

# CARE & THE PLATFORM ECONOMY IN THE UK

## A Mapping Exercise

In the UK and globally, in-home domestic childcare and adult care services are increasingly being provided via digital platforms, with significant implications for in-home/domestic care workers.

This paper maps what we already know about this phenomenon and identifies knowledge gaps that could be filled through focused research in support of influencing initiatives aimed at improving rights and protection for care platform workers. The mapping focuses on capturing the key challenges and opportunities that care platforms pose for workers; examining what UK policies are relevant to these platforms and their workers; and identifying key influencing work on this issue.

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For more information, or to comment on this paper, email [policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk](mailto:policyandpractice@oxfam.org.uk).

# CONTENTS

<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>2. THE MAPPING</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>3. MAPPING KNOWLEDGE</b>	<b>10</b>
3.1. CARE PLATFORMS: A DIVERSE LANDSCAPE	10
3.2. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES	11
<b>4. MAPPING POLICY</b>	<b>19</b>
4.1. EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS	19
4.2. IMMIGRATION POLICY	20
4.3. DATA PROTECTION	21
4.4. REGULATORY BODIES	21
4.5. EU DIRECTIVE ON PLATFORM WORK	22
4.6. ILO CONVENTION ON PLATFORM WORK	23
4.7. FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE UK POLICY CONTEXT	23
<b>5. MAPPING INFLUENCING WORK</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>6. CONCLUSIONS</b>	<b>26</b>
6.1. LOOKING AHEAD: IDENTIFYING THE OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED BY FUTURE-FOCUSED RESEARCH	29

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Author: Veronica Deutsch.

Veronica Deutsch is a researcher and writer focusing on care labour. She was a co-founder and Director of the Nanny Solidarity Network and, during her tenure, helped to establish the Childcare Workers' Solidarity Fund and the Independent Workers' Union of Great Britain's Nannies & Au Pairs branch—the first trade union branch for nannies & au pairs in the UK. She is currently completing a PhD at the University of Bristol mapping the stratification of the nanny and au pair workforce in London and how this shapes workers' ability to mobilise against precarity. She is also a Core Team member and Research Lead at RadHR. Veronica previously worked as a nanny for nine years.

Contributors: Ridhi Kalaria – UK Partnerships and Program Manager, Silvia Galandini – Domestic Poverty Lead

Invaluable support, advice and steer were gratefully received from Rachel Noble, Fatema Tuz Johoora, Ruth Mhlanga, Leena Patel, Alex Bush, Beth John, Helen Stawski, Shuna Keen, Helen Hester, Claire Spoons, Leah Mugehera, Melton Llenos, Elizabeth Shaughnessy, Ben Grossman-Cohen, Annah-Grace Kemunto and the rest of the Oxfam Publishing Team.

Special thanks to all the worker groups as well as policy and research experts that have provided critical inputs and have helped shaped this work.

# SUMMARY

The emergence of digital platforms over the past decade has powerfully transformed the world of work. As part of this shift, in-home caring services, including childcare and adult care, are increasingly being provided through on-demand digital platforms globally, including in the UK. Yet research, policy and media debates around the platform gig economy have primarily focused on male-dominated sectors such as food delivery and ride-hailing, with feminised and racialised sectors, such as in-home care services, remaining relatively unexplored and invisible.

As the care platform sector continues to grow rapidly and the crisis of care provision deepens, understanding its impact on care workers' rights and, more broadly, its implications for the platform and care sectors, becomes increasingly urgent.

**This paper presents the findings from a mapping exercise** aimed at exploring existing knowledge on care platforms, including the challenges and opportunities they pose for workers. It also provides a brief outline of the current UK policy context as it relates to care platforms and identifies what UK-based influencing is already being carried out.

With regard to **existing knowledge**, the mapping highlighted that, while care platforms share many similarities with other forms of platform labour, they ultimately appear to be a distinct phenomenon in the platform economy. The unique conditions surrounding the way these platforms operate pose both challenges and opportunities for the digital care workforce.

Three **key challenges** were identified:

1. **Poor workers' rights and protection**, primarily due to workers operating in private, domestic premises and hence being more likely to be left vulnerable and unsupported, but also to the highly heterogenous market structure of care platforms, and the specific ways in which they shape employer-worker relations.
2. **Isolation makes it difficult for care workers to mobilise, given the nature of the services they provide (i.e. personal in-home care)**. Workers are often isolated from one another, which makes it harder for them to organise collectively or individually against poor working conditions. Feminised workforces like the care platform workforce, also often struggle to engage in traditional union tactics, instead prioritising less visible forms of peer support, such as mutual aid.
3. **Care platforms and the care platform workforce are under-researched**, despite several new and ongoing research projects – both UK and globally. This lack of robust and detailed data on care platform workers makes it difficult to describe the workforce with a high level of confidence and accuracy – not only regarding gender, race, ethnicity and migrant status, but also other socio-economic and demographic characteristics.

Three **key opportunities** were also identified:

1. **We can conceptualise care platforms as distinct from other types of platform labour**. Doing so will make it possible to highlight the specific experience of the care labour market; link conversations on care platforms to broader discussions on the devaluation of care and reproductive labour; and encourage the inclusion of care platforms in research and policy-influencing work around more traditional and

offline forms of care provision.

2. **The unique conditions of the workforce may help workers mobilise.** Care platforms might make domestic care workers and the care services they provide more public and visible, also facilitating connections between workers. Whilst recognizing the significant power asymmetries between workers and their employers, the personal and close nature of in-home care services could also, in some circumstances, help mediate employer-worker conflicts and encourage allyship. As some care platforms have marketed themselves as an explicit solution to the worsening care crises in the UK, this may create an opportunity to include demands around care platforms in existing calls for reform in the early education, childcare and social care sectors.
3. **There is a basis of emergent, future-focused evidence to build upon.** Though there is limited research into care platforms in the UK specifically, existing studies offer vital insights into alternative platform models where workers' rights are placed front and centre, e.g. cooperative and worker-owned models. While these may not go far enough to mitigate the challenges posed by platform work, it is possible to build on this future-focused evidence as well as existing frameworks for domestic workers, to develop recommendations that speak to the unique conditions of care platforms.
4. Looking at the **UK policy landscape**, the paper highlighted key policies regulating care platforms at the UK government level – either directly or as part of regulations of the gig economy in general – and those relevant to the digital care workforce regarding enabling or hindering access to rights and protection. The key policy areas explored include employment rights (with a focus on statutory protections), immigration policy (given the over-representation of migrant workers in the care platform workforce), data protection (in relation to collection of workers' data by platforms, but also by employers in domestic premises), and regulatory bodies.

The review of the **current UK influencing context** highlighted that (1) worker groups increasingly play a key role in sharing first-hand experiences of working through care platforms; (2) most research for influencing focuses on the formal childcare sector, and only a limited number of stakeholders address adult care provided through platforms; (3) recent UK-based initiatives among feminised digital care workers have focused on more invisibilised and solidaristic tactics (e.g. mutual aid) than those adopted by other platform workers (e.g. wildcat strikes); and (4) influencing on issues specifically related to care platform work and workers remain broadly invisible in the policy-influencing agenda around childcare and adult care provision.

