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Platform work-lives in the gig economy: Recentering work–family research

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Abstract

Crowdwork platforms have been widely celebrated as challenging gendered labor market inequalities through new digitally mediated possibilities for reconciling work, home, and family. This paper interrogates those claims and explores the wider implications of digital labor platforms for an expansive work–family research agenda stubbornly rooted in formal modes of employment in the "analogue" economy. Based on ethnographic research with women platform workers in the UK (using PeoplePerHour, Upwork, Freelancer, Fiverr, and Copify), the paper asks: what are women crowdworkers' lived experiences of integrating paid work and family relative to formal employment? And what coping tactics have women developed to reduce gendered work–family conflicts on digital labor platforms? In response to these research questions, the paper makes three contributions. First, it offers a critical review of recent commentary to theorize how disruptive innovations by digital labor platforms to recast long-standing definitions of "work", "workers", "managers", and "employers" have served to position platforms and platform workers as somehow outside the analytical gaze of the expansive work–family research agenda. Second, it extends a growing alternative work–family analysis of platform work to examine the kinds of "work–life balance" (WLB) provision available to women crowdworkers in the absence of an employer; and how women's experiences of algorithmically mediated

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and contradictory work–family outcomes further challenge widespread claims of new platform work–life “flexibilities”. Third, the paper points to exciting and urgent possibilities for advancing and recentering work–family research through new engagements with platforms, algorithmic management, and “independent” platform workers in support of feminist activism and campaigning around WLB.

KEYWORDS
gig economy, platform work, women, work-family, work–life balance

1 | INTRODUCTION

> People who are responsible for caring for loved ones need the ability to fit their work schedules and their caregiving schedules together. That's where the new digital labor economy – [...] the gig economy, the on-demand economy, the platform economy – holds enormous promise.
>
> (Slaughter, 2015, p. 2)

> The evidence base around the actual experience of gig working is patchy in general. We know even less about gigging and work–life balance.
>
> (Warren, 2021, p. 8)

The desirability and means of integrating competing demands of paid work and family remain hot topics among governments, managers, trade unions, academics, activists, and media. In the wake of successive rounds of “recession, redundancy and restructuring” (Bessa & Tomlinson, 2017), many workers now struggle with higher workloads, unpredictable schedules, and unsocial work hours. With increased female labor force participation and more dual earner households, household life is also more complex, reinforced by the neoliberal rollback of welfare, which has transferred care down to the “natural” level of the home. The outcome for millions of workers is a complex, gendered, balancing act for which women continue to pick up the greatest burden.

The societal significance of the “work–life balance” (WLB) agenda is profound, with the causal connections between work–life conflict, reduced psychological well-being, and deteriorating familial relationships well established (e.g., MacDonald et al., 2005; Marmot et al., 2010; EU-OSHA, 2014). Employer-led possibilities for enabling family-friendly working include temporal flexibility of work, spatial flexibility of work, reduced total work hours, and childcare assistance. However, WLB provision remains uneven and seen by many employers as a costly burden. Research identifies workers with significant caring responsibilities quitting firms with poor WLB provision (e.g., Boxall et al., 2003; James, 2017). It also identifies increasing numbers of women turning to digital labor platforms, in response to negative employment experiences and in pursuit of increased temporal autonomy of work, and a better reconciliation of paid work with family (Davis et al., 2014; Nemkova et al., 2019; Thompson, 2018). As employer promises to enable WLB have fallen short in the workplace, digital labor platforms have become the inheritor of women's campaigns for WLB and flexibility, albeit from a distributed “bedroom factory” (Altenried, 2022) of domestic work places. Indeed, claims surrounding “flexible”, “family-friendly” work possibilities in the platform economy are celebratory and widespread. Yet, work–family scholars have been slow to engage with the new digitally mediated realities of gig work as experienced by “independent” platform workers.

In response to recent calls to arms (Kelliher et al., 2019; Warren, 2021), this paper asks: what are women crowdworkers' lived experiences of integrating paid work and family? How do those experiences compare with celebratory

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platform claims and previous formal employment? And what coping tactics have women developed to reduce gendered work–family conflicts on digital labor platforms? To answer these research questions, the paper draws on rich ethnographic research with 49 women in the UK using popular crowdwork platforms to access online gig work from home. The UK focus stems from its position as a major center of growth in Europe's platform economy also with the second highest childcare costs globally as a proportion of average household income (World Economic Forum, 2019). Engagement with women's platform work-lives demonstrates exciting possibilities for bringing the expansive platform labor research agenda into new productive conversation with an expansive work–family research agenda—and for enhancing the relevance of work–family research in the face of platforms' profound challenge to work, employment, and industrial relations.

