainer, Seekster cleaners had to remember a certain line of greeting and saying goodbye, and speak only when they were spoken to. She said a worker did not have to be a cis woman to apply for the job, but one needed to express femininity during work time. Despite this claim, trans women were clearly not accepted because of “customers’ security concerns”, according to the platform.

During the same day, the trainer and her team instructed workers to use Seekster digital application, Google Map, and e-banking.

2.4 Commissions and remuneration

Most labor platforms pay piece rates to their massage and cleaning workers. Masseuses usually work for a session of one, one and a half, two, or at most three hours per session. As for cleaning, domestic workers also spend two, three, or more hours depending on the size and cleanliness of the places.

Apart from hourly fees, massage therapists reported other forms of income such as tips and incentives. All therapists said that they had received some form of tip, including food, water, and snacks from their clients, although one platform had a policy which prohibited masseuses from taking customers’ food.

Massage platforms

Company	Service Rate (what customer pays)	Hourly Fees (what masseuse receives)	Commission rate (what platform receives)
Wongnai	1,099 THB / 2 Hours of Thai Massage	500 THB/ day guaranteed plus 200 THB/ Hour x numbers of hour (3,500 THB guaranteed per week)	platform claims not to use commission fee deduction system
Or'Ease	1,000 THB / 2 Hours of Thai Massage	654 THB/ 2 hours of Thai massage (30% deduction by the platform plus tax)	30 - 35%
MyTHERAS	1,300 THB / 2 Hours of Thai Massage	750 THB/ 2 hours of Thai massage (250 THB per hour + 250 THB travel expense)	platform deducts some commission fee but not in a certain rate
MASGO	990 THB / 2 Hours of Thai Massage	550 THB/ 2 hours of Thai Massage	55%

Table 7: Massage platforms’ service rate, hourly fee, and commission rate

On-demand platforms determine their pricing in a highly competitive manner, and the so-called dynamic pricing works in such a way that sets the service pricing first and worker remuneration accordingly. In this regard, the proportion of income taken out by platforms is an important factor in determining the share that workers received in relation to the service fees charged to customers. Although hourly rates are specified on order sheets that masseuses and cleaners receive before they work, the order sheets do not have details of fees paid by clients. Accordingly, some of the workers do not know the fees that platforms charge clients and thus do not know the discrepancy or the commission fees deducted by the platforms.

Almost all massage therapists (95 percent) say that they paid commission to platforms, regardless of their knowledge of commission fees. From our interviews, such fees range from 20 up to 50 percent of the service fees paid by customers. It is worth noting that massage therapists also paid other hidden fees which depended on individual platforms. Almost 70 percent of the massage therapists paid fees other than commissions. For example, one major platform charged a withdrawal fee whenever masseuses took out money from the online account created specifically to receive payment from the platform. In addition, due to a lack of platform regulation in Thailand, different platforms had such diverse practices in terms of deducting income and value added taxes. Some platforms charged three percent for the income tax, while others included an additional seven percent for the Value Added Tax (VAT) and three percent for administrative fees. With this lack of transparency and regulation, it is questionable whether platforms follow guidelines when it comes to charging workers.

Cleaning platforms

Company	Service Rate (what customer pays)	Hourly Fees (what masseuse receives)	Commission rate (what platform receives)
Seekster	549 THB / 2 Hours of Cleaning	300 THB/ 2 hours of Cleaning	45%
Knockdoor	450 THB / 2 Hours of Cleaning	350 THB / 2 hours of Cleaning	22%
BeNeat	500 THB / 2 Hours of Cleaning	350 THB/ 2 hours of Cleaning (175 THB per hour)	30%

Table 8: Cleaning platforms’ service rate, hourly fee, and commission rate

Most cleaning platforms have declining fees, such as 350 baht for the first two hours and 400 for three hours (additional 50 baht for the last hour). From workers’ perspective, it makes sense to accept a shorter gig (e.g., two hours) rather than longer ones because the marginal increase after two hours is much lower. As a result, workers are incentivized to move to different places. However, limited modes of transportation available to workers can limit their options.

As Bangkok has highly uneven development in public transport, women who regularly use public transport complain that they either spend a large portion of their income on travel expenses or spend too much time on the road. The workers are often presented with a dilemma. On the one hand, the sky train and underground train are convenient. On the other hand, the fees are exorbitant, with Bangkok’s sky train known to be one of the most expensive among Southeast Asian cities. While cheaper, public buses are very slow and inconvenient because commuters must take additional modes, such as motorcycle taxi, to reach the destination.

As a result, women who do not own a car or motorcycle spend long hours outside of their homes. Otherwise, they must spend more on transport and take home less money, making gig work less attractive. Given its diminishing attractiveness, workers feel that they do not have many options.

Our findings resemble other recent works, such as that by CIS (2021), which shows that domestic workers on the on-demand platforms received higher wages than workers using the marketplace and digital placement agencies. Possible explanations

for this are that the on-demand or app-based platforms require a higher level of internet and digital literacy skills, while app-based platforms can charge higher fees from the customers, due to their convenience.

Platforms in Thailand have also taken the liberty of changing work arrangements without regard to regulations and labor laws, an emerging practice of concern. In addition, cleaning platforms create packages for office buildings, which are offered to domestic workers to work in a team. This work arrangement resembles shifts organized by the massage platforms in how it allows the platforms to manage their gig workforce while optimizing managerial costs. From the workers' perspective, however, cleaning packages are less preferable than individual gigs for many reasons. Mainly, the pay for team cleaning is much lower while being time-consuming because the workers must cover large and very dirty areas. However, its apparent benefit is the regularity of cleaning schedules. The workers believe that platform companies offer low fees for office and building cleanings as a marketing strategy for the platforms, but workers are the ones who subsidize the platform marketing opportunities.

2.5 Dispatch and tasks distribution

Major cleaning platforms such as Seekster, KnockDoor and BeNeat assign tasks through on-demand applications, so workers must download the applications to see available tasks. Rather than being assigned the tasks, cleaners are the ones who accept them on a first come-first-serve basis. One platform, BeNeat, offers an option for customers to choose specific cleaners according to their preferences, based on worker profile information, including photo and performance ratings.

By contrast, massage platforms such as MyTHERAS and Wongnai hire dispatchers to assign tasks to individual massage therapists, although one platform, Or'Ease, allows workers to choose tasks in preferable areas. Although this task assignment appears more straightforward and transparent, and workers feel less competitive, workers have a different kind of pressure from the "admin person", who assigns tasks to workers. One platform, Wongnai, does not allow massage therapists to refuse the assigned tasks, as they use a guaranteed earnings system. Wongnai set task zones within a five-kilometer radius of public transport stations. For some tasks that are not chosen by any workers in the first instance, perhaps due to location, dispatchers make a phone call to convince workers to accept them, sometimes offering additional transportation payments.

Our research shows that new or inexperienced gig workers tend to accept any tasks that show up without careful attention to the details, mainly because they are afraid to lose the chance at a gig. Some of the cleaners shared their experiences that, when they first started, they accepted tasks without paying enough attention to details such as location, which made them regret accepting the gig, as traveling to distant locations offset earnings through time or travel costs.

A case study of domestic workers in India shows similar findings that workers using on-demand platforms gain clarity about the tasks through a disaggregation that gives them information to demand extra wages for additional work. However, those workers with marketplace platforms and digital placement agencies tend to be subject to disproportionate burdens owing to unclear task descriptions. Similarly, domestic workers relying on traditional placement agencies confirm this, saying that when clients ask them to do more than they are told by the agency, they can contact the agency manager, who will sort it out with the clients for them.

Choosing gigs: a masseuse perspective

Aey,⁴⁶ a masseuse in Bangkok, contemplates and chooses her work based on customers addresses. She usually chooses gigs located in a well-known or upscale condominium since she believes that upper-middle-class customers will likely give more tips and treat her better. Most importantly, she thinks, these customers are unlikely to sexually harass her. She says that if a customer's address seems to be in a place "at the same level" as her, she will most likely decline the task.

⁴⁶ All names of workers in this report are pseudonyms.

Workers' profiles, conditions and agency

3.1 Respondents' profiles: from gig workers to platform-based gig workers

Throughout the course of this research, as Thailand saw an increase in job losses under the COVID-19 pandemic, more workers entered the flexible but highly precarious platform-based gig economy. In pre-COVID times, app-based care work attracted low-income and unskilled women workers— those who are also responsible for unpaid care work in their households and therefore drawn to the flexibility and fast income turnaround that gig work promises. Compounded with low education levels, low-income women workers of older ages (particularly those with young children) appear to be the ones left with no other option but to accept such work.

Moreover, these low-income, middle-aged women often have relatively low digital skills and internet literacy, highlighting a mismatch between worker profiles and the images of the modern workforce marketed by digital platforms. Our research identifies an absence of necessary skills training by the platform companies, especially

throughout the pandemic, with companies accepting more workers but claiming that it is unsafe to arrange trainings before starting work. In addition, those who are qualified to work still face other technical obstacles such as unfamiliarity with reading Google Maps or using Line communication. Many workers fail to describe their work process precisely and clearly as they lack understanding of how the platform technically works.

We find commonalities among care workers in the platform-based gig economy in terms of their educational background, socio-economic status, and technological and practical skills. Our survey findings show that the majority of care workers, especially domestic workers, have little formal education (i.e. past the primary school level), low digital literacy, and are at least 45 years old.

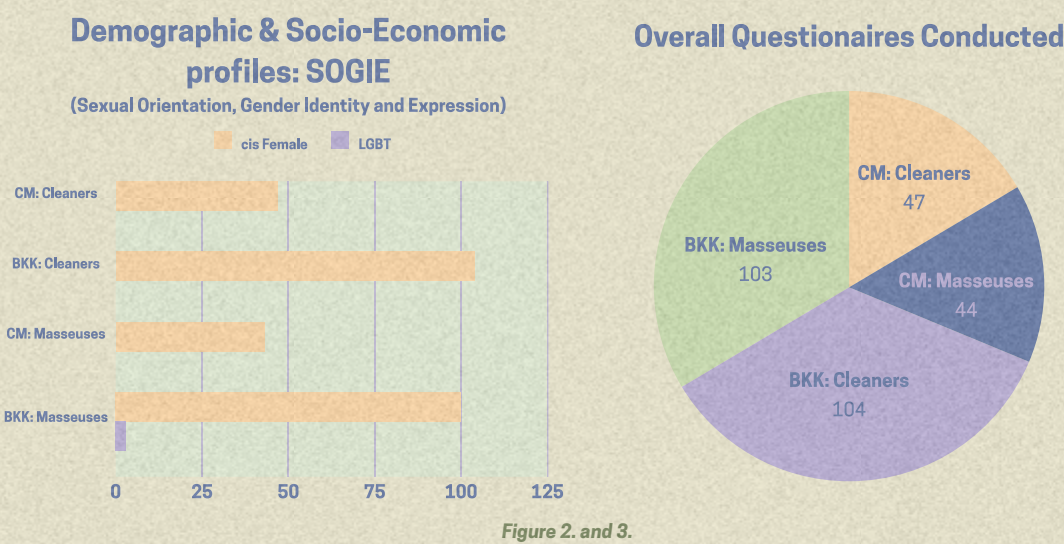
Unlike those in Bangkok, domestic workers in Chiang Mai have fixed working hours and receive a fixed salary. Most of them do not need to commute because they live in their employer's home. Some are subcontracted through recruitment agencies and work in precarious employment arrangements. Their work problems include employers refusing to pay their full salary amount, even as subcontracted domestic workers are protected under Thai labor law that requires the recruitment agencies to step in and take responsibilities for their workers. In brief, the recruitment agencies play a role in mediating disputes, resolving the situation between the employers and workers, and dismissing workers.