Based on this review of existing evidence, the mapping helped shed light on **key knowledge gaps**: (1) lack of robust, large-scale quantitative data on who makes up the workforce; (2) limited in-depth analysis of the UK's policy landscape as it relates to care platforms and their workforce; (3) very little knowledge about the market composition and structure of UK care platforms, particularly in the context of adult home care platforms; and (4) limited understanding of how care platform workers can be included in broader movements around platform labour and care.

**Future conversations on care platforms in the UK context should focus on addressing these gaps, while also proactively considering what alternatives to the current care platform landscape could look like** – in terms of legislative change and alternative ownership models, as well as the specific campaign demands that might help us achieve these aims. Across all this work, it would be important to:

- **Support worker groups with *practical resources***, to support their campaign efforts.
- **Facilitate space for *continued connection*** between worker groups and academics.

- **Identify opportunities for a *dedicated programme of work* around care platforms to ensure focused attention and tailored resources.**

# 1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital platforms over the past decade has powerfully transformed the world of work.<sup>1</sup> As part of this shift, **in-home caring services, including childcare and adult care, are increasingly being provided through on-demand digital platforms** in the UK<sup>2</sup> and other countries.<sup>3</sup> International studies indicate that – while it is difficult to capture exact figures - the digital care workforce constitutes a large part of the overall platform workforce.<sup>4</sup>

Despite this, research, policy and media debates around the platform gig economy have predominantly focused on male-dominated sectors such as food delivery and ride-hailing,<sup>5 6</sup> with **feminised and racialised sectors, including in-home care services, remaining relatively unexplored and invisible in these debates and initiatives.**<sup>7</sup>

The rise in platform-based services has brought both challenges and opportunities, with specific implications for the rights of paid care workers – as well as the care and platform sectors more generally – which are currently underexamined.

It is also linked to broader phenomena. The UK's care sector is facing a severe crisis, characterised by chronic underfunding, workforce shortages, financialisation and an increasing demand for services. This crisis is emblematic of a wider devaluation of care and reproductive labour, where work traditionally carried out by women is confined to the domestic sphere and categorised as unskilled.<sup>8 9</sup> Women – and particularly migrant, Black and minority ethnic women – tend to be over-represented among platform in-home care workers,<sup>10</sup> reflecting the greater amount of low-paid and unpaid in-home care work carried out by women offline.<sup>11</sup> These conditions have had knock-on effects for how care is included in policy, lobbying efforts and social movements historically, and have laid the basis for the recent proliferation of care platforms.

As the care platform sector continues to grow rapidly, understanding its impact on care workers' rights and, more broadly, care provision becomes increasingly urgent. **This discussion paper presents the findings from a mapping exercise aimed at exploring in more detail the phenomenon of care platforms in the UK.** It looks at the existing knowledge on the challenges and opportunities care platforms bring particularly for workers – including evidence on the broader systemic issues that give rise to this sector; the current policy context; and what influencing is already being carried out.

The mapping exercise was commissioned by Oxfam GB to develop a better understanding of the phenomenon of care services delivered through online platforms. It forms part of its work tackling the undervaluation of care work (paid and unpaid) – predominantly carried out by women, with a focus on caring for children and disabled, ill and older people – as a key driver of poverty, as well as a cause and consequence of economic, gender, race and other intersecting inequalities.<sup>12</sup>

## 2. THE MAPPING

The mapping exercise - on which this discussion paper is based - was carried out between October 2023 and March 2024. Its primary aim was to develop a better understanding of childcare and adult care services provided through online platforms and their workforce, by collating and reviewing existing evidence and taking a snapshot of the current policy and influencing context. The exercise was shaped by three main research questions around the current knowledge, policy and influencing context:

1. **Knowledge** – Based on existing evidence, what are the key challenges and opportunities that care platforms pose regarding workers’ rights and protection (including workers’ organising rights), and socio-economic, gender and racial equality?
  - a. To what extent and why are those challenges and opportunities specific to care platforms, or are they in line with evidence on digital platforms in other sectors?
  - b. What are the key knowledge gaps and key learning questions highlighted by the evidence review (i.e. what has not been researched enough or at all, and could be further explored)?
2. **Policy** – What policies at the UK government level currently exist to regulate care platforms (either directly or as part of regulations of the gig economy in general), and what policies are relevant to the digital care workforce regarding enabling or hindering access to rights and protection?
3. **Influence** – Who is already working on influencing care platforms in the UK (looking at grassroots organisations and coalitions of care workers, unions and researchers)?

The mapping was carried out through **desk-based research** which was utilised to:

- Review existing evidence on care platforms, including both academic and non-academic sources in various formats (written, audio and video); the focus was on UK evidence, but international and non-UK references were also consulted.
- Map the policy landscape, with a focus on the UK government rather than devolved nations, as this is where some of the main policy levers sit.
- Identify key influencing stakeholders and programmes of work.

The keywords used in the desk-based research were: childcare, care, care worker, social care, adult care, gig, gig work, gig worker, gig economy, digitisation, digital platform, online platform, babysitting app, care app, worker app, platform app, early years, domestic worker, domestic work, gender inequality, race inequality and migrant workers.

**Conversations with experts** were undertaken to gather advice on key sources to consult and emerging or ongoing influencing and research initiatives, as well as to sense-check the findings from the mapping.

Throughout this paper the apps and platforms are referred to as 'care platforms' and the workers as 'care platform workers'. The mapping focused on digital platforms that mediate childcare and adult care services, including babysitting, home care, social care, au-pair and nanny platforms. Platforms mediating other types of domestic work (such as cleaning) were not included in the mapping due to capacity constraints. Likewise, the report does not refer to specific platforms and their conditions, but rather intends to give a broad overview of the sector as a whole.

**It is important to note that while the mapping exercise strove to be as inclusive as possible, it does not claim to be wholly comprehensive of the existing knowledge, perspectives and influencing work on care platforms, given the limited time available to conduct the exercise. Instead, it can provide a helpful starting point for further scoping and discussion.**

# 3. MAPPING KNOWLEDGE

The mapping gathered existing evidence on the phenomenon of care platforms. Overall, it found that care platforms comprise a broad church and mediate a variety of work arrangements. While care platforms share many similarities with other forms of platform labour, the mapping highlighted how they are ultimately a distinct phenomenon in the platform economy. The unique conditions surrounding the way these platforms operate pose both challenges and opportunities for the digital care workforce.

## 3.1. CARE PLATFORMS: A DIVERSE LANDSCAPE

Care platforms encompass a wide variety of sizes and funding models, from larger investor-backed platforms to smaller entrepreneurial models.<sup>13</sup> They are also split into different operational categories:<sup>14</sup>

- **Marketplace platforms** ‘provide a ranked and sorted pool of candidates. Care workers seeking employment can be searched, ordered, and browsed by prospective employers.’<sup>15</sup>
- **On-demand platforms** ‘facilitate the matching of client and worker’ and charge ‘a specific transaction fee when [...] matching the parent with a carer’.<sup>16</sup>

In both cases, the platforms do not operate according to typical platform models, in which an algorithm automatically dispatches workers to consumers. Rather, they influence hiring through sorting and ranking, increasing the chance of biased hiring practices and often serving to **deepen** unequal or racialised hiring practices in ways that are specific to these platforms.<sup>17</sup>

Additionally, while care platforms can be generally defined as **location based**, as the care services they mediate are carried out in a specific physical location, there were some limited examples of care platforms mediating ‘**cloudwork**’<sup>18</sup> (online platform work) such as ‘virtual babysitter’ gigs.<sup>19</sup>

Some care platforms facilitated less common arrangements, such as:

- Back-up care, i.e. childcare provided by corporate clients to employees with caring responsibilities, in either domestic or nursery settings.<sup>20 21</sup>
- Virtual care, i.e. childcare or babysitting services provided via video conferencing platforms<sup>22</sup>
- Voluntary care, i.e. an initiative launched via several care platforms to encourage digital care workers to offer their services for free, in particular to ‘key workers’ like NHS staff<sup>23</sup> – again, no adult care platform equivalent was identified.

