

# Research on the Limited Autonomy of Domestic Workers in the Platform Economy

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**Abstract:** The rise of digital platforms has reshaped the working model of the domestic service industry, providing domestic workers with apparent flexibility and autonomy. However, within the context of platform economies, the autonomy of domestic workers remains constrained by multiple factors. This paper aims to analyze the current working conditions of domestic workers in platform economies, exploring both the manifestations and limitations of their autonomy. It further delves into the strategies employed by domestic workers to maintain and enhance their autonomy. The research finds that while digital platforms offer some degree of choice and flexibility, the control exerted by platform algorithms, the limitations of social and economic status, the burden of emotional labor, and the instability of work significantly undermine their actual autonomy.

**Keywords:** Platform Economy; Domestic Workers; Limited Autonomy

## 1. Introduction

Domestic service refers to a range of daily life support and management services provided by professionals to households or individuals. The scope of domestic services typically includes cleaning, cooking, laundry, elderly or childcare, gardening, shopping, and pet care. Domestic workers offer customized services based on the specific needs of clients.

With the rapid development of information technology, the platform economy has permeated various industries, including the domestic service sector. Digital platforms, such as domestic service apps, provide new employment opportunities and flexible work arrangements for domestic workers by directly connecting supply and demand. The development of the domestic service industry helps address the growing demand for care and

employment pressures, and domestic work has increasingly become a sector managed and coordinated through technological platforms. Therefore, achieving high-quality development in the industry is of great significance. However, the current domestic service industry in China faces challenges such as irregular development and discrimination against domestic workers. Behind the apparent flexibility and autonomy lies a complex set of power relations and control mechanisms, which significantly limit the actual autonomy of domestic workers. This paper aims to explore the issue of domestic workers' autonomy in the platform economy, analyzing the factors contributing to their limited autonomy and the strategies they employ to cope with these constraints.

## 2. Literature Review

In recent years, research on domestic work and platform economies has gradually increased. As an important service sector, domestic work has long played an indispensable role in social reproduction. However, with the rise of digital platforms, the spatiotemporal structure and labor relations within the domestic service industry have undergone significant changes. To understand these changes and their impact on domestic workers, this paper reviews key studies in relevant fields, focusing on: (1) research exploring the impact of platform economies on the labor market, particularly in terms of flexible employment and work scheduling; (2) power relations in the labor process.

### 2.1 Impact of platform Economy on the Labor Market

With the advancement of information technology, the platform economy has rapidly developed and reshaped the traditional labor market. The platform economy breaks the spatial limitations of traditional work models

by directly connecting supply and demand. Numerous studies indicate that the platform economy offers more flexible employment opportunities and lowers the barriers to market entry for job seekers. This flexibility is particularly notable in the domestic service industry, where service providers can freely choose their work hours and locations through digital platforms, thereby increasing job autonomy. However, another set of studies points out that the platform economy is not merely a simple intermediary; it assesses and controls workers through data-driven algorithms [1], which, to some extent, undermines workers' autonomy. The platform's rating systems and employer feedback mechanisms impose new forms of supervision and control on workers, forcing them to cater to employers' demands to secure ongoing job opportunities. This new form of control, although subtle, can place workers in a more vulnerable position, especially when their income depends on the platform's ratings.

## **2.2 Power Relations in the Labor Process**

The theory of labor process focuses on the extent of control and autonomy experienced by workers in their work, as well as the power relations within the labor process [2]. In domestic service, the labor process is influenced by both employers and platforms. Platforms regulate and control the labor process through technological means, such as algorithm management and rating systems, while employers intervene directly through supervision and feedback. Research indicates that domestic workers are not entirely passive in the labor process; they employ various strategies to cope with this dual control, such as building trust and demonstrating professional skills to enhance their autonomy. However, these strategic behaviors do not fully eliminate the control exerted by platforms and employers, and workers' autonomy remains constrained by multiple factors.