1) Gender

Of the 298 respondents, 47 of 47 domestic cleaners in Chiang Mai, 44 of 44 masseuses in Chiang Mai, and 104 domestic cleaners in Bangkok are cis female. While 100 out of 103 masseuse respondents in Bangkok identify as cis female, one as gay, one as a “tomboy” (masculine-expressing lesbian), and one as lesbian.

	Domestic cleaner Chiang Mai	Domestic cleaner Bangkok	Massage Masseuse Chiang Mai	Massage Masseuse Bangkok
cis Female	47 people	104 people	44 people	100 people
LGBT	-	-	-	3 people (1 gay, 2 lesbians)

Table 9: Gender of gig workers compared to traditional workers



2) Age

Women care workers in the platform-based gig economy

Most women in both occupations (over 80 percent) are over 35 years of age, with domestic cleaners having a slightly higher average age than massage therapists. Almost half of the domestic cleaners surveyed (48 percent) are between 45 and 54 years of age, whereas about two-fifths of masseuses (39 percent) fall in this age group (see figure 4 for full breakdown).

Demographic & Socio-Economic profiles: Age (BKK)

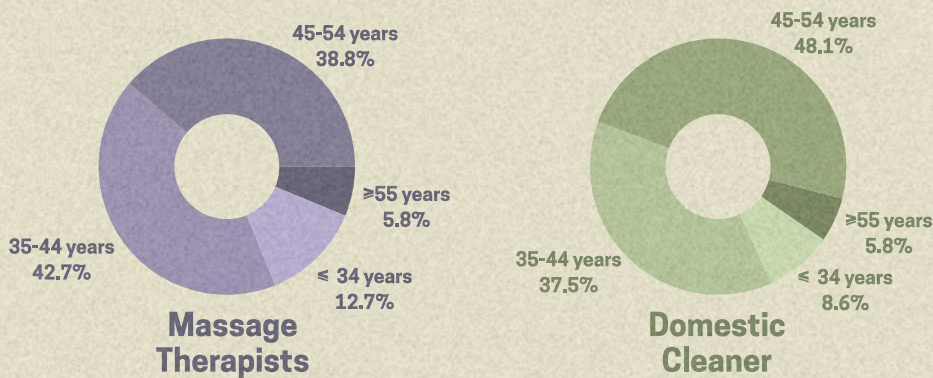


Figure 4.

We observe that massage platform companies prefer to hire women between 30 and 35 years old. For instance, two platform companies set the minimum age of applicants to 30 and 35 respectively. We speculate that platforms may be setting this minimum age requirement to try to prevent the popularly perceived association between massage therapy and sex work.

Chiang Mai has a significantly higher proportion of masseuses under the age of 35 (approximately 32 percent) as most platforms in Bangkok limit the age of workers to at least 35 years, resulting in less than 13 percent of masseuses under 35 in Bangkok. Although the main cleaning platforms set the minimum age of service providers to 18-20, a small percentage (approximately 8 percent) of Bangkokian workers are below age 35. This can be explained by the fact that younger workers have more alternative and better paid career paths. Their power to choose preferable jobs can be compared to the young migrant domestic workers in Chiang Mai, who are mainly under 35 years old (approximately 47 percent) as well.

Women care workers in the traditional gig economy

Traditional gig workers surveyed in Chiang Mai are comparatively younger than the digital gig workers in Bangkok. Almost a half (46.8%) of domestic cleaners and almost one third (31.8%) of masseuses are 34 years old or younger, partly because massage parlors and cleaning recruitment agencies do not set a minimum age for job applicants.

Demographic & Socio-Economic profiles: Age (CM)

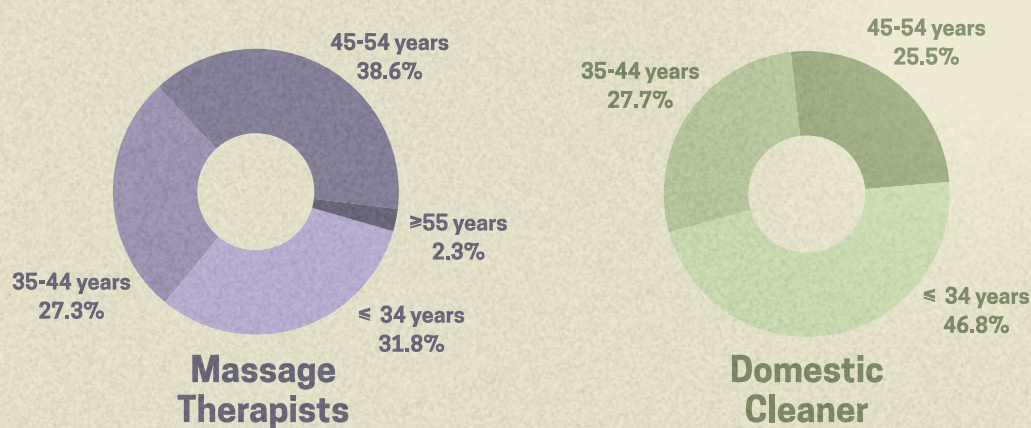


Figure 5.

Almost 30% of Chiang Mai masseuses and domestic cleaners surveyed are between the ages of 35-44, whereas around 40% of masseuses and 25% of domestic cleaners were between the age of 45-54 years old.

It is notable that there are very few elderly workers in traditional gig work. While there are only around 2% of Chiang Mai masseuses that were 55 years or older, there is no domestic worker around that age.

3) Education and family background

Demographic & Socio-Economic profiles: Level of Education (BKK)

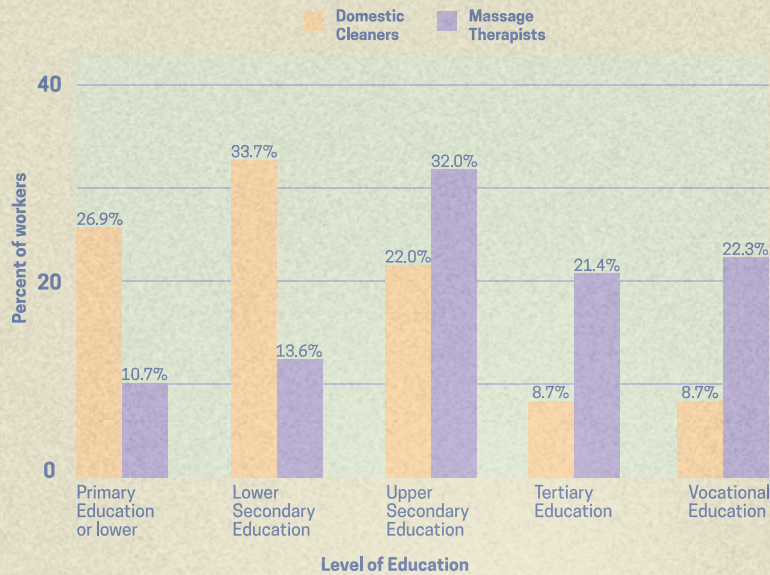


Figure 6.

Domestic worker respondents have lower education than those in massage therapy. Around 60 percent attained a primary or lower secondary school education, while the proportion of masseuses attaining an upper high school education or above was around 75 percent. Less than one in ten domestic gig workers have a college degree, compared with one in five among the masseuses. Generally, credentials and educational background do not play a role in the application for jobs in domestic and massage work. Nevertheless, in the platform-mediated gig economy, workers are expected to have a certain degree of internet and digital literacy – skills that are not provided by formal education but correlated with education level.

Our focus group interviews help us better understand the relationship between worker ages and choice of occupation. Several respondents in domestic work over 45 years of age shared with our researchers that, due to their ages and limited employment options, they feel determined to keep their platform-based jobs and were able to put up with problems at work, such as dealing with customers.

While domestic workers in Bangkok are Thai, those in Chiang Mai are migrants from Myanmar who came to work in northern Thailand. Some are undocumented workers. Around 90 percent of them lack education beyond the primary level due to a lack of access in their home country. Most of the domestic workers in Chiang Mai from Myanmar are not interested in continuing studying, while a few of them applied for Thai informal education. Their work rarely involves technology.

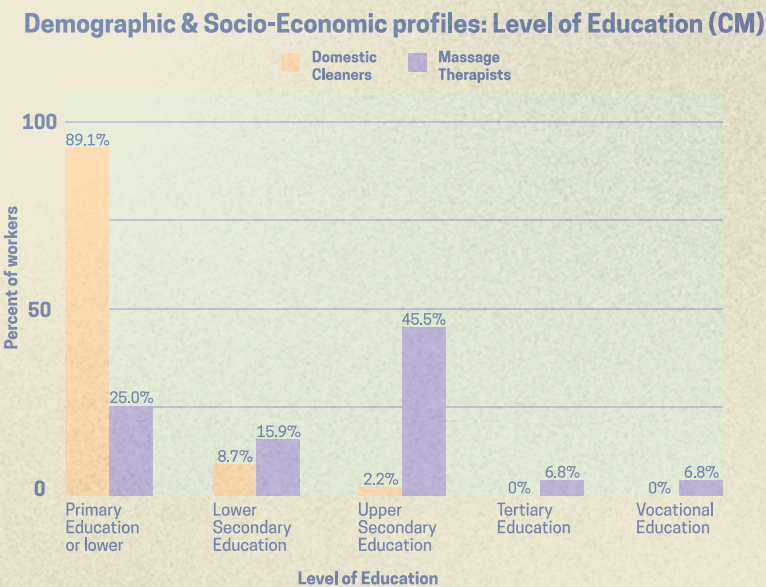


Figure 7.

Masseuses in Chiang Mai are both Thai and migrant workers. Most of them are not highly educated. Approximately 85 percent of them had completed no more than upper secondary education. Yet some masseuses are interested in applying for informal education to qualify for a massage certificate to work abroad.