The paper proceeds as follows. Building on a summary review of the WLB benefits heralded by platforms and high-profile commentators, the first part of the analysis offers a critical review of recent commentary to theorize an analytical myopia within WLB research, which effectively excludes thousands of digital labor platforms and 163 million platform workers worldwide. This ultimately undermines the societal and policy relevance of WLB research. So motivated, the second part of the analysis extends a growing body of work that brings work–family research and platform labor research into new productive conversation. This hybrid analysis (work-family meets platform labor) contextualizes women's choices around platform work in relation to previous experiences of employment, challenges widespread claims that platforms offer new work–family flexibilities, and identifies new forms of gendered *work–life precarity* that are algorithmically mediated. In the final section, larger research and theory development possibilities are identified for recentering and advancing work–family research through new engagements with platforms, algorithmic management, and "independent" platform workers. This is in support of feminist activism and campaigning around WLB, and to "understand the unequal terms on which people are included in the digital economy… in the context of already existing sets of social relations" (Ticona, 2022, p. 8).

2 | DIGITAL LABOR PLATFORMS YIELDING NEW WORK–LIFE FLEXIBILITIES?

Over 163 million workers worldwide find paid work through digital labor platforms (Kässi et al., 2021), including over 64 million women. Labor platforms are argued to represent "a technological revolution like no other" (Bissell & Del Casino, 2017), because they sever the long-standing relationship between production and formal employment. Platforms use algorithms to broker, manage, and motivate work carried out beyond the confines of "typical" workplaces. Divergent from standard employment, labor is sold on a one-off, as-needed basis, enabling companies to outsource tasks to a global on-demand workforce at a much lower cost than that performed internally by employees (Bergvall-Kåreborn & Howcroft, 2014). Workers (also called taskers or sellers) are paid on a project, piece rate, or hourly basis and must supply and maintain their own equipment (Stanford, 2017). Platform algorithms and digital infrastructures match requesters and taskers, allocate work tasks, mediate invoicing and payment, set minimum terms of service, and rank workers through multiple performance metrics based on requester feedback.

Alongside the much-studied "geographically-tethered" on-demand urban services (personal transportation, food delivery, and parcel couriers), another major platform segment is remote "crowdwork" (also labeled cloudwork or online freelancing). This emerges from the virtual crowdsourcing of higher-skilled tasks—for example, web mobile and software development, sales and marketing, HR, legal, social media, graphic design, copywriting and translation, and accounting. Crowdwork is explicitly marketed to women with young families as providing access to global job opportunities from home on a flexible schedule basis that allows matching of work with family-related activities (ILO, 2018, p. 5; Altenried, 2020). Flexibility is argued to stem from workers deciding when they want to work and what kind of tasks they want to perform (Hannák et al., 2017). Coupled with zero commuting, this is contrasted with the work demands of 9–5 office environments (De Stefano, 2016b, p. 5; Hannák et al., 2017, p. 1). Crowdwork opportunities also come with low barriers to entry: "all you need to get started is a computer and a reasonably fast internet connection" (Felstiner, 2011, p. 154). As such, crowdwork is heralded as offering women "a real opportunity to work flexibly… a lifeline back into work" (Wosskow, 2014, p. 14; Slaughter, 2016).

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Such claims are also evident through platform advertising images that showcase women with children, alongside positive crowdworker testimonies. Platform bosses have claimed that:

> Before the advent of the internet, there was no outlet for stay-at-home mothers to harness their skills to generate an income. Now businesses across the UK can easily source talented and experienced mothers looking for an additional income.
>
> (Xenios Thrasyvoulou, PeoplePerHour founder and CEO [Family Friendly Working, 2008])

> Mobile Optimized Mothers, or as we call them M.O.M's… are empowering themselves, choosing to work from home and earn a living on their terms. We're very honored to help them on their mission to achieve that balance between career and life.
>
> (Jeff Tennery, Moonlighting founder and CEO [PRWeb, 2015])

These claims are significant, given data evidencing the significant proportions of women platform workers, and stubborn gender inequalities of paid work and care, which continue to assume female majority childcare. In a US survey of 2000 women gig workers, 70% were primary caregivers (Hyperwallet, 2017). In an ILO survey of 1167 crowdworkers (Berg, 2016), 41% had children living in their household, the majority under 6 years old. Women engaged in platform work are also more likely than men to have a child and be partnered (Churchill & Craig, 2019).

In contrast to platform claims around emancipatory work–life futures, a growing body of research has identified work–life hardships among platform workers and the contradictions of platform "flexibility". Studies have identified constrained "independent" worker autonomy over work volumes and scheduling (Lehdonvirta, 2018); problems of night working, overwork, sleep deprivation, and exhaustion among crowdworkers (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2016; Wood et al., 2018); and multiple anxieties among "independent" gig workers untethered from a formal employer (Petriglieri et al., 2019). Studies also identify the requirement of constant availability as discriminating against crowdworkers with childcare responsibilities (Piasna & Drahokoupil, 2017) and how platform capitalism "breaks the dreams" of gig workers seeking to provide for their families while being in charge of their time (Dinh & Tienari, 2022). These are important contributions but have typically developed in isolation from an expansive, feminist WLB research agenda, which predates platform research and has much to offer. Indeed, for millions of crowdworkers worldwide, we know very little about their everyday experiences of reconciling platform work and family in practice. This lack of knowledge perpetuates hardships for millions of platform workers and their families on several levels. It critically limits the ability of policy-makers to hold platforms to account, of feminist activists to target resources in pursuit of progressive digital work futures, and of platform workers to identify more (and less) progressive platforms.