These lesser-known kinds of care platform labour emerged during the pandemic in response to the closure of formal childcare settings (nurseries and childminders), with a 2022 report from the New Economics Foundation highlighting how one platform saw

a triple-digit percentage increase in users as families increasingly turned to in-home care arrangements.<sup>24</sup> Crucially, this shift highlights the interrelatedness of the formal and informal care sectors and their respective consumer markets, despite the sectors often being analysed separately.

Finally, while some consistencies are evident across the sector, such as the high levels of precarity faced by workers, **it is important not to homogenise what is a highly heterogeneous sector**. As academic Helen Hester notes: 'in terms of thinking about the possibilities for platform care ... despite sharing a certain flexible, infrastructural, and intermediary quality, individual platforms need to be understood in their own specificity. The structure of the platform will, in practice, manifest itself in distinctive ways, meaning that it can be tricky to talk about "platform care" as a single cultural entity.'<sup>25</sup>

## 3.2. CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

The process of mapping existing knowledge highlighted both the challenges and opportunities brought about by care platforms, especially regarding their workforce. These are generally in line with what is being observed in the broader digital gig economy, but there are also important elements that are specific to care platforms.

**The mapping drew as much as possible on evidence about UK-based care platforms. However, as highlighted in 3.2.3, evidence is currently limited due to both to the difficulty in capturing the workforce and the nascence of the research field.<sup>26</sup> The majority of sources consulted therefore refer to the platform economy and care platforms in other national contexts (both in the Global North and South).**

### 3.2.1 CHALLENGE #1: WORKERS' RIGHTS AND PROTECTION

Existing research in the UK and other national contexts shows that all platform workers (both in care-focused and other sectors) are subject to limited (if any) regulation<sup>27</sup> as a consequence of being 'placed somewhere in a grey zone between employed and self-employed'.<sup>28</sup> This leaves them stuck in a 'regulatory vacuum' **that deprives them of basic rights and protection**.<sup>29</sup>

Poor protection for workers can play **a key role in platforms' business models** to contain costs and increase profits,<sup>30</sup> especially as they seek an advantage in a very competitive global market.<sup>31</sup> In addition, some policy and research experts have raised concerns around the practices of global digital platforms that operate across borders. These businesses benefit from economies of scale and drive down workers' pay, with consequences for the offline economy, especially at a local level.<sup>32</sup> There is also some evidence that platforms tend to favour inflexible user agreements that reduce workers' ability to push back against unreasonable asks from care users.<sup>33</sup>

Policy Network also highlights how all platform workers are likely to miss out on (1) essential financial support when they struggle to make ends meet, as rigid social security systems 'are designed to accommodate people who are either in or out of work' and hence do not accommodate the reality of flexible platform work; and (2) training opportunities that could open the doors to career progression.<sup>34</sup>

Evidence suggests that platform labour in general lays the basis for flexible, accessible work for those who **often face barriers to paid work**, such as migrant workers<sup>35</sup> and

those with caring responsibilities,<sup>36</sup> therefore supporting financial independence and digital inclusion, among other benefits.<sup>37</sup> However, there is also evidence that not only is this flexibility insufficient to protect workers if not accompanied by other basic rights and protections,<sup>38</sup> it is also limited in practice.<sup>39</sup> For example, not accepting work assigned through the platforms can lead to missing out on opportunities to be assigned future gigs.<sup>40</sup>

A 2020 report from the European Economic and Social Committee provides a useful breakdown of ‘challenges that would need to be addressed in order to make platform work a fair and safe alternative to traditional types of long-term home care work’.<sup>41</sup>

**Table 1: Summary of labour aspects of long-term home care work mediated via platforms**

<b>Work aspects</b>	<b>Standard on-location worker-initiated labour platform</b> (De Groen et al 2018)	<b>Care platform</b>	<b>Possible measures for improvement</b>
<b>Algorithmic management</b>	Listing (not matching), predominantly one-off services	Listing, stable client-worker relationships	Transparency over functioning of listing algorithms  Protect free choice of clients by workers
<b>Recruitment and dismissal</b>	Low requirements, low entry barriers, intense competition, high turnover	Medium-high requirements, lower competition, lower turnover due to ratings	Pre-checks by the platform, formal application procedure
<b>Employment status and social protection</b>	Self-employment Low level of protection	Self-employment Low level of protection	Transparency and advisory services on social protection
<b>Remuneration</b>	Determined by worker Unpaid searching time for tasks and journey to clients’ home	Determined by carer Unpaid searching time for tasks and journey to clients’ home  Potentially unpaid extra hours	Transparency and assistance with tax compliance
<b>Working conditions</b>	Flexible schedules and work intensity Exposure to ratings from clients No access to training	Flexibility limited by clients’ need Exposure to ratings from third parties (e.g. family members) No access to training	Provide functions for replacing unavailable carers  Provide complaint mechanisms to readjust unfair ratings  Ensure access to training offers
<b>Health, safety and conflict resolution</b>	Increased risks at clients’ home, unfair risk sharing	Increased health and safety risks at clients’ home and through care work in general	Active information policy, awareness raising and contact points

Work aspects	Standard on-location worker-initiated labour platform (De Groen et al 2018)	Care platform	Possible measures for improvement
	Power imbalance between platform and worker in conflicts with clients	Power imbalance between platform and worker in conflicts with clients	Obligatory insurance cover Fair and transparent conflict resolution mechanism

Source: Trojansky (2020), *The Platform Economy and Precarious Work*, European Economic and Social Committee.<sup>42</sup>

While a lack of workers' rights and protections is an issue that affects both care-specific and other platforms alike, existing evidence indicates care platform workers are likely to face specific challenges.<sup>43</sup> Evidence suggests that:

- Care platform workers operate in private, domestic premises, meaning they are more likely to be left vulnerable to legislative loopholes that make it harder to protect themselves at work (see more on this in section 3.2.2).<sup>44</sup> The often intimate nature of care work also poses particular health and safety risks, such as close contact with bodily fluids; responsibility for personal care; and working on domestic premises siloed away from other people, increasing carers' vulnerability to sexual and physical violence.<sup>45</sup>
- New ways of managing the employer-worker relationship through care platforms exacerbate existing inequalities within the labour market. A recent research project by Jing Hiah explored how 'digital platforms shape employment relationships in paid domestic work' and examines how these inequalities are navigated by the workforce.<sup>46</sup>
- Due to the highly heterogenous market structure of care platforms specifically, workers' wages vary significantly, with some care platforms taking up to 25% of workers' hourly rates as a commission fee, and others charging a subscription fee for both families and workers to access the platform.<sup>47 48</sup>
- Care platforms are more likely than other platforms to obscure the extent to which the platform holds responsibility, facilitating their evasion of responsibility for worker protection. This leaves a lack of accountability mechanisms for platform workers to fall back on in case of any grievances or violations on their rights.<sup>49</sup>
- Care platforms pose specific regulatory challenges for Occupational Health and Safety (OHS), with implications for workers including inadequate training, lack of access to proper equipment, and risks to physical and mental health.<sup>50</sup>
- Some have also highlighted the risk of platforms entrenching the digital divide, whereby workers who do not have access to mobile technology will be excluded from employment opportunities.<sup>51</sup>