Household Size	Domestic Cleaner CM	Domestic Cleaner BKK	Massage Masseuse : CM	Massage Masseuse : BKK
1 person	25.5 %	4.9 %	2.3 %	16.5 %
2-4 people	66 %	74.5 %	72.7 %	68.9 %
≥ 5 people	8.5 %	20.6 %	25.0 %	14.6 %

Table 10: Household Size

	Domestic Cleaner CM	Domestic Cleaner BKK	Massage Masseuse : CM	Massage Masseuse : BKK
Number of single mothers	≈ 32 % (15 from 47)	≈ 33 % (33 from 104)	≈ 57 % (25 from 44)	≈ 39 % (40 from 102)

Table 11: Single Mothers

Regarding household size, around three quarters of domestic workers have nuclear families with 2-4 members and one-fifth live with an extended family of over 5 members. Only a minority (around 5 percent) of domestic cleaners live alone. By contrast, the number of massage therapists who live alone is three times larger than that of cleaners (16 percent). Almost half of the cleaners (48 percent) live with a nuclear family while the rest live with an extended family.

4) Previous work

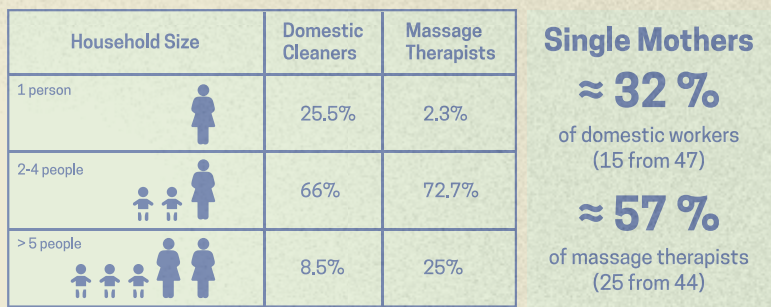
Women care workers in the platform-based gig economy

Almost all gig cleaners (96 percent) had previous occupations other than domestic work, which include office work, factory work, street vending, restaurant waitressing, and home-based housekeeping. When we asked the reasons why they became gig workers, the most common answers were because it was flexible (84 percent of the workers), a source of good income (78 percent), easier to find work than traditional options (61 percent), lack of other alternatives (34 percent), and other reasons (22 percent). It is interesting to note that women who chose “other reasons” often referred to several kinds of limitations or constraints to participation in the labor

market, such as old age, lack of education, and other physical limitations. In this regard, labor platforms do open some opportunities for women workers who are otherwise excluded or discriminated against in the labor market.

According to our interviews, workers perceived a major benefit of platform-based work to be the shorter time span for earnings (i.e. a few days after completing the task up to a week), which is much shorter than two weeks or a month for traditional work. For many women, platform-based work is a source of swift income, which helps lessen financial burdens when they are waiting for monthly wages. Some women explained that they started out with curiosity by testing out different applications and seeing how it worked. Once they found out that it had advantages of quick turn-around times for earnings, they left their previous jobs and became fully active on the platform. Owing probably to their lower education background or more constrained occupational choices, the domestic cleaners appeared to be more content with, or to be more accurate, less critical of the way the gig economy operates, compared to their peers in massage work.

Demographic & Socio - Economic Profiles: Family (CM)



Demographic & Socio - Economic Profiles: Family (BKK)

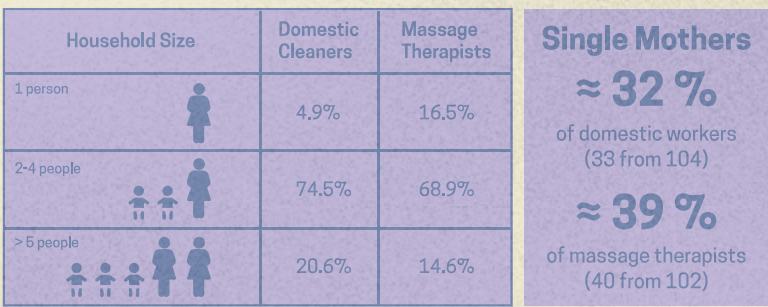


Figure 8.9.

Similarly, almost all of the massage therapists (99 percent) had other previous occupations before becoming masseuses, and most of the workers (89 percent) took similar routes and entry points. They mostly had experience in location-based massage work such as working in massage parlors before entering online and platform-based work. Only a minority of women had never had massage experiences before entering the world of gig work. Our research participants worked in a wide range of places, including massage parlors, spas, and hotels in the country and abroad. Some women also had exposure to flexible types of massage work because they were “on-call” when massage parlors needed an extra hand.

It is noteworthy that massage work has specific time demands. For example, day-time office hours tend to have less customers than the evenings (i.e. after work) and weekends, which is generally true except for in tourist areas. For this reason, massage therapists normally have long waiting periods or idle hours during the day, for which they are paid only by working hours rather than full-time. Nevertheless, massage parlor owners bear the costs of minimum payment as a form of guarantee. Therefore, owners prefer to keep workers to a minimum and would rather have on-call massage therapists when needed to lessen the costs

3.2 Employment in the platform-based economy

1) Reasons for seeking platform-based gig work

The top three reasons masseuses give for seeking out app-based employment are: lack of other employment opportunities (46 percent), potentially high income (42 percent), its flexibility (35 percent), and potential alternate sources of income (11 percent). One quarter of the respondents refer to their massage parlors being shut down by COVID-19 restrictions or its economic impacts.

The economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic came up in interviews throughout the course of our research. Some women said that they entered the gig economy because factory work no longer provided them with enough income due to cuts in overtime work or temporary workplace shutdowns. They thus searched for alternatives online with friends and family. According to interviewees, some massage therapists decided that working with massage parlors is not necessarily more secure than with platforms, especially during the pandemic. Not only did massage parlors no longer of-

fer guaranteed daily income, but they also lowered the hourly rate, lost their customers altogether, or were occasionally forced to lockdown their businesses. Considering these conditions, several women in our focus group conversations expressed goals of going to work abroad as soon as the travel ban is lifted.

Attraction to platform work

Ann and Mew, two domestic cleaners in Bangkok, used to work in two different factories before joining Seekster. During a focus group interview, they shared that two main reasons for switching from their previous work to platform work were the higher payment and its flexibility.

"As a single mom, I can pay for my daughter's college fee because of the payment I receive from the platform," said Ann.

"I prefer a platform job since it allows me to manage my own work time and break time. It's more flexible than how I used to work in the factory," said Mew.

Koi, a masseuse in Bangkok, said that she used to work abroad, in massage parlors in Russia and Korea. During the pandemic, she had no choice but to turn to the platform gig work. She flew back to Bangkok while all massage parlors were temporarily closed. She expected to work as a platform masseuse only until the COVID-19 situation got better because she used to gain much more for her family when she was abroad.

2) First exposure to platforms

According to our survey, the most common channel into platform mediated work was through peer recommendation. Sixty five percent of masseuses shared that they learned about the platforms through friends. It is noteworthy that several platforms have had referral programs in which workers who suggest friends to apply receive a small commission. In addition, masseuses we interviewed got the information through platforms' own social media and websites (28 percent) and their own online searches (20 percent). Only a small percentage received information directly from the platform (4 percent). Similarly, domestic cleaners say that they were first informed about the labor platforms through peer networks (63 percent), from platforms' websites and social media accounts (43 percent), directly from the platforms (13 percent), and through their own online searches (12 percent).

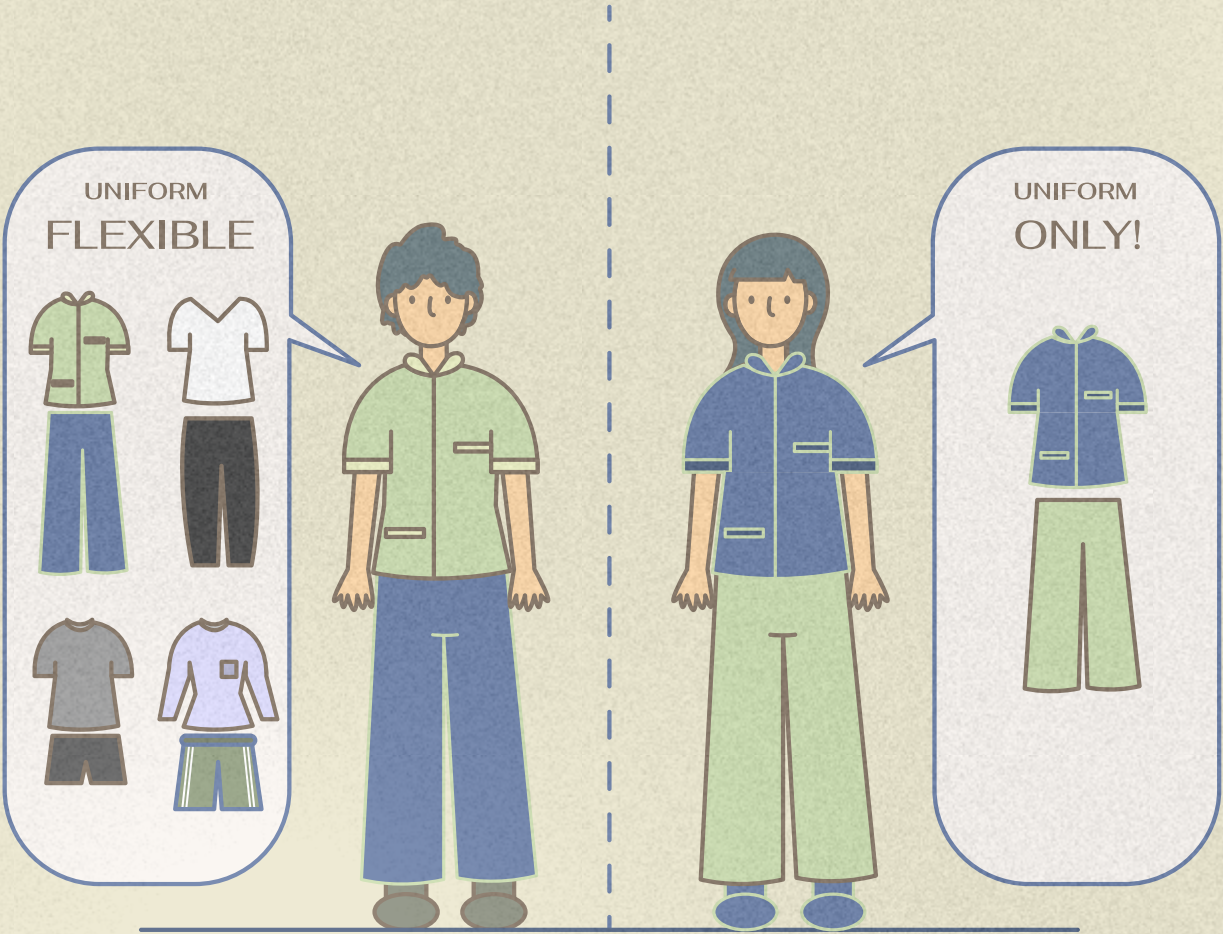
When asked how they assessed the trustworthiness of the platforms, the two groups of care workers indicated different priorities. The massage therapists say

that they assessed the platforms by verifying information with trusted friends (52 percent), using only the information offered by the platforms (48 percent), assessing the operating system (31 percent), or judging from potential earnings (10 percent). In contrast, the cleaners judged the platforms by looking at their potential income (81 percent), checking with trusted friends (59 percent), assessing the information offered by the platforms (30 percent), or by using advertisements (23 percent). 13 percent had no assessment.