3 | THEORIZING THE ANALYTICAL EXCLUSION OF DIGITAL LABOR PLATFORMS IN WORK–FAMILY RESEARCH

The WLB research agenda explores the "antecedents, moderators, mediators and consequences of work–life balance" (Brough et al., 2020, p. 477). Over 4 decades, WLB research has consistently demonstrated how gendered responsibilities of care, family membership, and personal life interests unavoidably shape workers' different abilities to engage in paid work—with women commonly bearing majority responsibility for childcare, and the brunt of work–family conflict. In response to neoliberal governments unwilling to intervene in firms' right to manage, studies have explored the "inexorable link between WLB and certain kinds of flexible working practices" provided by employers (Fleetwood, 2007, p. 387; see also Lyonette & Baldauf, 2019). The WLB research literature is now vast. Strikingly however, it offers close to zero engagement with digital labor platforms:

> Recent years have seen a number of important changes to working arrangements and the nature of employment relationships (e.g. … self-employment including the gig economy) and such changes are predicted to continue. To date, however, these changes have largely not been incorporated into the

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> study of work–life balance. Rather, the primary focus has been on traditional working arrangements and employment relationships – full-time, permanent employment, in standard working time with a single employer.
>
> (Kelliher et al., 2019, p. 102)

High-profile commentary has identified a need to broaden the focus of WLB research to include lower income and economically precarious workers (Gatrell et al., 2013; Warren, 2015), but progress remains limited. Warren (2021) also identifies "almost siloed academic literature and debates" (p. 8) in which platform labor studies "either do not refer directly to work–life balance at all or they touch upon it only briefly, and nor do they draw upon the established work–life balance literature" (p. 11). However, this previous commentary falls short of *explaining* this lack of productive conversation between WLB and platform labor research.

This paper argues that the lack of productive engagement between WLB research and the platform economy fundamentally emerges from the terms and places of (self-)employment under which platforms operate and their divergence from the terms in which the WLB research agenda has been cast for over 4 decades. Typically, WLB research has adopted a traditional model of "work" based on FT employment with a single employer (Kelliher et al., 2019). In contrast, digital labor platforms deliberately eschew any identification as "employers", instead positioning themselves merely as technology companies, or "intermediaries" who mediate between "self-employed independent contractors" and potential clients. No employment contracts exist for platform workers whose activities are instead bound by lengthy "platform user agreements" heavily skewed in favor of requesters and platforms. Work executed through platforms is also deliberately relabeled: as "tasks", "gigs", "HITs", and "services" (De Stefano, 2016a), for which employment regulation is argued not to apply (ILO, 2018). By deliberately invoking a new language of work and employment that emphasizes rupture and novelty, platforms neatly sidestep any legal obligation to provide labor protection premised on formal employer/employee relationships.[1]

These platform strategies have prompted major debate in legal studies around the possibilities for incorporating independent gig workers under established versus new "tailor-made" legal protections for workers (Todolí-Signes, 2017; cf. Stewart & Stanford, 2017). However, such reflexive debate has not been matched in WLB research in response to digital labor platforms. Now, over 4 decades in the making, the fundamental conceptual building blocks from which work–family theory is built include "work", "workplace", "employers", "employment contracts", and "employees" with legally recognized rights to "employer support" (e.g., Goff et al., 1990, Drago & Hyatt, 2003, Hayward et al., 2007, Swan et al., 2011). These "first principles of WLB theory" include an exclusive focus on "*employee* problems" (Hyman & Summers, 2004) and the "relationship between *employees*' work lives and their nonwork pursuits" and "*employees*' quality of work life" (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 76–7). Similarly, work–life balance policies are "formally designed and adopted at the organizational level by HR directors or managers…" (McCarthy et al., 2010) to "enable individuals to be able to combine *employment* with caregiving and other important non-work roles" (Kossek et al., 2010, p. 2) (see Table 1). In short, these core tenets of the WLB theory are premised on the exact same terms and actors which platforms deliberately reject.

Accordingly, the central WLB research concept of "employer-provided WLB arrangements"—as part of a larger suite of HR-managed benefits for salaried employees subject to line manager sign-off—is left wanting in relation to platforms. For platform workers, there is no "employer", nor line manager in the flesh, nor a single employer-sanctioned workplace. Likewise, the long-standing WLB research focuses on "employee awareness" of WLB arrangements offered by their employer. This alongside a research focus on the "bottom-line" benefits that accrue to employers, including improved *employee* engagement, *employee* satisfaction, *employee* turnover intention, and *employee* productivity (e.g., Bevan et al., 1999, Dex & Scheibl, 1999, Bond & Galinsky, 2006, Beauregard & Henry, 2009). However, platform workers are not "employees" with a single platform "employer".

As such, digital labor platforms pose major disruptive challenges to the core concepts on which the WLB theory has been built. The unhappy outcome is that WLB research ignores over 163 million workers worldwide who make a living from platform work. Accordingly, WLB research remains limited in its larger societal relevance and capacity to

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TABLE 1 Employer/employee focus of the extant WLB theory (emphasis added).