**Building on the second bullet point above, another important characteristic of care platforms is that the sector is highly stratified along race, ethnicity and class lines – reflecting the traditional division of labour as well as that of the wider care sector. As such, emerging digital infrastructures such as platforms may serve to reinforce**

### **existing inequalities and echo the systemic devaluation of care and domestic work.**

The Women's Budget Group notes: 'It is a well-established fact that women are channelled into lower-status, less visibly-prestigious positions which privilege gendered assumptions – for instance “nurturing” jobs such as nursing, teaching, and care work. [...] Occupational segregation<sup>52</sup> in the platform economy is equally well-established. [...] The activities of gig work are predicated on conventional lines of occupational segregation which pushes women to less prominent jobs in societal perception.'<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, experts have highlighted that the unique conditions of care platforms may mean that workers experience *greater* security and better pay in comparison with other platform workforces due to differences in how workers are paid (with hourly wages as opposed to a *per gig* fee), as well as longer and more regular gigs with particular clients meaning they are able to build stronger worker-client relationships.<sup>54</sup> Though this does not negate the high levels of precarity across the workforce, it does complicate the picture and suggest that, perhaps, part of the challenge around workers' rights is clarifying exactly how those rights are experienced across the workforce, and which specific elements and conditions of the work are more or less secure in comparison to other platform and care workforces.

## **3.2.2. CHALLENGE #2: ISOLATION MAKES IT DIFFICULT FOR CARE PLATFORM WORKERS TO MOBILISE**

As highlighted above, existing evidence suggests that – given the nature of the services they provide (i.e. personal in-home care) – **digital care workers, like other providers of home-based care, are often isolated** within private homes, making<sup>55</sup> this workforce far less visible.

This inherent isolation also makes **it harder for care platform workers to mobilise individually or collectively against poor pay and conditions**,<sup>56</sup> with union membership across the workforce remaining low.<sup>57</sup> Research also highlighted that workers are often unable to contact platforms to report mistreatment at work, depriving them of a channel to report abuse: 'Platforms are somewhat like a “ghost”: while they seem to be there, as there might be a telephone number or an email address, nobody picks up the phone or responds if a worker needs anything.'<sup>58</sup>

While some examples of workers organising have emerged since the pandemic – such as the formation of the Nanny Solidarity Network, a worker-led mutual aid and campaigning group providing resources, emergency aid and community<sup>59</sup> – care workers lack the 'factory floor' and social hubs (such as waiting areas for delivery drivers) that would allow them access to each other, making organising efforts and peer-to-peer support challenging<sup>60</sup>. Evidence from other feminised workforces shows that workers face similar challenges around engaging in traditional union tactics and, in response, prioritize forms of supporting one another that centre more around community, such as mutual aid.<sup>61</sup> This is due to the fact that the kinds of work most often carried out by these workforces is often isolated and informalised, with few routes for collectivising.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, some live-in<sup>63</sup> care platform workers share a home with their employers, and therefore may face additional barriers when it comes to challenging exploitative conditions.

Platforms echo agency and digital marketplace dynamics, meaning many of the challenges they pose are recognisable to scholars and activists as established challenges within the sector. For instance, Funda Ustek-Spilda et al highlight how, in an

effort to appeal to consumers, care platforms may frame themselves differently to how they operate in actuality, sometimes making it difficult to differentiate between online agencies and platforms: 'Compared to digital labour platforms in other sectors, care work platforms are keener to portray themselves as **simple digital marketplaces**, providing a simple match between clients and workers.'<sup>64</sup>

These unique conditions profoundly influence how workers engage with platforms, as well as their demands and organising tactics when it comes to reform. While other platforms are facing new challenges<sup>65</sup>, care platform workers are facing permutations of longstanding ones. The conditions that make offline care and domestic work precarious (such as isolation and informality) are also shaping platform care, unlike other sectors where the precarity is engendered by the platforms themselves.<sup>66</sup>

### 3.2.3. CHALLENGE #3: CARE PLATFORMS AND THEIR WORKFORCE ARE UNDER-RESEARCHED

By drawing on international research and data on the wider gig economy,<sup>67</sup> as well as informal care and domestic workforces,<sup>68</sup> it is possible to assume that the care platform workforce is **highly feminised,<sup>69</sup> racialised and disproportionately constituted by migrants.**

However, **while the mapping highlighted several new and ongoing research projects – both UK and globally – exploring care services delivered through digital platforms, there is currently 'remarkably little scholarship' on platform care work in the UK context.**<sup>70</sup> Due to the difficulty in gathering reliable statistical data, qualitative analysis dominates the literature.<sup>71</sup> Current UK data also concentrates on the London region, potentially excluding workers operating in areas outside of the capital. Additionally, much of the current research on gendered experiences of UK gig work centres on women's experiences in the broader platform economy, including ride-hailing and food delivery sectors, as opposed to looking at feminised industries specifically.<sup>72</sup>

**Care work platforms are also often conceptualised in research as separate from the provision of formal care (e.g. nurseries, care homes and childminders) as well as in-home care organised outside of platforms. This is partly due to the distinct differences between workers' experiences of finding gigs through platforms vs those sourced through more traditional offline channels (such as placement agencies, forums, and word of mouth).**<sup>73</sup> But this siloing has also partly been linked to the view of in-home care as informal and hence sitting outside legal frameworks,<sup>74</sup> which in turn means that research on care provision that aims to influence policy change tends to exclude care platforms – on top of research around the broader platform economy generally disregarding care platforms (as highlighted above).

**This lack of robust and detailed data on care platform workers in the UK<sup>75</sup> makes it difficult to describe the workforce with a high level of confidence and accuracy – not only regarding gender, race, ethnicity and migrant status, but also other socio-economic and demographic characteristics.** What does exist speaks to the unique positionality and precarity of the workforce.<sup>76 77</sup>

There is a clear need for greater attention to be paid to care platforms and their workers in the UK, as well as for connections to be made between the UK and international contexts across both the Global North<sup>78</sup> and Global South<sup>79</sup> where research is being further developed.

However, despite significant challenges within the sector, there are also opportunities available to establish better, fairer working conditions and stronger rights for workers.

### 3.2.4. OPPORTUNITY #1: WE CAN CONCEPTUALISE CARE PLATFORMS AS DISTINCT FROM OTHER TYPES OF PLATFORM LABOUR

In mapping existing knowledge, an argument emerges in favour of conceptualising care platforms as separate from other types of platform labour (as pointed out in previous sections). Doing so enables a full understanding of their complex reality, especially from the perspective of the care platform workforce, and makes it possible to:

- Highlight the specific experiences of the care labour market, including on the basis of gender, race and migration status where informality and poor working conditions – whether offline or online – have historically been the norm.<sup>80 81</sup>
- Ensure that conversations on care platforms are linked to broader discussions on the devaluation (and privatisation) of care and reproductive labour.<sup>82</sup>
- Encourage the inclusion of care platforms in research and policy-influencing work around more traditional and offline forms of care provision<sup>83</sup>, generating positive outcomes for how they are incorporated into legal frameworks and the public narrative.