It is worth noting that some of the masseuses also evaluate risk pertaining to sex work. For example, if platforms explicitly have a statement specifying sex work prohibition, the women perceive the platforms to be safer and thus more reliable. Other factors that the women considered include, for example, the punctuality of payment and how often the payments are issued.

	Traditional Care Work	Gig Care Work
Cleaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No uniform required - Fixed work shift/time - Work in a designated workplace (e.g., employer’s house) - Do not have to commute to work/live in employer’s home - No or less use of digital technology - Recruitment agency negotiates services with customers - No test or training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Must wear (and buy) uniform with platform company’s logo - Work in various places (e.g., house, condominium, office) - Must commute to work (change of workplace when starting a new gig) - Use digital technology to help work (e.g., Google Map, Line, platform’s application) - Admin negotiates with customers - Must test and train before work
Massage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Must wear uniform - Fixed work schedule - Work in designate workplace (e.g. massage parlor, spa) - Commute to work - No or less use of digital technology - Owner/manager negotiates with customers - Test and train before work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Must wear (and buy) uniform with platform company’s logo - More flexible work time (or negotiable work shift) - Use digital technology to help work (e.g., Google Map, Line, platform’s application) - Commute to work (change of workplace when starting a new gig) - Admin negotiates with customers - Test and train before work

Table 12: Key differences between traditional and platform-based care work



3) Experience with platforms and accessing gigs

The massage therapists who participated in our research generally have less experience with digital labor platforms than domestic cleaners. Most massage workers are new to the world of labor platforms, with sixty two percent having less than a year of experience working with the platforms. Almost a quarter of the masseuses we interviewed have one to two years of experience, while around 12 percent have two to three years of experience. Only a few massage workers (3 percent) have over three years of experience (see figure 9).

Years of experience with online platforms

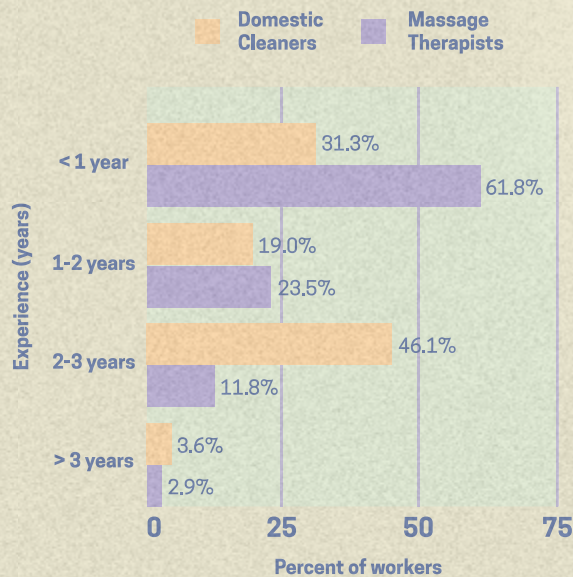


Figure 10.

The most popular channels to platform gig work among massage therapists are online and digital platforms designed to match customers and therapists (95 percent). Apparently, therapists depend on peers' referrals (9 percent) and personal social media platforms (6 percent) such as personal Facebook or Twitter accounts, to complement the platforms. However, therapists who use personal social media accounts as an outreach tool revealed that doing so puts them at greater risk. The therapists who seek customers on the internet share that they screen customers as much as they can, such as by accepting those with referrals or preferring older or higher-profile customers. Nevertheless, the therapists express that they cannot completely eliminate threats without real safeguard measures put in place by the platforms.

By contrast, only 31 percent of the cleaners have been with the platforms for less than a year. One fifth of these respondents (19 percent) have one to two years of experience while the other 46 percent already have between two and three years. A few women (4 percent) answered that they have more than three years of experience.

In terms of the channels used to access gigs, the domestic workers rank on-demand platforms and websites designed to match the customers as the first channel (62 percent), followed by personal social media accounts (25 percent), and peer refer-

rals (23 percent). It is worth pointing out that social media accounts are, to a certain extent, alternatives to on-demand and online platforms. Relatively speaking, the domestic workers rely less on digital platforms compared with the masseuses. Some domestic cleaners even shared with us that they are able to contact customers directly and agree to gigs without the platforms' involvement. It also seems that concerns over physical or gender-based threats are less serious for domestic workers than for the masseuses.

Similarly, almost all massage therapists (95 percent) rely on online platforms to connect with their customers. Compared with the cleaners, a much smaller number of massage therapists use friend networks (9 percent) and personal online accounts (6 percent) to connect with customers. Finally, only a few masseuses depend on a traditional intermediary, whether person or company, to match with customers.

Masseuses in Chiang Mai use some technology to work, but not as intensely as the gig workers in Bangkok. They use social media such as Facebook or Twitter to find and connect with customers. Some look for their customers online and work in a massage parlor at the same time.

Some platform companies operate in both Bangkok and Chiang Mai, such as BeNeat, Seekster, Or'Ease, but the Chiang Mai market, especially the massage platforms, were not as popular. Moreover, some Chiang Mai platform companies have a narrow service area and few service personnel, which caused some difficulties in reaching platform care workers for our research partner in Chiang Mai.

4) Gig work as source of income

According to the survey, the main source of worker earnings come from hourly fees to customers rather than from platform incentives, which are marginal. Platforms may add extra customer fees, such as for massages after 9 p.m., to any workers, but the extra income is small compared to an hourly rate when workers start a new session. Accordingly, massage therapists are generally not interested in such "overtime" rates. Most massage workers (70 percent) do not receive overtime wages. The rest said that while their platforms offered them such wages, they had never received them. By comparison, almost all cleaners (95 percent) never received overtime payment. It is worth noting that domestic workers say that they often work at least

ten minutes up to half an hour over the scheduled hours to complete cleaning gigs without asking for additional fees.

We observe that cleaning is different from massage work in the way that it is task-oriented (e.g., cleaning a room) as opposed to hourly work. Moreover, we find that domestic cleaners on one platform are encouraged by the platform's trainer to work slightly overtime without extra fees to attract customers. Some masseuses similarly believe that working 10-15 minutes for free can help impress customers and will increase a rebooking rate.

Survey responses indicate that platform gig workers are often the sole earners in their families. Among the platform-based cleaners, two-fifths of respondents report having no family members with regular income. The other three-fifths of the cleaners have at least one member with regular income. By contrast, over half of the massage workers (55 percent) say that none of their family members have regular income. Only a tenth (13 percent) consider themselves as regular income earners, probably because these women are with the platform that has a guaranteed, shift-like scheme. The rest, around one-fifth of the masseuse respondents (22 percent), say that at least one person in the household other than themselves is a regular income earner.

To better assess income reliability for these gig workers, we must situate their precarity within the context of Thailand's informal labor market. Most workers have prior experiences in informal work, for which they were usually not offered employment benefits or social protections. This precondition influences how workers assess the gig work. Put simply, between two types of precarious work, a relatively better-paid gig is considered better than a lower-paid one. Another intervening factor that complicates this analysis is that, during the early years of their operations, several platforms appealed to workers by offering to pay higher than the current rates, especially when the workers first started working with them. As the workers later found out, the promise of high earnings and more frequency of gigs would taper off over time. We believe that the algorithmic and digital mediation of online platforms allows the companies to prioritize groups of individual workers, in a way that cannot be done in traditional workplaces where workers are not as isolated and individualized. Workers who had just started with the platforms were regularly assigned tasks at least for a certain grace period. Although it is worth noting that workers experiencing diminishing platform wages are not always passive, as some

express their agency by dealing directly with customers without the platform as middleman.

In addition, during the research, several platforms were still on a trial-and-error basis, resulting in different platforms having a variety of working terms and regulations. For example, one massage platform offered a guaranteed income system, which translated into the requirement of minimum working hours for all workers. In other words, workers needed to complete a certain number of daily working hours required by the platform, resembling a shift work system in factories. From the workers' perspective, such control makes it hard for them to make sense of the discrepancy between the idea of work flexibility offered by platforms and the reality that workers have requirements like regular employees. Although this example appears to be anecdotal, it shows how they can develop ad hoc features based on their needs of a guaranteed minimum supply of work in a context of lax regulation.

When we asked workers about household incomes and numbers of regular income earners, the findings are somewhat conflicting because workers sometimes count themselves as "regular" income earners even if their income streams are sparse and irregular. One potential explanation is that platforms try to offer tasks to workers on a regular basis, but these tasks are less desirable to workers. For example, some cleaning platforms bundle workers together to minimize their operating costs in the form of workplace cleaning. By doing so, they can offer workers regular tasks to complete deals struck between platforms and organizational customers. From the workers perspective, this type of task does not pay as much as working for personal customers, and they are usually more exhausting. However, the certainty and frequency of these jobs can offer a routine schedule for workers, making it easier to plan their work and life. Lastly, it is very likely that, in our context, the term regular income earner may be understood by workers as very close to "breadwinner." Therefore, when they consider themselves the only regular income earners in their household, even though they are gig workers, we interpret the answer with caution that workers either are the household breadwinner or have a certain degree of income consistency because their platforms provide routine-like gig contracts.

3.3 Working conditions in the platform economy

1) Written contracts and terms of work

Our survey indicates that platform gig workers have limited knowledge of the terms of their employment. Seventy two percent of masseuse respondents do not have employment contracts, whereas 28 percent think that they have contracts but are not sure about the contents. Even more cleaner respondents (92 percent) did not sign any contract with the platforms, while around eight percent replied otherwise. Furthermore, the workers who claim to have a contract are not able to identify details of its contents or provide a copy. They say that platforms (with the exception of one) do not share the copies with them.

In general, we find that the workers do not pay much attention to contracts (or lack thereof). It is also worth noting that we got different information when interviewing two main cleaning platform executives, who told us that their platforms issued contracts for workers. Our view on this issue is that, unlike traditional forms of employment, platform companies only have disclaimers and regulations, which are often in the form of online content. As platform companies regularly update or review their policy—at their will—the terms of work change accordingly. When platforms are the only party to change rules and regulations without worker consent, it is problematic to call this a contract. It is noteworthy that some massage platforms asked the workers to sign an agreement acknowledging the prohibition of engaging in sex work.

Regardless of the existence of a contract, most of the workers know important terms such as hourly rate and punitive charges. When we asked the workers whether they participated in the determination of their terms of work, more massage therapists responded yes compared with the domestic workers. Thirty nine percent of massage therapists say that they were allowed to have input on the terms, especially the prohibition, although it was mostly in the form of suggestions rather than negotiations. By contrast, 92 percent of cleaners say that they did not have any say in the terms of work. They only follow instructions and do what they were told to. Only a small number (5 percent) said that they did have some input.