Intervention/study
"The *relationship between employees' work lives and their nonwork pursuits*… a *heightened concern for employees' quality of work life*… a form of interrole conflict in which the role pressures from the work and family domains are mutually incompatible" (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985, p. 76–7).
"*Employee problems* toward reducing tension between work and domestic demands" (Hyman & Summers, 2004, p. 418).
"Work–life policies and practices are geared to… *enable individuals to be able to combine employment with caregiving and other important non-work roles*" (Kossek et al., 2010, p. 2).
"Work–life balance policies are *formally designed and adopted at the organizational level, usually by HR directors or managers*…" (McCarthy et al., 2010, p. 158–160).
"Work-life balance arrangements and practices refer to *initiatives voluntarily introduced by firms* which facilitate the reconciliation of employees' work and personal lives" (Darcy et al., 2012, p. 112).

Abbreviation: WLB, work–life balance.

inform policy interventions around digital work futures, and feminist campaigns for family-friendly working. Crucially, this also matters because platforms represent more than an income top-up but the *primary income source* for a rapidly growing global workforce of precarious workers (Berg et al., 2018). In short, the future of WLB policies lies in engaging more directly with platform workers who are not in formal employment status.[2]

To critically examine the quality and effectiveness of the "family-friendly" working opportunities that platforms claim to offer, this paper responds to a series of urgent research questions. What WLB arrangements are available to gig workers to reconcile work, home, and family in the platform economy in the absence of a legally defined employer? How do patterns of work–life conflicts among platform workers compare with those widely documented among white-collar professionals in standard employment relationships? (including FT roles previously held by platform workers themselves). What WLB benefits do platform workers with young families identify as available through digital labor platforms? And, hence, to what extent do platforms offer a genuine means of economic empowerment for women who bear the brunt of unpaid domestic labor?

Recent work has begun to engage with these questions, and to challenge the analytical marginalization of women within platform labor studies more generally (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2016; James, 2022). It has identified difficult work–family trade-offs experienced by women platform care workers, who frequently deprioritize their own children to support clients' children (Hunt et al., 2019). Work by Schörpf et al. (2017) identifies a "platform colonization" of crowdworkers' family lives through platform expectations of swift client response and algorithmic reputational systems. Other work demonstrates the adverse effects of "discretionary" and "autonomous" night working on crowdworkers' subjective well-being and work–life balance, with common instances of emotional exhaustion (e.g., Shevchuk et al., 2019), and contradictory WLB outcomes for platform workers in which lauded work–time flexibility comes hand in hand with unpredictable hours, income insecurity, work intensification, and work–life conflict (Warren, 2021, p. 11). These are important studies, but a drop in the ocean of a burgeoning gig economy research literature that boasts over 9 million articles since 2000.[3] Consequently:

> Far more research is needed into the specific and gendered work-life balance experiences of gig workers… [which] are yet to be embedded into the growing literature around gig working.
>
> (Warren, 2021, p. 18)

In response to such calls to arms, this paper further advances this urgent research agenda. The analysis explores women's work-lives across a series of popular crowdwork platforms in the UK as they execute platform tasks as "independent" workers on behalf of clients (or requesters) remotely from the private domestic spaces of their homes, juggled alongside childcare and other family commitments. In contrast to highly visible (and majority male) platform workforces in parcel delivery, ride-hailing, and food delivery segments, these women's work-lives remain "hidden in the cloud" (Gregory, 2018).

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4 | RESEARCHING WOMEN, WORK, AND FAMILY IN THE PLATFORM ECONOMY

This paper draws on ethnographic research to explore the complex decision-making processes, contradictions, and work–family gains of women platform workers compared to their former employers. In-depth semi-structured interviews were completed with 49 women crowdworkers January–August 2018.[4] Participants were recruited by listing the interview as a paid task on PeoplePerHour. PPH is a prominent site that is well established with a large and active user base, whose design is representative of a large class of crowdwork platforms. PPH claims "2.4 million active members globally", with two thirds UK-based.

Task ads were placed across PPH's key categories: Web Development, Design, Video Photo & Audio Writing, Admin, Marketing & PR, Business Support, Social Media, Creative Arts, Mobile, Translation, Search Marketing, Extraordinary, and Software Development. Interviews were prepaid at £25 and set above the average hourly rate, after PPH fees, within the limits of the project budget. Task ads were regularly reposted. As a function of workers "multi-apping" across multiple platforms concurrently, this PPH mode of recruitment yielded 49 women active across 24 different digital labor platforms with an accumulated platform work experience of 144 years.[5] The wording of the ad specified "UK-based women 18 years or older with young children", and the study imposed no strict sampling criteria beyond this. The majority of participants were white women, with dependent children, living in households with male partners typically in full-time paid employment outside the home.