In addition, a separate conceptualisation helps highlight how, despite the precarity and poor quality of platform care work, care platforms offer some positive opportunities for care workers' rights.

While platforms in the broader digital economy have often served to de-regularise traditionally more formal industries (e.g. in the transport sector), particularly the context of childcare platforms has served to increase mechanisms for regulation and protection in a traditionally informal sector – for example, by providing many care workers with tools for processing payments and finding gigs.<sup>84</sup>

Existing evidence on the broader platform economy suggests that, in some cases, platform labour constitutes a 'provisional step up rather than down'<sup>85</sup> for many migrant workers, as it can provide greater protection than other forms of informal work. While this might make workers (especially those from lower socio-economic backgrounds) dependent on platform work,<sup>86</sup> care platform workers are less at risk of experiencing this dependency. This is also due to the proliferation of migrant community networks that facilitate job-sharing in the informal care economy, providing other avenues to find work beyond the algorithm.<sup>87</sup>

### 3.2.5. OPPORTUNITY #2: THE UNIQUE CONDITIONS OF THE WORKFORCE MAY HELP WORKERS MOBILISE

The specific nature of labour mediated by care platforms offers some distinct mobilization opportunities for the workforce:

- **Visibility:** While historically care has been made invisible by its confinement to

the domestic sphere, care platforms engender a level of visibility of paid care labour that highlights its prevalence in everyday life. Visibility is a key prerequisite for finding work on care platforms. There is evidence that workers are generally sorted by algorithms according to the level of detail on their profiles, and clients seeking care services play an active role in choosing who to hire.<sup>88</sup> While this visibility comes with risks for workers – especially undocumented migrants<sup>89</sup> – it also presents an opportunity for the development of worker-led mutual aid and support networks as workers are more easily able to find one another.<sup>90</sup>

- **The personal nature of care platform labour:** Work is carried out in private homes, where workers and employers are in close contact. Even though this setting increases workers' vulnerability, the interdependence engendered by caregiving/receiving relationship may present opportunities to mediate conflict and negotiate solutions<sup>91</sup> and may facilitate allyship between care users and workers in campaigning<sup>92</sup> (though intersectional organising of this kind is not without its challenges<sup>93</sup>).

**The link to broader care provision:** Many care platforms have marketed themselves as an explicit solution to the worsening care crises in the UK,<sup>94</sup> creating a connection between these platforms and existing state-subsidised care provision.<sup>95</sup> This could open an opportunity to include demands around care platforms in calls for early education, childcare and social care sector reform from existing coalitions, networks and unions. These demands could be included in influencing efforts that focus on workers' pay and conditions, as well as key issues such as safeguarding and care quality.<sup>96</sup>

### 3.2.6. OPPORTUNITY #3: THERE IS A BASIS OF EMERGENT FUTURE-FOCUSED EVIDENCE TO BUILD UPON

Though there is limited research into care platforms in the UK specifically, existing studies<sup>97 98 99</sup> offer vital insights into alternative platform models where workers' rights are placed front and centre.

One example is the development of cooperatives, which differ from other models by being worker owned, giving greater protections to workers. Cooperative care – that is, care which is delivered by a collaborative group of people (such as care workers, parents, volunteers, or a combination thereof) - 'was a popular solution to the childcare struggles of the 1970s and 1980s [...] funded by local authorities and work[ing] in tandem with social services to ensure the best outcomes for families',<sup>100</sup> via platforms or in settings that are owned and operated by those carrying out the care day to day. While there are several examples of cooperative care, both past and present, with some contemporary initiatives proving highly effective,<sup>101</sup> these models require a significant amount of capacity from workers to establish and maintain, and their ability to provide care is still closely tied to the funding landscape. This means that despite offering a better deal for workers, they remain constrained by the broader devaluation of care, with consequences for their sustainability.<sup>102</sup>

Other alternative pathways to reform also need to be mapped, as factors beyond ownership models require our attention in assessing the opportunities and difficulties posed by digital technologies.<sup>103</sup> For instance, both research into and examples of plural ownership models beyond cooperatives – such as social enterprises

(organisations with a primary social objective that reinvest any profits back into the business towards that goal) – are limited in the UK context.

Also, while cooperative and other alternative models (e.g. worker-owned tech solutions<sup>104</sup>) can provide better conditions for workers, they may not be a realistic undertaking across the breadth of the workforce, or go far enough to confront the challenges posed by platform work. There are also very few examples of cooperative platform models in the UK context, though there has been some initial research into what a UK-based cooperative care platform could look like,<sup>105</sup> suggesting perhaps that there is a space to build on existing evidence. As several researchers warn when considering alternative possibilities for the future of care platforms, there is a danger of over-emphasising tweaks or improvements that could be made to improve workers' conditions, without first considering the broader sociopolitical conditions that have ignited the care platform market and how they might be addressed.<sup>106</sup> Helen Hester argues that: 'we must not lose sight of the value of refusal when it comes to digital platforms, too. What, within the current sociotechnical infrastructure of platform care, can we repurpose, what do we need to turn our efforts toward refusing, and what must we start building from scratch? These are questions that require sustained deep thinking.'<sup>107</sup>

**This creates an opportunity to develop outputs that are responsive to the needs of workers. While immediate action needs to be taken on the significant current issues facing the workforce, futures-focused research that builds on existing evidence may be useful in deepening our understanding of the possibilities surrounding care platforms.**

**It is also vital that stakeholders work collaboratively with the workforce to build on existing regulatory principles for platforms to develop guidelines and supporting recommendations that speak to the unique conditions of care platforms in the UK.** Existing frameworks from civil society groups such as Fairwork's Manifesto for Fairer Platform Work<sup>108</sup> and the Fairwork principles,<sup>109</sup> have been designed with the broader platform economy in mind, and these tools provide a scaffolding that supports campaign and advocacy efforts. Internationally, the Good Work Code<sup>110</sup> – spearheaded by the National Domestic Workers Association (NDWA) in the US – and the Feminist Digital Justice declaration<sup>111</sup> may provide a helpful starting point for a UK equivalent.

A key consideration in the development of any potential framework or set of principles is how this information might reach and involve the workforce. Resources such as pamphlets are a critical way of bringing the workforce in but must be inclusive to non-English speakers and consider literacy gaps. Existing examples from worker groups show the power shareable resources<sup>112</sup> have in raising the workforce's awareness of key rights and entitlements.

## 4. MAPPING POLICY

While the mapping of existing knowledge drew on evidence from both the UK and other countries, the mapping of the existing policy context mostly focused on the UK. It included policies that currently exist at the UK government level to regulate care platforms – either directly or as part of regulations of the gig economy more broadly – and those relevant to the digital care workforce regarding enabling or hindering access to rights and protection on the basis of these workers’ status (e.g. self-employed/employed, live-in/live-out, migrant/non-migrant). The one exception was the inclusion of the EU Directive on Platform Work – while this does not affect the UK, it sets a precedent for what is possible.

**This mapping was carried out between October 2023 and March 2024, so the findings presented here do not include more recent policy developments. This is critical to consider, given the election of a new UK Government - with a new mandate and policy approach - on 4 July 2024.** In particular, potential changes to both migration policy and employment rights (including, respectively, proposals outlined in the *Restoring control over the immigration system* White Paper published in May 2025,<sup>113</sup> and in the Employment Rights Bill <sup>114</sup> that is currently being debated Parliament) might have implications for care platform workers that warrant more detailed attention in any future research on this topic.