The primary worker grievance is that platforms constantly change terms, such as commission or service fees, additional charges, and penalties without prior notice.

Another grievance is that most platforms impose excessive fines, such as late fees, no-show fees, or appointment cancellation fees. The cancellation fees and disciplinary measures, such as deactivating a worker’s account or putting it on hold, is another problem deemed unacceptable by workers and is contrary to their understanding of flexible work. We also find that care work platforms are very restrictive in the stated terms of worker comportment, dress code, and gig cancelation.

2) Scope of work described versus actual work

	Work Description	Actual Work
Payment	Better payment compared to traditional work; the more work, the more money	Few customer orders; workers have to pay their own working cost; some platforms do not pay on time and do not clarify the deduction of commission fees
Work time, Break time	Independent and flexible, workers can choose their own working times and hours	Workers have to work until late at night, with little time to rest; time wasted on long commutes
Workplace	Free to choose place of work; platforms inspect and check conditions of workplaces	Workers must sometimes accept faraway jobs and cannot cancel once they accept; some platforms assign workers to jobs outside the area of their choice
Work Safety	Safe conditions; screening of customers to mitigate serious threats	Workers have been harassed by customers, with platforms not responding when notified

Table 13: Work description and actual work

We also asked the respondents whether they were given a work description beforehand and about the match between purported working conditions and actual ones. Most masseuses (88 percent) said that they were broadly informed verbally about the scope of their work, particularly the prohibition of sex work. Eleven percent of masseuses were not informed at all. By comparison, only 23 percent of all masseuses were informed through written contracts, although they may or may not be aware of the details, and 69 percent confirmed that they did not receive written information.

Shifting assignments and review system

Fah, a massage therapist at Wongnai, shared that she often found a mismatch between the job description and the actual work. For example, when customers receive platform discounts on Thai massage services, some of them ask her to rub oil or herbal balm on their skin too, which is a more expensive massage service. As Fah personally bore the cost of essential oils and balm, she has been upset by this. Yet, she never complains to the customers or the platform since she does not want to come across as “picky”. She is afraid that this might affect her customer reviews.

Compared with their peers, the cleaners are less informed and more unsure about the scope of their work. Although cleaning work is easier to translate into instructions, and customer work requests can be written down precisely in advance, more cleaners say that they do not know the scope of work beforehand. Less than half of the domestic workers (44 percent) say they were verbally informed about the scope of their work. Regarding a written work description, only 13 percent of the cleaners were informed through an online worksheet. Around 63 percent of these workers were not informed because their worksheets only specified fees, hours of work, and distance to customers' location.

When asked whether the actual work matched their work description, just 66 percent of masseuses said yes. Those who said no (33 percent) explained that discrepancies come from customers. For example, customers may reserve one type of service (e.g., Thai massage) and later ask the masseuse to switch to another service (e.g., head and shoulder or foot massage). When this happens, the customers should pay for the price difference, but masseuses feel too shy to ask for that. Only a minority of masseuses ask for additional payment from customers because they do not want to receive a bad review.

Contrary to the information received beforehand, more cleaners than masseuses responded that the work description matches the actual services performed at the site, with 86 percent saying so. In interviews, cleaners who have been asked to perform tasks outside of the scope of service, such as cleaning cars and washing clothes, say that since major cleaning platforms always emphasize the priority of meeting customers' demands, they feel they should not say no to the customers, or are afraid to do so. During a cleaner training session of a platform, our researchers observed that participants were recommended to refuse irrelevant and unsafe tasks

that involved climbing, for example. However, if a customer really insists, the guidelines suggest workers to politely decline or explain that performing the task is only a one-time exception.

3) Displaying personal data and personal privacy

Most massage therapists (91 percent) have their personal profile displayed to customers, which includes a head-shot photo, work experiences, training certificates and other credentials, ratings and comments. Our desk research shows that such platform practices vary depending on their target clientele. For example, Or'Ease is very selective about displaying therapist profiles, only displaying those with a lot of experiences. For this reason, new therapists or those with less experience have less chance of getting a gig. Therapists with a small platform, MaHome, tell us that the platform allows customers to ask for therapists' photos, and the platform tends to share those of young therapists. According to the workers we interviewed, this practice encourages the customers to target certain therapists who are more likely to be subjected to sexual harassment or unsolicited sexual advances/proposals.

The fact that platforms can publicly disclose workers' information without workers' consent exacerbates the information and power asymmetry between workers and platforms. This asymmetry is also compounded by, first, the ability of platforms to withhold some information (e.g. customers' profile) needed by workers, and, second, platforms' lack of transparency in the cases of changing the terms of work.

Women workers often suggest that the more information platforms offer on the working environment and especially the profiles of customers, the better they can protect themselves. In other words, more transparency from the part of platforms could translate to better safeguards and safer environments for workers. However, platforms have continued to operate with a lack of transparency, which results in a high degree of information and power asymmetry.

4) Benefits and expenses

Since labor platforms refuse to recognize workers as their employees, workers do not receive any employment benefits. However, on-demand workers are entitled to accident insurance only under strict conditions specified by the platform. For exam-

ple, like their food delivery counterparts, care workers need to fulfill a minimal target of tasks or gigs to receive insurance.

As most on-demand platforms require entrance fees (e.g. registration and processing costs), they often market the benefits of registration in terms of access to customers and complementary products—semi-obligatory because they help enhance workers' professional image via the appearance of the platforms' logos. In addition, platforms recommend that workers, whether massage therapists or domestic cleaners, bring standardized equipment and accessories to service customers. Platforms instruct massage therapists to have a mat, a cushion, towels, oil, and, since the COVID-19 pandemic began, alcohol spray and wet wipes. Domestic cleaners carry with them a kit that includes all-purpose cleaner, a brush, a mop, rags, scouring pads, and sometimes a compact but decent vacuum cleaner to impress clients.

Workers, especially new entrants to the platform-mediated gig economy, tend to overestimate its benefits in financial terms but underestimate its costs, especially hidden and non-financial terms. Nevertheless, when asked about the cost of engaging with gig work on the platforms, workers appear more aware of the actual costs and expenses involved. These costs include, but are not limited to, travel and waiting costs, as well as adaptation costs specific to entering platforms and maintaining online status.

It is true that workers generally perceive the benefits of the platforms not only in financial terms. According to our interviews, workers often say that they appreciate the fact that they neither have a boss to deal with, nor have to engage in extra unpaid tasks (e.g. sweeping the floor or washing towels) which they were normally asked to do. It is worth noting that workers tend to overestimate the earnings generated through the platforms and inflate the income differences between platform and non-platform sources. However, in the process of our interviews and follow-up discussions, workers noted the actual costs and expenses and reevaluated their disposable income, which is often insignificant. These findings are revealing of the unexplored relationships between low-paid care work in the informal economy and the emerging gig economy.

5) Getting to work—transportation issues

Transportation plays a major role in the service delivery of care workers. As transportation costs are generally not included in service fees, akin to food delivery work, women workers bear the costs of travel to and from locations. Our questionnaire and focus group interviews show that women who do not own a private mode of transportation (e.g., car or motorcycle) spend up to 3 to 4 hours per day commuting, taking up the bulk of the total amount of 4 to 5 working hours.

Domestic cleaners explain that those with their own vehicles and younger cleaners are more mobile and in more advantageous positions. As cleaning fees are reduced significantly for a cleaning period of over 3 hours, mobile workers prefer gigs that last no longer than a few hours, to maximize their pay. For example, workers are better off cleaning three apartments that may take a few hours each, but these places might be in different neighborhoods, requiring them to move constantly from one place to another during the day. On the other hand, older workers or those who rely solely on public transportation are more likely to choose longer gigs (e.g. 4-8 hours) to minimize commuting time. Thus, cleaners who only use public transportation have limited options for available opportunities.



Lugging around equipment

Gob, a domestic cleaner for various platforms, shares how she carries a backpack of around five kilograms full of cleaning equipment that includes a small vacuum, pocket-sized brooms and mops, and cleaning solutions. She commutes on a very crowded public bus that she usually rides to minimize her working expenses and maximize her income.

Despite being no more than 155 centimeters tall, she packs as much equipment as she can into her backpack, which is almost as large as her, to impress customers in return for slightly higher pay.

“My bag will definitely get heavier from those wet towels when I finish cleaning,” Gob laughs while sorting out the equipment.

Furthermore, both cleaners and masseuses are expected to bring their bulky and heavy equipment to work, which again necessitates appropriate modes of transportation. For example, when a platform advertises deep cleaning and customer satisfaction, some cleaners feel obligated to bring their vacuum cleaners and prepare several clean towels. Failure to satisfy customers could solicit negative reviews for the workers, and, as a result, the workers could face temporary deactivation. Therefore, it is common for the cleaners to carry an average of 3-5 kilograms in their backpacks while in a constant rush. Cleaners must also take responsibility for extra cleaning time when the task is not finished within an agreed period.

Choosing gigs: a cleaner’s perspective

Bee, a domestic cleaner in Bangkok, reveals that she used to accept gigs she did not want to do, especially when she first entered the market. She had trouble reading addresses in English, but was anxious about not receiving jobs if she responded too slow. In addition, her phone’s screen was “too tiny” for her age. Even though the platform said workers were free to choose, Bee ended up accepting tasks that were too far away and could not cancel them because she already pressed the “I want this job” button. She thus had to commute by taxi to arrive on time, spending a large proportion of her fees on commuting.

“It was not worth the payment, but if I didn’t do that it could have affected my work history”, she says.

6) Breaks and rest

Domestic cleaners and massage therapists indicate differences in the ability to take breaks depending on the nature of their work. Only half of the massage therapists (51 percent) say that they have enough time to rest during the day, while 27 percent say they do not (the remaining 22 percent are unsure). The therapists who have enough rest during the workday usually spend four hours per day on massages, or two sessions of two hours, excluding transportation. By contrast, masseuses who report not having enough rest either feel obliged to work at least three sessions of massage per day or are asked to apply extra strength for clients. It is worth noting that massage work is labor intensive, and masseuses need plenty of time to recover daily. Overworking for an extended period could potentially impact women workers' health and earning capacity in the long run. Lastly, massage therapists who report being unsure are those new to the platform and do not receive regular gigs. They say that although they do not work when not on a gig, it does not mean that they can rest. They have to be alert at all times for gig opportunities, which is tiring. In the gig economy, to be on the lookout for new gigs is in itself a form of work.

Therapists who receive advanced reservations can thus better plan and control their schedules. It is worth noting that massage work is highly standardized (e.g., work shifts in hourly increments) and highly predictable. Compared to cleaners, masseuses have a great deal of control over the pace and content of their work. In general, the massage therapists also indicate that platform-based work allows them to have more free time compared to parlor-based work, where they must be on the premises for long shifts.