## **3. Limited Autonomy of Domestic Workers**

In the domestic service industry, the autonomy of workers has long been a focus of research. In traditional domestic work, workers' autonomy is typically subject to strict control by employers, who decide the work tasks, scheduling, and methods. The following discussion explores both the appearance of

autonomy offered by digital platforms and the real limitations on autonomy.

### **3.1 Digital Platforms and the Appearance of Autonomy**

The emergence of digital platforms provides workers with a certain degree of autonomy in choosing their work opportunities. Platforms typically allow domestic workers to select clients, working hours, and locations. This choice is seen as an important factor in enhancing workers' autonomy, enabling them to arrange work according to their personal circumstances. Compared to fixed working hours in traditional employment relationships, digital platforms offer more flexible scheduling. Domestic workers can choose their work hours based on their personal schedules, which seemingly increases their control over work-life balance. Through platforms, domestic workers can serve multiple employers simultaneously, breaking away from the traditional model where one worker is tied to one employer. This multiple-employer relationship theoretically grants workers more choice and reduces their dependency on a single employer [3].

Moreover, the physical and emotional labor burdens faced by domestic workers also limit their autonomy. Research shows that domestic work not only involves physical labor but also a significant amount of emotional labor, such as establishing and maintaining good relationships with employers [4]. This emotional labor requires workers to maintain a high level of flexibility and adaptability in their work, which further undermines their autonomy.

### **3.2 Real Limitations of Autonomy**

Although digital platforms provide domestic workers with a degree of autonomy in choosing their work, this autonomy is constrained in practice in several ways:

First, the algorithmic control of platforms imposes invisible constraints on workers' behavior. Platforms control workers' actions primarily through two mechanisms: task allocation and rating systems [5]. Task allocation algorithms decide whether to offer work opportunities based on workers' geographic location, skill match, and past ratings. The rating system indirectly controls workers' behavior through feedback from

employers; workers with low ratings may lose access to job opportunities. This invisible constraint forces workers to conform to the expectations of platforms and employers when choosing work, thereby weakening their autonomy.

Second, the socioeconomic status and cultural background of domestic workers also affect their autonomy in the workplace, especially regarding gender and racial issues. Research indicates that workers in socially disadvantaged positions often lack bargaining power with employers, making them more susceptible to exploitation. Workers' cultural backgrounds can also impact their autonomy in interactions with employers. In cross-cultural exchanges, language barriers and cultural differences may further limit their decision-making abilities.

Additionally, the physical and emotional labor burdens faced by domestic workers limit their autonomy. Domestic work involves not only physical labor but also significant emotional labor. Emotional labor refers to the need for workers to manage their emotions and display specific feelings to meet employers' expectations. In domestic services, workers often need to establish and maintain good relationships with employers through smiles, friendly attitudes, and other means to ensure long-term cooperation. This emotional labor, while intangible, adds to the psychological burden on workers, compelling them to prioritize accommodating employers' needs, which further restricts their autonomy.

Finally, domestic work under the platform economy is often characterized by high instability. The uncertainty of job opportunities forces domestic workers to accept various types of work and discourages them from rejecting employers' demands. This instability increases workers' economic pressure and limits their negotiating leverage when facing unreasonable requests [6].

#### **4. Strategies of Domestic Workers and Limited Autonomy**

Domestic workers face multiple constraints from platforms, employers, and the social environment, significantly limiting their autonomy. Despite this, domestic workers do not passively accept these limitations; they employ various coping strategies to maintain and enhance their autonomy to some extent.

However, the effectiveness of these strategies is often limited, and they cannot completely eliminate external control.

#### **4.1 Strategies of Domestic Workers**

##### **4.1.1 Building and Maintaining Trusting Relationships**

Domestic workers often increase their influence in the workplace by building strong, trusting relationships with employers. Establishing trust can be achieved through high-quality service, reliable performance, and emotional investment. For example, some domestic workers pay particular attention to details to ensure that employers' needs are fully met, aiming to secure long-term employment and greater autonomy [7]. Through such methods, domestic workers can, to some extent, influence the content and conditions of their work, striving for more favorable arrangements.