### 4.1. EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS

Platforms – regardless of the sector – mediate a range of employment relationships, from Pay-As-You-Earn to gig work that presumes self-employment.<sup>115</sup> Though conditions vary, this means that platform workers, including those providing care services, are not entitled to basic statutory protections like Statutory Sick Pay, Statutory Maternity Pay, maximum working time regulations or the National Living and Minimum Wage.<sup>116</sup>

Care platform workers tend to fall into the ‘self-employed’ category, with experts highlighting how platforms strategically frame this as a positive for workers, due to the perceived flexibility and autonomy of self-employment.<sup>117</sup> While across the broader platform economy, workers are in some cases classified as ‘limb (b) workers’ or ‘dependent contractors’, meaning they are formally self-employed but with access to some of the rights conferred by employee status (e.g. hourly minimum rates, rest breaks and paid annual leave),<sup>118</sup> the mapping did not find any examples of care platforms where workers are classified in this way. Existing research into other platform labour markets points to ‘self-employed’ platform workers often facing expectations in their work that are more congruent with a direct employment arrangement (such as constraints around when and how they carry out their work).<sup>119</sup> Thus, it is likely that care platform workers are contending with similar pressures. This raises a question around what kind of campaign ask might be most useful for this workforce - would care platform workers benefit from campaigning for a limb (b) worker model, as in the cases brought up by workers in other platform sectors?<sup>120</sup> Or do care platform workers’ unique conditions require a different approach to collective bargaining?

Workers are paid in a variety of ways – from ‘pocket money’ and so-called ‘in kind payments’ (such as meals and accommodation) in au pair arrangements, to one-off payments for jobs, to weekly or monthly wages in longer-term arrangements.<sup>121</sup> In 2021, the Low Pay Commission (LPC) consulted various worker groups to better understand their challenges related to pay, with a focus on the domestic worker exemption. Also known as the Family Worker Exemption (FWE), the exemption excluded live-in care workers, such as au-pairs, from employment rights, including the right to the National Minimum Wage, statutory break times and statutory leave. This inquiry was spurred by a 2020 Employment Tribunal ruling where the exemption was found to be unlawful and indirectly discriminatory on the basis of sex.<sup>122</sup> The FWE exposed care platform workers – and especially migrant workers – to increased vulnerability.<sup>123</sup> Following the LPC’s inquiry, their 2021 report<sup>124</sup> recommended that the exemption be scrapped – a recommendation which, in turn, led to the end, in April 2024, of the Family Worker Exemption (FWE).<sup>125</sup>

However, it is unclear how the FWE removal has impacted workers in practice, and how effectively they have been able to access the newly acquired rights. Likewise, workers may still be subject to the accommodation offset (i.e. a notional amount that may count towards a worker’s pay for National Minimum Wage when accommodation is provided by the employer), which has been denounced as leaving workers vulnerable to exploitation.<sup>126</sup>

## 4.2. IMMIGRATION POLICY

As stated earlier, though we do not have a clear sense of exactly who is working in the digital care sector, we can assume that the workforce largely includes migrant workers.<sup>127</sup> Platforms in general offer an informal route to earning for migrants, also due to their often relatively ‘quick and unbureaucratic’ sign-up process.<sup>128</sup> Thus, both immigration policies and policies in other areas that impact migrants and migrant workers in the UK are also likely to affect care platform workers.

Despite recruitment and retention crises in the formal care sectors (both childcare<sup>129</sup> and social care<sup>130</sup>), there are limited viable visa routes to regularised care work – regardless of whether it is provided in domestic or formal settings, or mediated through online or offline channels. Changes to immigration policy following Brexit, coupled with the effects of the pandemic, have also had implications for domestic care workers, making it significantly more difficult for workers to remain and work in the UK. Measures that restrict the ability of migrants with insecure status to ‘live, work, and access services’ (the so-called ‘Hostile Environment’) further contribute to the funnelling of migrant workers into less visible and more precarious sectors.<sup>131</sup> These changes have also contributed to the exodus of thousands of au pairs since 2016.<sup>132</sup>

In the past couple of years, some platforms have introduced mandatory Right to Work (RTW) checks for workers, while others may require evidence of a Disclosure & Barring Service (DBS) check upon sign-up. These practices may have potentially made it harder for care (and other sector) platform workers with insecure status to both register with platforms, leading to practices such as account-sharing (where workers ‘rent’ another workers’ account to book gigs), which in turn puts them at increased risk of mistreatment.<sup>133</sup>

Other measures linked to the UK immigration system are also likely to impact care

platform workers, including:

1. The high costs for visa applications and extensions, as well as the Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS), a surcharge associated with the majority of UK visa routes,<sup>134</sup> which can put additional pressure on workers.
2. The increasing income thresholds for certain visa routes,<sup>135</sup> which may mean digital care workers find themselves under pressure to take on more gigs, or gigs with poorer conditions, to up their earnings. This may, for instance, apply to those who are here on Family Visas due to having a British or settled spouse or dependant(s).
3. No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF),<sup>136</sup> which excludes those on Limited Leave to Remain (LLR) visas from public funds such as Universal Credit. This is likely to have implications for the financial stability of migrant care platform workers, especially when earnings from gig economy employment are not sufficient to cover essentials.

## 4.3. DATA PROTECTION

Existing evidence has shone a light on where data protection legislation intersects with care platform work.

Firstly, employers might utilise CCTV video recording systems in domestic premises where platform (and other) care workers operate. Domestic workers are generally not protected under the Data Protection Act 2018,<sup>137</sup> which excludes CCTV on domestic premises from data protection obligations, if images are captured within the boundaries of domestic private properties.<sup>138</sup> In practice, this means workers may be subject to 'nanny cams' without their knowledge, potentially exposing them to exploitation.<sup>139</sup>

Another key issue in relation to data privacy and security is the collection of workers' own personal data by platforms, particularly when this data is shared with third parties such as government agencies – including immigration authorities - which might create barriers to migrant workers reporting abuse and exploitation.<sup>140</sup> It is worth noting that, since January 2024, all digital platforms in the UK that facilitate the provision of services or the sale of goods by UK or other taxpayers are required to report details of who is operating via their platforms to HM Revenue & Customs, primarily to avoid and reduce tax evasion.<sup>141</sup>

There have been positive examples of worker-led responses to the data protection and security challenges faced by the non-platform domestic workforce. In 2021, the Voice of Domestic Workers<sup>142</sup> and Migrants Organise<sup>143</sup> co-produced a Digital Privacy & Security Guide for domestic workers in partnership with the University of Oxford. The guide outlined how migrant domestic workers can protect their privacy and safety online, thus providing these informalised workers with vital information that was previously unavailable elsewhere.<sup>144</sup>

## 4.4. REGULATORY BODIES

Care platform workers are not subject to mandatory regulation in the same way that

workers in formal settings are,<sup>145</sup> however, they are able to voluntarily register with their respective regulatory bodies. Regulatory bodies differ for childcare and adult care – in England, these are:

- Ofsted for childcare workers (though take-up is low, at less than 10% of the estimated informal childcare workforce<sup>146</sup>). While registration is not necessarily useful for workers themselves, being Ofsted registered allows employers to access the tax-free childcare scheme. In the informal sector, e.g. in the case of nannies and au pairs, employers will sometimes cover the costs for workers' Ofsted registration. However, this is generally more likely in long-term employment arrangements mediated by certain platforms. While care platforms do not generally require workers to be registered with a regulatory body, childcare workers who supplement their income via platform work could in theory be registered with Ofsted in this context.
- The Care Quality Commission (CQC) for social care. Here, guidance is contradictory – while according to the Scope of Registration<sup>147</sup> outlined on the CQC's website, the activities carried out by platform workers may be considered as meeting the conditions for mandatory registration, it is unclear whether platform workers or platforms themselves are actually required to register with the inspectorate,<sup>148</sup> thus there is limited oversight.