Lack of adequate rest

“I have to shove a sandwich I bought from 7-11 down my throat, followed by a quick slurp of some milk. Or else I don’t have time to eat lunch,” says Oy, a Wongnai’s masseuse.

Compared to other platforms like Or’Ease or MyTheras, Wongnai is the only platform with required working hours and shifts. According to Oy, the platform often instructs her to work 2-3 gigs a day to make it worth their daily 500-baht guaranteed income. It also implies that she has to accept the tasks coming her way no matter how far they are.

“I barely eat a proper meal during the day. Mostly it is just a sandwich, an egg, or a bottle of milk. Then I have 2 full plates of rice for my late dinner instead,” adds Oy.

“The admin says I can choose my preferred shift, but not a morning shift since it has the lowest customers. They don’t want me to be lazy, but I just want to spend my dinner time with my son.”

“I had an ankle injury once when I was driving to work. The platform said they had to deduct my income 500 baht per every day I took a day-off,” Oy says during a focus group discussion. “Although I told them I would like to take my day off, they said I could but of course without payment.”

In comparison 76 percent of cleaners say they do not receive enough rest during the work day, whereas just 18 percent say they have some form of rest. According to in-depth interviews, cleaning gigs last somewhere between two to eight hours, depending on customer needs. Normally, domestic cleaners prefer to choose a gig that requires two to five hours. During the cleaning, they feel that they cannot take a break and so keep on working because they understand that the specified hours are a designated cleaning time that does not include a break. This means that generally, domestic cleaners must drink or eat snacks while working without taking a proper break. As a result, domestic workers who took long-hour gigs rarely had water, food, or toilet breaks.

Those cleaners who say that they had some kind of rest were those who worked on a special gig. For example, one major platform offers a “big cleaning” gig for those wanting extra income. Such a gig usually entails cleaning an office or building space for up to eight hours with a team of at least two cleaners. In this scheme, due to its demanding nature, cleaners are required to take a lunch break for twenty to thirty minutes. It is worth noting that cleaners do not like this type of gig because they are paid much less per hour. However, many workers choose them if they have no other choice, meaning when gigs for individual cleaners are not available.

Interestingly, when we changed the question and asked both massage therapists and cleaners about their rest after work, most from both groups said that they had adequate rest. Seventy four percent of masseuses and 84 percent of cleaners who say that they have sufficient resting hours seem to adopt similar strategies: they maintain a clear division between work and rest time. Cleaners only work during the day until 9 or 10 pm at the latest and go to bed early. On the contrary, massage therapists work in the afternoon and evening, so they spend time in the morning with their family or doing household chores. They also set limits for their work, such as no work after 9 pm, to ensure enough rest for the next day.

With that said, around 10 percent of masseuses and 13 percent of cleaners feel that they are generally not well-rested. According to our interviews, workers who are not well rested include masseuses who are anxious about not receiving gigs and have to keep looking at their mobile phones, or domestic workers who have young children or are single mothers with children and sometimes with parents to take care of.

7) Occupational safety and health issues

a) Work-related injuries and health concerns

Work-related health concerns among both masseuses and cleaners also include regular undernutrition and malnutrition. Many workers explain that they must prioritize the gigs and eat later whenever there are demands.

Platform cleaners that we interviewed regularly skip meals or only drink water during work hours, unless a customer offers or prepares meals for them. Similarly, although massage therapists admit that food is crucial for them because they need strength to work long hours, most of them regularly shift mealtimes and prioritize customer appointments that were often scheduled during the prime time. This issue also affects workers' dependents, such as small children, which we find that, as a result of this working lifestyle, often have a diet of pre-packaged, processed foods.



Moreover, workers' safety is also associated with the working environment. Over 30 percent of masseuses and 20 percent of cleaners consider their workplaces unsafe. Such unsafe or uneasy feelings can relate to, for example, the objects or conditions that workers find at customers' houses or apartments. For example, some workers say that wild or scary animals such as aggressive dogs make them feel unsafe. Others feel unease with drugs, weapons, or with mentally ill persons at the places.

b) Safety during transportation

More than one third of platform-based massage therapists (37 percent) say that they are worried about accidents while traveling to designated locations.

According to the workers, the fact that platforms only allow 1-2 hours of travel time pressures them to ride a motorcycle to save time during rush hours. This mode of transportation is not ideal if workers must eat or rest during the journey. Moreover, motorcycle accidents are very common in cities like Bangkok, especially during rush hours that are also peak periods for on-demand services. Therefore, many women workers do not finish the working day until after 10 pm or midnight.

Burdens and risks of transportation

Gade, a platform masseuse with Or'Ease, notes that customers usually reserve her services during the evening and nighttime. Since the traffic is generally bad, she relies on a variety of modes including motorcycle taxis, buses, the underground, and sky trains to travel to customers. As the platform does not limit the working zone, sometimes she has to spend a lot of money on transport, because she is not familiar with the places and gets lost. Gade says that motorcycle taxis are very dangerous because of the way they ride fast through the traffic. She also feels unsafe when taking the motorcycle taxi alone at night, especially when the drivers take quiet and isolated routes. As she does not know the direction, she is often scared and always expects the worst to happen.

In addition, to save expenses, women workers usually take public transportation on return legs, but they feel unsafe to travel alone during such late hours. To minimize risks, many women workers text their family members or partners to let them know where they are going. Many workers share their working schedules with the partners and urge them to ring the workers immediately after the supposed hours, especially when the workers do not send any updates about their locations.

Injuries and work insecurity

Ice is a masseuse with the Wongnai platform. After a motorcycle skid incident which caused her to wear a plaster cast on her foot, she needed her work income to pay her medical bills. However, it was very difficult for her to go anywhere with a cast because she had to constantly wipe off the rainwater and moisture.

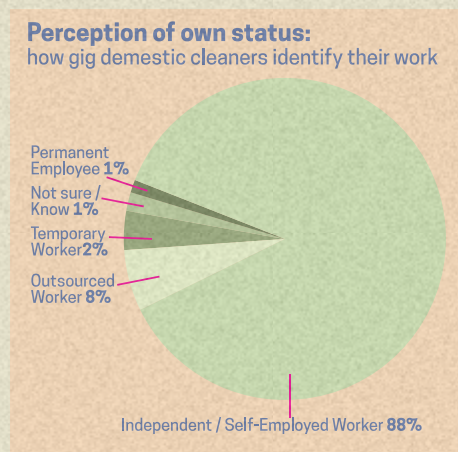
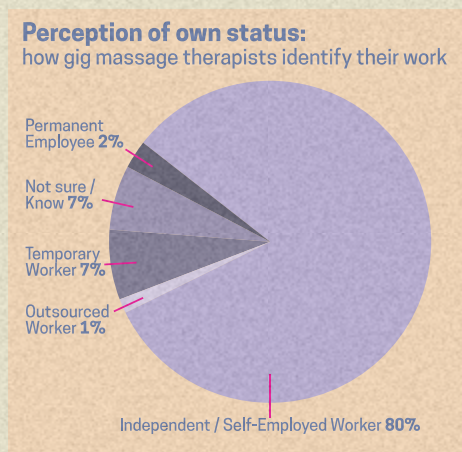
She explains, "I only worked with the Wongnai platform and no one else, so when there was no income from massage work, I got nothing. The platform helped pay a few small bills for my medicine, but I had to take care of the rest by myself. The company said that I could leave but would be unable to receive guaranteed income (what they call a "guaranteed hand"). When my foot started to heal, I still couldn't wear sneakers as required by the company, so the platform fined me 500 baht for violating the dress code."

A year after this incident, she suffered a wrist injury outside working hours and could not do massage work for several months. Finally, she had to resign from the company and returned the insured equipment and uniforms to receive her deposit money back. Ice later moved to work as a cleaner until her wrist got better. The company informed Ice that when she recovered, she could reapply with the platform. However, the platform eventually closed down at the end of 2021.

3.4 Experiences, agency, and strategies

1) Worker classification and perception of status

It is crucial to acknowledge that all platforms across the board define workers as self-employed and pay them on a piece-rate basis. Regardless of their employment practices, care platforms also use the term “partner” to refer to care workers. This classification deviates from the ideal type “standard labor arrangement” characterized by stable hours, job security, and social protections as a condition of employment. Instead, these “self-employed” workers, or “partners” are in precarious positions that lack stable employment and social protections, but, in principle, they provide workers with the flexibility to participate in the labor market according to their own schedule.



We examined workers’ perception of their status by asking how they identified their work. Most masseuses (80 percent) view themselves as independent or self-employed workers. A small group (7 percent) view themselves as temporary workers. It is interesting that one out of ten masseuses did not know or are not sure about their own status, and only a few workers view themselves as an employee (2 percent) and outsourced worker (1 percent).

Similarly, most platform cleaners (88 percent) believe that they are self-employed. A small group (8 percent) identify themselves as part-time, while a small number (2 percent) identified as temporary workers. Only a small fraction of cleaners (1 percent), who mostly take on gigs regularly provided by platforms (the so-called “package program”) define themselves as permanent workers.

It was worth noting that Wongnai clarified via email that their masseuses are “temporary workers”, but during the personal interview with Mr. Isriya Paireepairit, the Head of Public Affairs of Wongnai Massage at Home, to confirm the information he argued that he “did not know the difference between a temporary worker and freelance status”.

2) Perception of fairness

How workers see available opportunities and interact with labor platforms is crucial to them experiencing fairness. For example, workers who use social media and messaging platforms that assign gigs through a designated administrator according to their locations or expertise feel differently from workers who compete with each other to accept available gigs popping up on their screens. A major drawback of the former is that because assignments are personalized, they can sometimes feel preferential or biased. Nevertheless, when some workers question the fairness of this system, they attribute unfairness to individual admin persons rather than platform policies. Moreover, women workers explain that when mistakes happen (e.g., wrong address being assigned), they are the ones who are at fault rather than the admin person. As admin persons have a certain degree of authority, some women blame their impartiality for sparse or infrequent gigs.

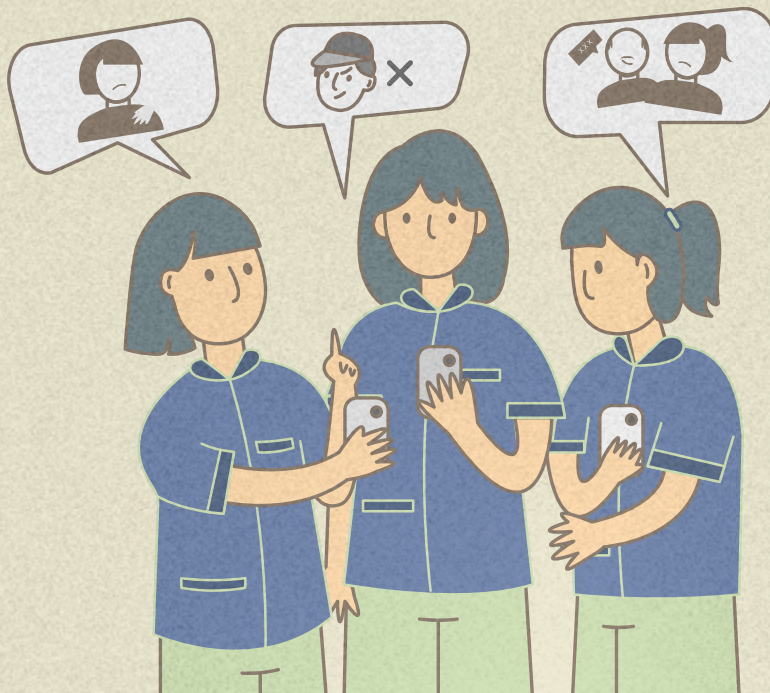
Domestic cleaning and massage are interpersonal in the sense that customers and workers view trust as an important element in the relationship. Therefore, when domestic cleaners and massage therapists have good experiences with customers, many workers attempt to pursue transactional relationships outside of the platform, despite the risk of deactivation for violating the platform policy against such activity.