##### **4.1.2 Demonstrating Professional Skills**

By demonstrating professional skills, domestic workers can increase their perceived value in the eyes of employers, thereby enhancing their negotiating leverage. These skills include not only efficient cleaning, cooking, and other practical abilities but also the capacity to communicate and understand complex needs. When domestic workers are viewed as "professionals," employers may show greater respect for their methods and recommendations, thereby granting more autonomy [8].

##### **4.1.3 Flexibility and Time Management**

Domestic workers often need to switch flexibly between multiple tasks to handle platform assignments and employers' last-minute demands. They might use a "time-blocking" strategy to maximize their work efficiency, arranging multiple tasks in different time slots to increase their income and job stability. This flexible time management approach [9] helps domestic workers to some extent control their work pace and avoid passively accepting work arrangements.

##### **4.1.4 Strategic Selection of Employers and Tasks**

On digital platforms, domestic workers can partially control their work environment by selectively choosing specific employers and tasks. Some domestic workers choose employers who have shown respect and reasonable work demands based on past

experiences, in order to avoid unnecessary conflicts and stress. Additionally, they may select tasks that align with their abilities and offer fair compensation, thereby ensuring a degree of autonomy in their work process.

## 4.2 Limited Autonomy

Despite domestic workers employing these strategies to maintain autonomy, their effectiveness is often limited due to the following constraints:

### 4.2.1 Control of Platform Algorithms

Digital platforms control domestic workers' job opportunities, task assignments, and income through algorithms. The platform allocates work based on workers' geographic location, skill ratings, and scoring systems, meaning that even if domestic workers have the right to choose tasks and employers, they must operate within the rules set by the platform. The rating system imposes invisible constraints on workers' behavior, compelling them to meet employers' expectations to maintain high ratings and stable job opportunities [10], which significantly limits their autonomy.

### 4.2.2 Socioeconomic and Cultural Constraints

The socioeconomic status and cultural background of domestic workers are key factors that limit their autonomy. Many domestic workers are in a disadvantaged socioeconomic position, lacking resources and negotiating power. This often puts them at a disadvantage when dealing with employers, making it difficult for them to assert their rights. Additionally, cultural background, particularly language barriers, can further constrain their autonomy in interactions with employers, especially in cross-cultural domestic service environments.

### 4.2.3 Burden of Emotional Labor

Domestic work involves not only significant physical labor but also requires domestic workers to invest in emotional labor. They must manage their own emotions and maintain good relationships with employers to ensure long-term cooperation. Although intangible, this emotional labor adds to the psychological burden of domestic workers, making it difficult for them to truly achieve autonomy in their work. Emotional labor demands that workers present "appropriate" emotional states in front of employers, further diminishing their control over their work.

### 4.2.4 Job Instability

Domestic work in the platform economy is highly unstable, with uncertain job opportunities forcing domestic workers to accept various types of work and demands to ensure stable income. This instability further limits their choice and negotiation power, compelling them to continue working under unfavorable conditions.

## 5. Conclusion

In the context of the platform economy, the autonomy of domestic workers exhibits significant limitations. Although digital platforms offer some degree of choice and flexibility, such as selecting work hours, locations, and clients, this apparent autonomy is constrained by multiple factors. Key limitations include control by platform algorithms, low socioeconomic status, the heavy burden of emotional labor, and job instability. In the platform economy, domestic workers often need to follow the standards and regulations set by the platform, including working hours, service content and charging standards. This control affects their autonomy and makes them adapt to the requirements of the platform in their work. The income model of the platform economy is usually single-payer, which means that the income of domestic workers is directly related to the amount of work they do. In order to obtain more job opportunities and higher income, they may need to accept more work arrangements, further limiting their autonomy. While domestic workers employ strategies like selectively choosing tasks, building trusting relationships, and demonstrating professional skills to maintain autonomy, the effectiveness of these strategies is often limited and does not fully eliminate external control. Therefore, the autonomy of domestic workers in the platform economy remains constrained and requires policy and institutional reforms to improve their working conditions and protect their rights.

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