## 4.5. EU DIRECTIVE ON PLATFORM WORK

The EU Directive on Platform Work came into force in December 2024 (though states have until December 2026 to implement it into law). While not pertinent to the UK, it sets an important precedent for the regulation of digital platforms moving forward.<sup>149</sup> The Directive addresses:

1. Employment status. 'The new law introduces a presumption of an employment relationship (as opposed to self-employment) [...] aiming to correct the imbalance of power between the platform and the person performing platform work. [...] When a platform wants to rebut the presumption, it is up to them to prove that the contractual relationship is not an employment relationship.'
2. New rules on algorithmic management. '[A] person performing platform work cannot be fired or dismissed based on a decision taken by an algorithm or an automated decision-making system.'
3. Transparency and data protection. 'The directive introduces rules that protect platform workers' data more robustly. Platforms will be forbidden from processing certain types of personal data, such as on personal beliefs and private exchanges with colleagues.'<sup>150</sup>

However, Fairwork highlights that 'this might not be enough to ensure that all platform workers are entitled to adequate rights and protections. As many court cases in Europe and beyond have shown, platforms have been able to amend their contracts and slightly alter their working models in response to court trials to circumvent current regulations and avoid their workers being reclassified as employees.'<sup>151</sup>

## 4.6. ILO CONVENTION ON PLATFORM WORK

In October 2022, Fairwork launched the Manifesto for Fairer Platform Work<sup>152</sup> in advance of the International Labour Organization (ILO) meeting of experts on decent work in the platform economy.<sup>153</sup> The Manifesto, which contained a series of policy recommendations for creating a fairer platform economy, highlighted fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management and fair representation. Though the Manifesto was intended to cover the breadth of those whose work is mediated via platforms, and as such did not speak specifically to care platforms, it did nod to the unique safety risks faced by digital domestic workers, stating: 'When work is performed on the premises of a third party, such as in the case of domestic work, the platform and the user should be jointly liable for any unsafe condition the worker might be subjected to.'<sup>154</sup>

The ILO 2025 Conference<sup>155</sup> agenda will include an item on standards related to decent work in the platform economy,<sup>156</sup> offering an opportunity to ensure any proposed policy sufficiently includes digital care workers.<sup>157</sup> However, it is important to remember the UK's history of abstaining on votes for<sup>158</sup> - as well as failing to ratify - conventions pertaining to the rights and wellbeing of domestic and care workers – such as in the vote on ILO189 in 2011.<sup>159</sup> This convention, which sought to ensure member states recognised the contribution of domestic workers to the global economy, and safeguarded adequate protections for them at work, shows how such standards constitute important normative frameworks: governments can be lobbied to ratify them, and held to account in terms of their implementation. However, there is also an argument that enacting an international instrument such as an ILO convention is not necessarily a panacea for the workforce.<sup>160</sup>

## 4.7. FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE UK POLICY CONTEXT

Beyond the policy areas highlighted above, which more directly relate to and impact care platform workers, there are other policies that are likely to be relevant to this workforce.

For example, a 2022 study from the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE)<sup>161</sup> highlighted that over one third of women working in the platform economy chose platform work because it is flexible enough to fit in around unpaid caring responsibilities.

This evidence suggests that there is scope to explore how care platform workers may be impacted by more peripheral policies such as eligibility criteria for funded childcare hours and social security benefits, including those related to caring responsibilities and disabilities. This may warrant further investigation.

The mapping also highlighted how, under the previous Conservative UK government – which had a focus on innovation and digital technologies – there was a growing interest in the gig platform economy. The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy<sup>162</sup> and the Health and Safety Executive<sup>163</sup> both called for evidence on the size and nature of the gig/platform economy; its role in the modern economy in relation to traditional employment; and the experiences of workers in the sector.

Similarly, consultations were launched on violence and abuse in the workplace (e.g. The Department for Work & Pension's call for evidence<sup>164</sup>), but also more specifically on early years and childcare (e.g. the Department of Education's Areas of Research Interest highlighted a need to better understand what can be done to improve 'the supply, demand and quality of both provision and the underlying workforce in early years'<sup>165</sup>). Such consultations could have a more direct and explicit link to care platform work. Additionally, the current Labour government's new Employment Rights Bill<sup>166</sup> may bring additional changes to the policy landscape that will affect the care platform workforce, particularly those who work via platforms that mediate longer-term gigs, who are more likely to come under employee status.

## 5. MAPPING INFLUENCING WORK

The mapping exercise sought to identify both key and marginal stakeholders carrying out influencing or influencing-related work on care platforms in the UK context. It highlighted a few general observations:

Worker groups increasingly play a key role in sharing first-hand experiences of working through care platforms, especially in the childcare sector, and therefore plug some of the knowledge gaps that exist around platform work.

Only a limited number of stakeholders (including academics and worker groups) are focused on research around adult care provided through platforms, while most research for influencing work takes place in the formal childcare sector.

In the past decade, UK-based unions' efforts to organise platform workers have focused on more visible forms of action, such as wildcat strikes.<sup>167</sup> These stand in contrast to the more invisibilised and solidaristic tactics prioritised by feminised digital care workers, such as mutual aid,<sup>168</sup> which tend to remain relatively overlooked in the influencing space.

Influencing on issues that specifically relate to care platform work and workers also seems to remain broadly invisible in the policy-influencing agenda of movements and coalitions focused on childcare and adult care provision, as these tend to centre on the formal provision of care as well as those requiring care services. This may be because there is significant difficulty in bringing together formal and informal care workers in an intersectional, cross-sectoral movement,<sup>169</sup> or because, in some cases, framing campaigns and advocacy around those accessing care might be more effective to achieve policy change.<sup>170</sup>

Though the scoping exercise identified some examples of emerging UK research initiatives and projects (from academics) as well as campaigns (from worker groups), strengthening the relationships between academic and non-academic stakeholders as well as the connection between UK and international contexts would help build scope for solidarity and joint action around this agenda.

# 6. CONCLUSIONS

The mapping helped capture current knowledge on care platform work and its specificities, but also shed light on key knowledge gaps, and how these could be filled through innovative and collaborative work between cross-sector stakeholders.

Alongside this, it highlighted several potential research questions and recommendations for next steps that could help further develop the conversation on care platforms in the UK context. The primary gaps identified and their associated questions are as follows:

## 1. There is currently no robust, large-scale quantitative data on who makes up the workforce.

There is extremely limited data on the composition of the digital care workforce in the UK, including its demographic composition across gender, race and migration status. This type of evidence would greatly support influencing actions and worker organising efforts. We must also acknowledge the importance of accounting for the workforce's diversity, taking care to not homogenise it into a single 'care worker' category, as a broad range of worker experiences and working arrangements are encompassed within the sector.