Interviews lasted 1–2 h and typically were carried out through the video meeting function within the platform itself. The interview protocol focused on: worker demographics and household situation; platform work history; platform pay and dependence; work routines; work–life conflict; positive work–life outcomes of platform working; lived experiences of algorithmic management; WLB provision and uptake; support structures and suggestions for platform redesign. Research participants were also questioned on their before-and-after experiences of platforms compared with previous employment and any significant work–life discontinuities. After each interview, positive feedback was left on the platform as a means of enhancing each participant's profile and giving back.[6] The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed through secretarial support. In-depth analysis was carried out through detailed coding and cross-comparison of coded interview transcripts to draw out key themes, commonalities of experience, and sources of difference with the aim of building theory iteratively. Member checking was also used to gauge the credibility of evolving theories. The polyvocal style of write-up incorporates the voices of women gig workers who have to date remained largely "invisible" within digital labor research.

Women in this study are engaged in an impressive breadth of skilled platform services, including digital marketing, communications, social media management, accountancy, legal services, voice over work, transcription, web development, HR support, virtual assistant, content writing, translation, proofreading, copyediting, graphic design, eBay store management, bookkeeping, market research, and database management. These women's platform task specialisms typically represent forms of white collar desk-based work in which they already had experience and qualifications in previous periods of formal employment. Participants are also well qualified—two thirds hold undergraduate degrees and one fifth postgraduate degrees. Most women typically completed 15–35 h of platform work per week (around 20% of which is unpaid job search and bidding) with average pay £15 per hour (ranging £7–£40 per hour), and a range of platform dependencies within the participant sample: platforms contributing between 19% and 100% of total household income. Participants' combined monthly platform earnings were £38,405 after fees in the previous month.

5 | JUGGLING GIG WORK, HOME, AND FAMILY ON DIGITAL LABOR PLATFORMS

5.1 | Accessing WLB arrangements: Platforms versus previous employers

While family is widely identified as an important factor motivating workers' turn to platforms, evidence remains limited on the kinds of WLB arrangements available to platform workers in the absence of any legally-recognized employer, nor their effectiveness in reducing work–life conflict relative to previous employers. This knowledge

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gap is especially problematic, given the widespread celebration of digital labor platforms as disrupting stubborn gender inequalities in "analogue" labor markets by offering improved integration of paid work with family and care.

In this study, women's engagement with digital labor platforms was commonly explained in relation to the limited (and failed) WLB support of previous employers—with multiple women turning to platforms following redundancy, return from maternity leave, a failed flexible working request, extended sick leave, bullying, derogatory comments from a line manager around childcare and "commitment", and/or being passed over for promotion in favor of a younger colleague without children. Platform working also often coincided with key life course events including pregnancy, birth of a child, maternity, or child starting school; alongside other shifts in personal circumstances such as separation or divorce, or an increase in a partner's working hours. In other words, workers engage with platforms not as individuals but as members of families and households (following Negrey, 2012).

Gendered responsibilities of care and WLB support needs motivate workers' engagement with platforms in three ways and also highlight the inseparability of WLB decision-making in the platform economy from patterns of WLB provision among mainstream employers. First and foremost, workers identified a need for greater *temporal flexibility of paid work* around childcare responsibilities and a means for avoiding expensive private childcare costs incurred through working a standard 9–5 workday. At the heart of these needs, participants identified a fundamental mismatch in previous employment between mainstream office hours versus school hours, on a daily basis and also annually, because "You only get 5 weeks holiday a year but there's 11 weeks school holidays!".

In addition to flextime, workers identified a simultaneous need for greater *spatial flexibility of work* to reduce time and energy previously spent commuting to offices in previous roles. In combination, participants sought *greater personal autonomy over work*, "being able to dictate my own hours of when I can and can't work", and "to have the flexibility to prioritize what is important to me at that moment in that day, and not have to book time off a month in advance or worry about how I am going to afford wrap around school care". Similarly, workers sought to cut down previous unpaid overtime and weekend working due to clashes with family activities. Often, these WLB support needs were described in relation to a child's ill health and "often having to scooch into school and rescue situations". Typically these requirements were identified in relation to a lack of effective WLB provision by their previous employers, which in turn had motivated participants to turn to platforms to reduce work–life conflict:

> I left a big employer due to inflexible working. I needed one hour a week to work from home to pick up my daughter from school, which they point blank refused. I decided to go freelance… registered with PPH basically just to give me a kickstart.

> I was expected to do full-time work in part-time hours. Frequently I had to rush out of the office to go and pick up the kids and half the time, meetings had over run. I just didn't see myself starting a family while in that environment. But, equally, I didn't want to go out looking for another new job, because you had to be there a while before you think about having a baby.

Here, crowdworkers pointed to a fundamental difference between the WLB provision as a *formal policy* identified by their previous employers versus *informal provision* in which use of those policies in practice is dependent on managerial ratification and coworkers' buy-in:

> The company that I worked for… although they said all the right things about flexible working and support paths, etc. I would be the first going home at 4:30. And that was always frowned upon, everyone was still there… you kind of got the looks, it just wasn't a family friendly environment.

As one crowdworker summed up: "I don't see that there are many bosses out there who are happy about the fact that you have to have time off to look after a child"… Indeed one participant described how she and her partner previously

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"had to take our annual leave separately just so we could look after the kids". In contrast, platforms were identified as offering a potential improvement relative to previous employers:

> PeoplePerHour attracted me for this very reason, that I can put myself as available / unavailable to fit around home life… So it felt as though there would be a lot of control… and that it would work with my current stage of life with juggling children.