3) Participation in determining terms of work

Ninety one percent of masseuses say that customer fees are entirely determined by the platforms. The fees determined by the major platforms were fixed and not negotiable. However, small platforms (i.e. MASGO, HomeSpaBKK, MyHappiness) allows some room for masseuses to negotiate for their transportation fees, which were usually not included in the remuneration.

Despite the imbalance of power, we find that workers are not passive actors. Instead, they respond in many ways that illustrate their agency or ability to improve their working conditions, albeit within a limited scope. For example, workers exercise their agency to make their working environment safer or improve their precarious situation. After having experienced threats or difficulties with particular customers, some workers note all the details about locations and customer profiles to share with their peers. In a sense, workers create a supportive and protective system for each other by sharing more information and making it more accessible to others. Most importantly, since platform grievance mechanisms are ineffective, if not completely absent, cleaners and massage therapists have created their own “blacklist” of indecent customers, for example, those who do not treat the workers with respect and those who pose potential risk and danger to them. As their platforms fail to ensure their safety, the women workers look out for each other by sharing and updating the blacklist within the community.

Individual workers have taken other actions in an attempt to change the balance of power. For instance, as domestic cleaners and massage therapists are home-based, they no longer have a regular workplace. However, a small number of massage therapists (7 percent) still maintain their work in massage parlors.



4) Ability to choose where and when to work

Literature on platform work discusses “platform stickiness,” namely the sunk costs that workers invest in the equipment and training required by the platforms. The stickiness also includes nonmonetary costs such as emotional investment that workers put into the process of learning and familiarizing platform policies and practices. Such stickiness is one of the reasons behind workers’ hesitation and inability to change platforms or exit the gig economy. With that said, our research indicates that the women workers are far from passive. Several workers explain that they established personal connections with good customers, those who are reliable and respectful toward them. By doing so, not only can the workers bypass platforms that take 15-20 percent of commission out of their pockets, but they can also better manage their routines and personal chores. For example, some cleaners and masseuses explain that they can better manage household and childcare responsibilities because they serve regular customers who maintain predictable and recurrent schedules. It should be noted that all platforms prohibit this kind of customer-worker relationship by imposing such harsh penalties as permanent deactivation. Therefore, the workers are extremely cautious and will only do so after weighing the benefits and costs.

We also examined the women’s perception of their ability to choose location and types of gig (e.g. single home, condo, and apartment). Eighty one percent of therapists and 63 percent of cleaners say that they can choose where they work by looking at distance, convenience in terms of transportation modes and cost, as well as the clients. For example, domestic cleaners are more cautious about going to a condo if the client is a man. Such information is important for the consideration of the workers, although it is not always available to them. The workers may find that even though the platform indicates that a woman reserved the service, only men are at the site when they show up.

Among the masseuses who answered that they could choose location and gig, their criteria included distance and having enough time to finish the gig, transportation cost, and types of massage involved. Experienced workers recognize the address information and profile of customers so that they can decline or not choose customers who are demanding or troublesome, which is another tactic that massage therapists use to protect themselves beforehand. Although this group of therapists answered

that they have the ability to choose, they added that sometimes they feel obligated to answer to undesirable gigs (e.g., those that were faraway) because of limited options. A therapist from one platform remarked that the number or frequency of gigs seems to depend on how often she responds to the gig offered. She noticed that the more she is inactive, the less gigs she can see on the application.

5) Multi-platform income-earning strategies

In general, workers prefer to increase their opportunities by being on multiple platforms. The need to manage their flow of income is one reason why massage therapists are registered with several platforms. Each platform has a different time frame in terms of paychecks. For example, major massage platforms tended to issue payment by weekly or longer via bank account transfer. Alternatively, therapists can receive cash directly from clients when gigging for small platforms, but the therapists can transfer the difference back to the platforms. We found 82 percent of massage therapists receive payment at least a week after the gigs while just 17 percent immediately receive the payment from clients. Only a very small percentage (1 percent) receive payment in advance.

Emerging issues in feminized platform-mediated care work

4.1 Women's inclusion and gender stereotyping of work

Care labor platforms reproduce gender norms and gendered divisions of labor by intentionally recruiting women into care work and discriminating against men, and gay and transgender women. In our interviews, platform owners and executives expressed gender-normative attitudes that women are most suitable to perform care work. In addition, care platforms not only view women narrowly by focusing on cisgender women, or sexual identity assigned at birth, their recruitment and employment practices also reproduce overt feminine traits and gender biases. For example, during an orientation of one cleaning platform, a trainer repeatedly emphasized that women cleaners must be docile and deferential toward customers. In addition, plat-

forms expose women workers to greater risks of gender-based violence. However, with such practices that perpetuate the feminization of care work, we find a lack of gender-responsive policies to mitigate the risks faced by women in gig care work. In this last section, we draw from interviews to identify emerging issues in feminized platform-mediated care work in Thailand.

4.2 Professionalization and digital divides

Literature on care work platforms raises the question of whether digital platforms lead to the professionalization of care work. Historically, domestic workers were categorized as “unskilled labor.” One recent report found that cleaning platforms often guarantee the provision of “skilled maids”, suggesting the creation of a skill hierarchy between workers who have gained access and others.⁴⁷ Moreover, the extent to which training programs offered by the platforms increase digital and other necessary skills is highly questionable. Most workers we interviewed say that their training was aimed mainly at adjusting and standardizing their ways of working (e.g., a uniform guideline about bathroom cleaning) rather than upgrading tangible skills. Despite the platforms’ discourses on professionalization, in practice they put much emphasis on soft skills such as attitude and personality traits. As reflected in our findings, cleaning platforms often stress the priority of customers’ needs and ask the workers to have “service minds” by putting the customers first. Our researchers observed an orientation in which platform “mentors” instructed the workers to comply with whatever customers demand for the sake of the platform. Without adequate support systems when conflicts arise, women workers have been forced to make choices that benefit customers at their own expense, such as dealing with tasks outside of the agreement or working longer than scheduled and compensated for.

Literature from the Global South shows that marketplace platforms and digital placement agencies offer an entry point for women workers who have low digital literacy and lack of internet access to enter the digital economy, although this group of women is disadvantaged because of information asymmetry.⁴⁸ On the other hand, on-demand platforms require a higher degree of digital literacy and internet fluency to, for example, navigate the platform-mediated workflow, including reading task assignments, tracking online transactions, and switching between offline and online interface. Accordingly, digital divides among care worker women from different socio-economic, educational, and class backgrounds impact access to gig work.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ CIS (2021)

4.3 Work and life: balancing paid care work and unpaid care responsibilities

While women workers are generally the ones who perform both unpaid care work at home and paid care work in the gig economy, our research indicates that care platforms all lack gender-responsive policies. When we take both unpaid and paid care work into account, women spend much more time on average than men working each day. Across the world, women are consistently have less time than men, and one of the main barriers for women to allocate more time to economic activities in the labor market is, therefore, unpaid care responsibility at home.⁴⁹

According to our survey, over half of the traditional domestic workers (55 percent) and 42 percent of platform-based cleaners say that they are responsible for unpaid care work at home. Over a third of the traditional domestic workers (37 percent) who are the main caretakers in their households say that they do not have enough rest and feel exhausted. Some of them say that the exhaustion and stress takes a toll on their bodies, such as by affecting their period cycles. In comparison, a larger proportion of massage therapists, over 84 percent and 47 percent of therapists using on-demand platforms and online marketplace, respectively, say that they are responsible for the household chores. Around 40 percent of therapists in these groups also say that these responsibilities negatively affect their health and personal well-being (e.g. not having enough rest).

When asked if paid care work has negative impacts on familial relationships and work-life balance, 40 percent of masseuses using an online marketplace and 43 percent of masseuses using on-demand platforms say yes. By contrast, a smaller number of the gig domestic workers answered yes to this question. Due to inflexible work schedules, a larger proportion of traditional domestic workers (31 percent) found it difficult to balance unpaid care work at home with paid care work. This compares with 15 percent of platform-based cleaners. The traditional domestic workers with relatively fixed schedules, however, may have greater ability to control their time and thus have more rest time. On the other hand, some platform-based cleaners say that, despite the perceived flexibility, they feel that they must work without rest to make ends meet. Furthermore, they feel that working all the time negatively impacts relationships within their families, as they have less quality time and communication with children and husbands. Ironically, they must rely mostly on text messages and

⁴⁹ ILO (2016)

phone calls to communicate with each other. It is also worth noting that although platform-based massage therapists benefit from flexible schedules allowed by the platforms, these workers spend much of this time on transportation and keeping a close watch on the mobile applications. According to our research, a worker may spend between 30 minutes and 3 hours on the road.

Time sovereignty

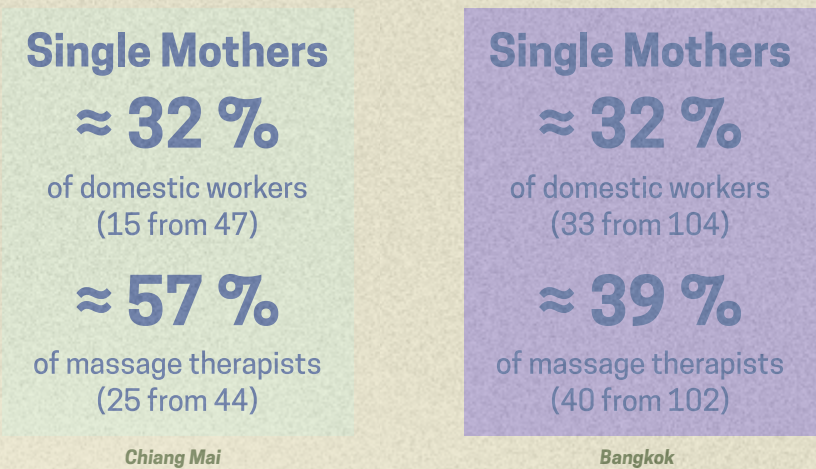
The Global Commission on the Future of Work states that gig work must support women in exercising their time sovereignty, or ability to schedule their work according to their needs in order to allocate time (and labor) for unpaid care work at home.⁵⁰ In principle, platforms claim that gig work provides flexibility for women workers to determine working hours according to their needs. However, not only do workers question this assumed flexibility, they also express feelings of losing control over their time. It is important to note, however, that experiences of managing one's time may vary between industries as well as between workers, making it difficult to assess the benefits and drawbacks of the purported "flexibility" of gig work.