There are key challenges<sup>171</sup> to capturing the workforce, including insecurity, which means workers are less likely to participate in academic research. That said, novel methodological approaches may provide a route to capture this data – for instance, collaborative mapping methods such as those adopted by Dalia Gebrial and Miranda Hall to bring together workers and academics to co-produce a 'power map' of key players in the digital care space.<sup>172</sup>

### What questions could future research ask to fill this gap?

- What is the demographic range of the care platform workforce in the UK?
- What is the demographic range of care platform users in the UK? Who is organising care via these platforms – and on behalf of whom?
- What are the experiences of those working via care platforms in the UK? How do their experiences compare with or differ from those on other platforms?
- What is the intersection or overlap between the home-based adult care and childcare platform workforces?
- How does the demographic range of the care platform workforce square with how care platforms are framing and marketing workers?
- What is driving families and individuals with care needs to choose platforms for their care (availability, flexibility, price, etc.)?
- What methodological interventions could be developed to address the challenges of capturing the digital care workforce?
- How do intersecting inequalities such as race, class and migration status shape workers' experiences of platforms?

## 2. There is limited in-depth analysis of the UK's policy landscape as it relates to care

## platforms and their workforce.

While this mapping exercise included a top-line mapping of the policy landscape surrounding care platforms, there is a need for greater and more detailed work in this space.

There is also a need to uncover the policy change that would have the greatest impact on care platform workers, which could then be prioritised by existing campaigns and influencing actions.

### What questions could future research ask to fill this gap?

- How will the removal of the Family Worker Exemption be enforced, and what will the consequence be for platforms mediating au pair arrangements?
- How do questions around worker surveillance and data shape the care platform landscape?
- How does the uptick in care platforms relate to wider government policies around social care and early years (e.g. in the case of a lack of childcare availability)?
- What is the link between care platforms and poverty (in terms of insecure work, care accessibility, attainment gap)?
- What legal frameworks (e.g. more general care and labour policies) can be utilised to hold platforms to account when it comes to workforce rights and transparency?
- What can care platform workers learn from the rulings in other platform sectors?
- What are the main regulatory gaps undermining care platform workers' right to decent work in the UK? What learnings can be gleaned from the new EU Directive on the Platform Economy to help address these gaps?

### 3. We know very little about the market composition and structure of UK care platforms, particularly in the context of adult home care platforms.

There is a need to better understand the key players in the UK care platforms market, following the example of mapping that has been done of US-based platforms.<sup>173</sup> Further research should also explore in more depth the market composition – in terms of workforce, market structure and care receivers, but also the role (if any) of local authorities in mediating the use of care platforms by care receivers.

While there is little inquiry into care platforms across the board, adult home care platforms in the UK context are particularly under-researched and warrant further exploration. There is also a need to connect debates on childcare and adult care, as well as understand to what extent the childcare and adult care platform markets interplay and overlap.

### What questions could future research ask to fill this gap?

- What is the size of the sector, and how is it growing?
- What is the market structure of care platforms in the UK? Who are the key players?
- Who is investing in or financing the platforms?
- What is the role of financialisation in UK-based care platforms?
- Is there an overlap in childcare and adult care – both in terms of care workers and receivers?
- What is the overlap between online/digital care agencies, and marketplaces and platforms? What is the variation between different platform models across the care sector?

- What different kinds of employment arrangements are mediated through care platforms, and how are they stratified in terms of labour and consumer markets?
- What kinds of care needs are platforms responding to (longer-term arrangements, wrap-around or respite care, etc.)?
- Do care platform users and workers engage in 'off-ramping' (the practice of workers/platform users moving their platform-mediated arrangements to the offline sphere), and to what extent? How is this handled by the platforms?
- How do workers in the digital care platforms raise concerns, which body is responsible for oversight and accountability?
- What are the specific occupational health and safety challenges as they relate to care platform workers, and how can they be redressed?

#### **4. There is limited understanding of how care platform workers can be included in broader movements around platform labour and care.**

Care platforms and the digital care workforce often fall through the cracks when it comes to discussions around care provision and platform labour. The latter tend to focus on the more visible workforce in other sectors within the platform economy, while movements about care provision primarily tackle formal care provision and its workforce. Part of the challenge here is that the workforce straddles both the care and platform sectors but does not fully fit in either space. This has implications for how visible or invisible care platform workers' demands are in terms of campaigning and lobbying efforts within these two sectors. Ongoing research is needed to understand if, and how, care platform workers may be better integrated into more visible labour movements.

#### **What questions could future research ask to fill this gap?**

- How can care platform workers be included in Early Childhood Education Care initiatives and social care discussions more broadly? What needs to happen or change? Is a broad-based care coalition possible?
- How is the stratification of the digital care workforce (by discriminatory factors such as ethnicity, gender, class and migration status) echoed in the formal care sector? What consequences does this have for worker organising?
- How can unions better incorporate the demands of platform workers in the digital care workforce?
- What are the specific accountability mechanisms, including pathways to recourse for care platform workers who experience mistreatment and abuse during gigs, that could be pushed for through campaign efforts?
- Is there potential for campaign and lobbying efforts that bring early years practitioners and childcare platform workers together (in the case of childcare), or platform workers and care workers (in the case of both childcare and adult care)? What could they look like?
- Looking ahead, is there a use in mapping alternative futures for care platforms, for instance worker-owned or state-subsidised models? Is there a route for mapping a vision for quality care that draws together platforms and formal care provision? What might a supply-side funding model that speaks to the breadth and variety of care provision in the UK look like?

## 6.1. LOOKING AHEAD: IDENTIFYING THE OPPORTUNITIES PRESENTED BY FUTURE-FOCUSED RESEARCH

Mapping alternative futures for platform care in the UK may help us better understand potential opportunities for policy intervention, particularly as existing research centres on worker-owned<sup>174</sup> and cooperative<sup>175</sup> models, which may not go far enough to mitigate the challenges posed by platform work. Likewise, with key legislative changes such as the EU Directive<sup>176</sup> setting encouraging precedents for what reform in the UK context could look like, now is the time to start imagining other possibilities.

Future-focused research that proactively considers what alternatives to the current care platform landscape could look like – in terms of legislative change and alternative ownership models, as well as the specific campaign demands that might help achieve these aims – would be particularly welcome. However, it's important to note that future focus does not imply that meaningful action isn't required immediately to close the knowledge, legislative and rights gaps that currently exist.

To build on these opportunities, it would be important to:

- **Support worker groups with *practical resources*.** The mapping highlighted that worker groups would benefit from practical resources to support their campaign efforts, particularly a mapping of the policy landscape and more robust and detailed data that clarifies the composition of the workforce. The development of accessible outputs (e.g. pamphlets or digital guidance) would be particularly helpful.
- **Facilitate space for *continued connection*.** While some well-established connections already exist between worker groups and academics, more collaboration should be fostered, especially with researchers who can support with quantitative analysis of the care platforms workforce.
- **Identify opportunities for a *dedicated programme of work around care platforms*.** This would be key to ensuring focused attention and tailored resources. A dedicated programme could be particularly effective when it comes to futures-focused work, within which alternative models for platform care would be mapped and utilised to better understand potential opportunities for policy intervention.

# NOTES

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The information in this publication is correct at the time of going to press.

Published by Oxfam GB for Oxfam International in July 2025.

DOI: 10.21201/2025.000076

Oxfam GB, Oxfam House, John Smith Drive, Cowley, Oxford, OX4 2JY, UK.

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