Indeed, in multiple cases women had been denied requests to convert a full-time role to part-time, or else to work annualized hours to "get the full 6 weeks off in the summer". In some cases, these women subsequently had unsuccessfully applied for jobs with greater temporal flexibility. Other women had used employment agencies that target female returners into flexible working designed to fit around childcare. Examples include Capability Jane, Women Like Us, Working Mummies, 2to3days.com, and Ten2Two.

Common types of employer-provided WLB arrangements documented over the last 4 decades in work–family research are summarized in Table 2. Their provision across employers remains highly uneven, with flextime most commonly identified (as cheap to implement), compared with lower instances for more radical types of arrangement (e.g., annualized hours) (James, 2017). Previous work has also shown the differential availability of such arrangements based on workers' employment contract type, seniority, and/or managerial status (e.g., Gray & Tudball, 2003, McDonald et al., 2005, Gregory & Milner, 2009). This unevenness was commonly evident among the participant group in relation to their previous employers and against which new "flexibilities" of platform working were judged.

In contrast to these documented patterns of unevenness by firm, company tenure, and seniority, around half are identified by research participants as available to all platform workers from the point of platform sign up. These include flextime, flexplace, annualized hours, job sharing, part-time working, compressed work weeks, term time only working, and emergency leave.

These platform-enabled work–life balance options were identified by women crowdworkers as divergent from their former employer-provided WLB arrangements on several levels. None are formally provided to workers by platforms identifying as a legal employer in employer-provided workspaces. They require *no formal application or negotiated formal request to an employer* nor years to be accrued on which workers become eligible to use—instead, they are instantly available once having signed up the platform, and to all workers: "we work when we choose". At the same time, platform workers are able to *make use of multiple flexible working arrangements in combination* (with some participants combining daily flextime with flexplace, term-time only working and "job sharing" through a combined platform profile). While previous WLB research points to the crucial role of manager and co-worker buy-in in ratifying and enabling worker uptake (e.g., Maxwell, 2005, McCarthy et al., 2010, Kossek et al., 2016, James, 2017), platform workers *require no managerial sign off*, because for them no human manager exists:

> I'm able to say, "I'll work this day, this day and this day." If that doesn't work out, I can just change it myself. I'm not having to put in an application for flexible working, that might not be agreed.

Likewise, there is no coworker stigma of "not pulling their weight". For some workers, this was identified as liberating. However, others balanced this against platform workers—in the absence of an employer—not qualifying for paid annual leave, paid parental leave, maternity leave, sick leave, and other legally mandated employment benefits. For others, an hour's family time gained was equated with "an hour's lost income".

As such, platform workers of varying platform tenures, incomes, and dependencies are able to access a range of WLB arrangements through platforms (flextime, flexplace, annualized hours, part-time working, compressed work weeks, term-time only working, unpaid leave during school holidays, and emergency leave) more readily than as employees in standard employment relationships previously held. However, such "WLB autonomy" is rooted in a triangular relationship between platform, client, and tasker in which neither client requester or platform identifies as a legal employer, such that the onus of responsibility for reconciling paid work and family is (further) shifted onto

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TABLE 2 Family-friendly working provision—comparing employers and platforms.

WLB category	Employer provided arrangement (identified by 40 years of work-family research)	Digital labor platform availability to taskers (as identified by platform workers)
Flexible work arrangements	Flextime	Yes
	Flexplace	Yes
	Job sharing	Yes
	Annualized hours	Yes
Reduced work hours	Part-time working	Yes
	Compressed work weeks	Yes
	Term-time only working	Yes
Personal leave	Extra-statutory maternity leave	No
	Extra-statutory paternity leave	No
	Adoption leave	No
	Unpaid leave during school holidays	Yes
	Guaranteed Christmas leave	No
	Leave to care for sick children	Yes
	Leave for caring for elder relatives	Yes
	Emergency leave	Yes
	Study leave	No
Practical help with child care	Employer-subsidized child care—on-site	No
	Employer-subsidized child care—off-site	No
	Information service for child care	No
	Workplace parent support group	No
	Breast-feeding facilities onsite	No
	Policy of actively informing staff of benefits available	No

Abbreviation: WLB, work–life balance.

platform workers themselves. This further devolves corporate responsibilities for sustainability of work, in which workers are encouraged to seek individual, privatized solutions to problems of work–life conflict in neoliberal welfare regimes. Moreover, while employer-provided WLB arrangements provide employees with a predictable income alongside flexibility, this is not the case for the kinds of family-flexibility enabled by platforms, in which workers trade-off improved WLB against an unpredictable income stream and a lack of any in-house support from managers and coworkers.

5.2 | Digital labor platforms yielding new work–life flexibilities?