When asked about the regularity of their work schedules, 90 percent of massage therapists and 95 percent of domestic workers, say that their working hours are irregular. Customers mostly determine the work schedules for both types of care work in the sense that workers must accept whatever is offered. The inability to determine one's own hours comes from work arrangements dictated by the platforms as well, which vary. For example, one massage platform requires their therapists to work eight hours per day, in three shifts: morning (10 am-7 pm), afternoon (1 pm-10 pm) and evening (3 pm-midnight). Each shift lasts nine hours, including one hour of break, which is identical to factory work. This platform receives requests from customers and assigns administrative persons to manage the gigs and coordinate with gig workers. While this platform uses the term "partners" to refer to their therapists, the arrangement looks more like employment of temporary workers. This practice is problematic since the workers do not have any say in determining the shifts that they want, and their shifts are regularly rotated.

⁵⁰ ILO (2019), *Work For A Brighter Future*. Global Commission on the Future of Work, International Labour Office, Geneva. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---cabinet/documents/publication/wcms_662410.pdf, p. 12

Single mothers among care workers

We also find that a significant number of women in platform-based care work are single mothers: over 30 percent of our domestic worker respondents and over 40 percent of masseuse respondents. Of the respondents, single mothers make up 55 percent of independent masseuses in Chiang Mai, who are connected to an online marketplace.



Among the single-mother domestic workers, around half of the traditional domestic workers say that they struggle to achieve work-life balance. They express that they do not earn enough income, are exhausted, and do not have enough time on their hands. Sixty four percent of platform-based cleaners indicate that they have had to choose paid care at the expense of unpaid care for their own children. During our focus group interviews, these women shared that they adapt by, for example, hiring someone to take care of their children or sending their kids to live with their relatives in another province. Because they do not have enough time for their children, they are concerned about their relationships with them. Masseuses, especially the platform-based ones, experience similar situations. More than one-fifth of the masseuses (23 percent) with online marketplaces and more than half of the masseuses with on-demand platforms (55 percent) shared similar concerns.

4.4 Gender-based violence and protective measures

A key finding from this report is the discrepancy between the perpetuation of a feminized workforce in the platform gig economy and the lack of gender-responsive

policies of platform companies to protect women from unsafe working conditions. Not only do labor platforms reproduce gender norms regarding the traditional role of women in performing care and reproductive work, but they also expose women workers to greater risk of gender-based violence.

Our original assumption was that platform-based women workers would have a higher degree of protection and safety than non-platform workers because labor platforms increase their visibility through various means (e.g. uniform requirement and online profiles). In addition, as labor platforms serve as intermediaries between workers and customers, they can in principle play a proactive role in mediating conflicts, at least for the sake of their brand image and credibility. However, we find that it is platforms themselves that expose women workers to greater risks of gender-based violence, particularly sexual harassment. Such risks are due to common platform design choices. For example, all platforms have a one-sided review system: only customers review the workers but not vice versa. More importantly, as competition is very tense in the market, platforms are very protective of their own reputations, and they tend to hide any information that they deem damaging to their image. This information includes, as we discovered, failure to protect workers and lack of transparency and accountability on the part of platform business.



Unsafe situations

Nam, a domestic cleaner on various platforms, including Seekster, shared that a male customer once watched pornography while she was working in the same room. She became even more scared when the customer told her to change her pants to shorts and tried to grab her.

"The admin always told us cleaners to feel free to get out of the customer's house if we feel threatened, but I was afraid to leave immediately like we were told. What would happen if I complained to the admin and the customer argues that the situation was only in my head? What if the admin decides not to take any action? Would I be able to continue my work? Would my payment be deducted if the customer says I didn't finish my task? I'd be so screwed."

Nam tried to call a number on her task instruction, but it turned out to be the customer's daughter who had booked the cleaning before leaving to run errands. Fortunately, the customer's daughter understood and let Nam leave the apartment.

Nam then complained to the admin, but the only response she got was "You can feel free to not accept the task from this customer next time." She decided to give up on reporting grievances to the platform and warned her close friends who worked in the same platform privately in their Line group chat about her experiences.

We also asked our respondents about their feelings of safety at work. It is concerning that over half of the massage therapists (59 percent of the platform-based gig therapists and 54 percent of the traditional gig therapists) have felt unsafe. In comparison, less than one-fifth of traditional domestic workers (14 percent) and around one-fifth of platform-based cleaners (20 percent) feel unsafe at work.

Massage therapists in Chiang Mai who work in massage parlors as well as use the online marketplace say that sometimes when clients touch them, they are afraid to resist, because doing so could aggravate the clients further and lead to physical abuse. Over 7 in 10 therapists in this group shared that they have experienced a form of sexual harassment such as lewd comments, touching, groping, and being asked for sex in exchange for money. Massage therapists who work in massage parlors or use intermediaries say that they often walk away from such situations because a third party, such as the massage parlor owner, can interfere if necessary.

By contrast, platform-based massage therapists frequently feel unsafe, because they work alone, work during night hours at distant locations, work with male customers, and work in apartments where exits may have been secured. Around 35

percent of this group shared that they have experienced some form of sexual harassment while working. Many are harassed by customers who propose money in exchange for “extra services”, coerce therapists to join them in drinking alcohol, or inappropriately touch them. Despite their fear and anxiety, most therapists do not contact the platforms or report incidents to police as the platforms advise. Instead, they use a combination of diplomacy and resistance to protect themselves. Many therapists also told us that they often share information about customers who harass with their peers to protect each other.

According to our research, traditional domestic workers are less exposed to risks of gender-based violence because they often work with regular customers or in public buildings along with peers. These workers can find ways to protect themselves or avoid threats (such as by reporting incidents to a supervisor or outsourcing company). Nevertheless, this does not seem to be the case for the platform-mediated workers. Many platform-based cleaners explain that they frequently feel unsafe while working in an enclosed space with male customers. During our focus group interviews, some cleaners revealed that they are concerned for their safety when alone with male customers who are drinking alcohol or are intoxicated, dressed inappropriately (e.g. wearing only boxers), or using drugs.

Twelve percent of traditional domestic workers and eight percent of platform-based cleaners shared that they have experienced some form of sexual harassment by employers or customers, such as touching parts of their body, initiating inappropriate conversations and/or sexual advances.

Care platforms explain that, in case of an emergency, workers can contact platforms through call centers or admin persons. According to workers, however, it is too late to do so when facing immediate danger. Besides, as per platform protocols, workers are instructed to put their mobile phones away when working to maintain professionalism. Therefore, most workers can only make such contact when the situation becomes threatening.

Ineffective complaint mechanisms

A customer once asked Nim, a massage therapist who worked for the platform Or'Ease, to "touch his private parts" while giving him a massage.

After Nim declined, that customer complained to the platform that she did not perform her job well. Or'Ease had claimed to protect masseuses from sexual harassment, so a staff was tasked to help Nim make a written complaint through the messaging application. Due to Nim's low educational background, she had problems reading and writing and could not explain the incident to the staff over the chat messages.

Frustrated by Nim, the staff ended their investigation by noting that Nim could not reasonably defend herself.

Recommendations

To platform companies:

Issues	Recommendations
Terms of work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Allow worker representatives to participate in decision-making on policy changes, working conditions, and worker penalties o Be transparent about any changes and updates on the terms, which, according to standard employment contracts, require consultation and agreement from the workers o Ensure that workers understand the terms of work before the task is assigned o Ensure that applications have a text-to-audio reader for disabled workers and workers of lower education levels o Establish guaranteed minimum earnings systems with reference to local laws and costs of living o Offer optional pathways to become full-time employees
Working Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Ensure that communication channels between platform and workers are always open and functional. Hotlines or direct lines for distressed workers must be readily available and responsive o Reduce informational and power asymmetry between platforms and workers as well as between workers and customers by putting in place a system where customers are required to share details of their customers' profile and designated location. More information means more protection for worker
Skill - Building	Provide workers with necessary digital skills development and capacity-building trainings to tackle digital divides between gender and age
Social Protection	Promote a pathway to access the social security scheme, for example, by facilitating the registration process that is built into the platform's recruitment process

Issues	Recommendations
Gender - Sensitive Policy and Gender - Based Violence	<ul style="list-style-type: none">o Prioritize prevention and protection of workers by establishing safeguard measures and guidelines for both workers and customers with regard to gender-based violence, created in partnership with workerso Ensure that customers are screened or vetted in similar ways to the screening and examination of workers' backgrounds. While workers' criminal records are checked, workers themselves proposed the idea that platforms should check male customers' criminal records as wello Set up a rapid response team for cases of gender-based violence. If needed, share resources with other platforms by co-investing the rapid response team or working closely with existing organizationso Make sure that customers understand that gender-based violence is a serious crime by providing information about relevant laws and punishmentso Put in place a code of conduct on gender-based violence, created in consultation with workers of diverse age, gender, and disability needso Implement diverse gender policies to allow people of all gender identities to access opportunities
Grievances Mechanism	<ul style="list-style-type: none">o Implement grievance and appeal mechanisms that worker representatives are involved in, including on issues related to worker penalties such as deactivation and fines for violationso Organize regular participatory meetings with workers to listen to problems and address worker challenges

To government:

- Conduct research into the ongoing transformation of areas of work, taxation, and social protection to gain a comprehensive understanding of emerging power asymmetries between platforms and workers, income insecurity, and long-term structural inequality resulting from the digital divide
- Immediately begin the process of drafting new laws to protect platform workers, particularly low-waged gig workers who tend to be marginalized and vulnerable
- Enforce labor laws as a requirement for minimum standards
- Designate a state regulator that works across silos (e.g. labor, e-commerce and digital economy) to address the core issues of platforms' lack of transparency and accountability
 - o One of the immediate tasks of the regulator should be to enforce rules for minimum standards and protocols, as well as protective requirements toward workers. Another task should be to set a legal minimum threshold for commission fees that platforms are allowed to charge from all stakeholder

Short bios of the researchers

Kriangsak Teerakowitkajorn is the founder and director of Just Economy and Labor Institute (JELI), where he has led a series of action research on labor platforms and platform workers since 2018. Kriangsak has a Ph.D. in Labor Geographies from Syracuse University and a Master's in Economics from Warwick University. He works extensively with labor movements in Thailand and Southeast Asia.

Chonthita (Neab) Krairikul is a researcher focusing on workers' associations. With a background in Journalism and Economics, she is a talented writer who amplifies the voices of marginalized people by writing about their struggles for social justice.