Crowdwork platforms are explicitly touted to women with young children on the basis that they enable better integration of paid work with childcare (e.g., Wosskow, 2014; De Stefano, 2016b; Hannák et al., 2017) in contrast to the "stifling nature of traditional employment contracts" (Woodcock & Graham, 2019, p. 5). However, the empirical evidence base to support these claims remains limited. Consequent to the WLB provisions identified above, women crowdworkers commonly articulated positive work–life outcomes in terms of significantly improved abilities

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to reconcile “pockets” of paid gig work around family activities, in ways not feasible in previous employment. While participants' weekly platform work hours varied from 15 to 35 h in the previous week (including unpaid search time), common to the majority of participants was the non-consecutive pattern of those work hours spaced out around personal responsibilities, divergent from previous job roles with the inflexibility of “an 8 h workday in a prescribed time and prescribed workplace”:

> You do the tasks that you want to do in the timeframe that you have available… I do the nursery run, the school run and then pockets of meetings, phone calls, catch ups. Then it's normally pick up, spend a couple of hours with my daughter and then a pocket of 2–3 hours in the evening, so from 7pm until 10pm where I really catch up and get things done that I couldn't do during normal working hours.

> You can pick and choose … that’s the advantage in terms of work–life balance. The difference is, being in charge of what you do and when you do it, not having to answer to anyone. You can put your family first, whenever there is that need during work time.

Platforms were recognized as enabling women to engage in paid work while spending more time with children on a daily and weekly basis and also reducing their previous need for expensive childcare fees in former job roles. Multiple women articulated a platform work–life strategy of annualized platform work hours, racking up work hours during term times to give space for childcare during school holidays. They also articulated the benefits of platform work over previous paid employment in enabling a greater responsiveness to unforeseen events and disruptions, most commonly child illness:

> As long as you are keeping to the deadlines with clients, they are not really interested if you are doing this in the middle of the night, or early in the morning. When you are in full-time employment, if your child falls ill, you have to ask for the day off. So, it does give you much more flexibility.
> If the school rings, I can go. I don’t have to say to the manager, school’s rang again, I have to go. I don’t have to be in a meeting and see my phone flashing on silent because the school want me and thinking ‘Oh my god, what's happened? Is he in hospital? Is he safe?’ And there’s nothing I can do about it because I'm sat in a board meeting with clients. So, it just means that I can be a mum all the time.

As a consequence of these new working patterns, some workers described reduced stress and anxiety around childcare, more time spent with children, reduced feelings of guilt, and better relationships with partners relative to previous employment:

> If it wasn’t for platforms like PeoplePerHour, I would have had to have gone back to work earlier than I had to… it allowed me to stay at home with them.

> If I was working in the role that I had been working, I would never see them, simple as… my relationship with my kids is certainly better for it. My youngest took his first steps yesterday and I was working but I saw it.

However, participants also identified ongoing and new work–life conflicts, frequent unpaid overtime, an inability to distance oneself from work, and the contradictory nature of WLB options that platforms offer. Despite the increased temporal and spatial flexibility of gig work described above, workers also identified constant feelings of time pressure and intense busyness, in which: “I feel all the time I'm juggling. I feel like I'm always on the run”, “I am working every spare minute”, “I have no social life”, “I have no hobbies, pastimes it's just work and children”, and “ (you) just keep working unless you are really dying”. These pressures were more commonly identified by workers with higher

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platform income dependencies. On one level, these comments are consistent with terms used by white collar employees in previous WLB studies including “time poor”, “time starved”, “time squeezed”, and “time pressure”. But in contrast to workers in standard employment relationships (and worker's own previous job roles), the intensive nature of constant job search through digital labor platforms creates problems of unpaid overtime on the basis that “you need to get hired multiple times a week”:

> If anything, you're working more hours than you do in a normal job, not just the work itself but finding jobs, chasing people up, chasing invoices, admin work, accounting. It's like half a day every week that you're not getting paid for.

Workers commonly identified significant weekly hours spent searching for work and bidding on gigs. This work requires drafting job-specific proposals, which is not paid by either platform or client. This work also typically requires an immediate response to a posted gig, because “if you're not on the platform constantly, if a job comes up and it was posted an hour ago, the client's already 15 proposals in before you've even been seen”. Underpinning this pressure, platforms typically over-recruit workers, who must then compete for gigs as part of a globally distributed gig workforce. A common working practice, then, was to extend the working day beyond paid gigs by do bidding work “often at night sit in front of the telly with my laptop and do a couple of hours”, “checking on my phone at the park with the kids”, “working in the car during my daughter's dance class”, or else even “on the beach on holiday”.

Patterns of overwork on platforms also emerge from management-by-algorithm—with a series of gendered work–life outcomes that remain largely undocumented by WLB scholars. Platform algorithms use reputational data combining client feedback from workers' previous tasks, frequency of gigs completed, timeliness of response to clients, and a myriad other “engagement” metrics as a means of ranking workers, and to match high performers with requesters posting new gigs (see Duggan et al., 2020; Wood et al., 2019)[7]:

> There's a massive pressure to keep your ranking high. Otherwise… they think you're not as effective. So they drop your ranking. If you don't get five stars on a job, that's a cause for concern for them. So if you're then dropped from that algorithm, you don't show and you don't get invited to send proposals.

> If you go off the grid for any period of time, you reset your profile to a much lower level because you have to be continuously visible… if you’re not doing jobs for a period of time then that looks bad.

For multiple women, working to “keep your ranking high” means taking on work during school holidays to avoid losing repeat clients and to avoid a drop in algorithmic visibility (and in some cases not going on holiday to avoid missing out on good gigs). For others, it means regular evening working, late night working, working weekends, and working public holidays, in ways which conflict with the rhythms of family life, placing limits on the flexibility of setting one's hours of work—especially when jobs posted involve parties in different time zones—and which in several cases “is one of the things that's stopping me making the full transition to 100% platform working”:

> With the six weeks holidays there will be no break, I will be having the kids every day, so everything is converted to evening work regardless of whether I like it or not. But I have kind of accepted that now, it’s only six weeks, I can get through it.

Pervasive instances of overwork also emerge from clients frequently underspecifying tasks that subsequently prove to be much larger once accepted—in one extreme instance, a worker realized that her gig would necessitate working 24 h a day for 5 days straight if she was to complete the image cataloging task on time (and at £1 an hour) despite its original specification for far fewer hours and an attractive hourly rate. Likewise, clients not responding immediately to workers' proposals, with workers also applying to other gigs in the meantime, only then to have multiple gig offers

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arrive in the same week, for which they are downgraded in the algorithm if they subsequently decline. Or else, clients who assume 24/7 constant tasker availability. In all three cases, taskers were keen to meet client expectations to avoid negative feedback that would reduce their visibility in algorithmic rankings and future workflows—or "I am at their mercy because I want to get paid":

> You can't risk a negative review, they are so damaging. Although you do have the facility to reply to it, it just puts that seed of doubt in someone's mind. And if they are looking at two people who have got the same skillset and one has got great reviews and one had a bad review two months ago, then they are more likely to go with the person who has the better feedback.

As a function of platform workers almost exclusively working from home (but also from their cars and jungle gyms), workers also explained how the need for immediate client response and demands of gig search frequently came into conflict with demands of family, including multiple instances of clients calling during children's mealtimes, bathtimes, and bedtimes:

> My work is always set for the times when [daughter] is already in the bed, but… it happened to me twice, that I'm supposed to start a call with my client, for eight o'clock, and my daughter was just playing up. She didn't want to go to sleep. My computer is downstairs. Her bedroom is upstairs. And I was stuck, like, do I go to the computer with the baby in my arms?!

Such interruptions pose particular challenges for women with preschool children who lack childcare support: "she wants drinks, she needs a wee, she wants to get dressed, she wants to dress up, it is constant interruptions". Likewise, frequent instances of children wandering into online meetings "when he was like 'Mummy, I want a poo' in front of a client"—"I have had a few occasions where I've had to shush them into the background". Exacerbating these problems, very few participants had a dedicated home office space—rather, in multiple cases, this had been converted into a nursery with the arrival of a first child. Others are working in living rooms, kitchens, and hallways often interrupted by children. A lack of spatial and mental separation of home and work creates new forms of work–life conflict over previous job roles. Consequently, participants were critical of platform advertising claims around new work–family possibilities: "I see all those adverts where they try and make people believe that you're homeworking with your child on your lap and you have a coffee and fire off some emails, but that is not true. And it makes me go into a rage every time I see those!".

These sources of work–life conflict have major societal significance as a function of their effects on women gig workers' health and well-being—and for the sustainability of platform models of wealth creation through human labor. Consistent with previous studies of negative health outcomes among self-employed women working "offline" (e.g., Parslow et al., 2004; Rietveld et al., 2015), platform participants identified problems of exhaustion, lack of sleep, social isolation, and working when ill:

> Even just last week, a terrible virus my daughter has, and I had it as well, but I had to work. I had to sit there doing telemarketing even though I felt so ill. As soon as you finish, you just try and recover then for the next day. So, you just don't stop.

Workers also described how their relationship with their partner had suffered from the demands of platform working, which for multiple participants extended to late night working in bed, and from *unpredictable patterns of time off* difficult to coordinate with their partner's paid annual leave. The *financial unpredictability* of gig work income was also widely recognized to have caused marital conflict—even identified by one participant as a major factor in the eventual separation from her partner. In other instances, workers explained how their bank had been unwilling to include their unpredictable platform income in their financial means assessment for a mortgage. Other workers pointed to the

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persistent stress and anxiety that emerge from fears of algorithmic judgments of “unsatisfactory performance”, which means workers' accounts suddenly being deactivated and being prevented from working. As one worker explained: “this is my income, this isn't a joke, this is me paying for my rent, this is me paying for food, paying for uniforms”. In other cases, these challenges had major implications for workers' family planning, with multiple workers exhibiting a new digitally mediated variant of what Hall (2019) has previously described as those “children never born” due to economic hardship:

> Having another child… I think that it would be a lot harder. Whereas the last time it was, right, okay, I am pregnant, I will get maternity leave it’s fine. There would have to be that financial consideration this time around, making sure the money is there before you plan to take time off again.

> Originally, we’d planned to have two kids. I think now, right at this moment in time, it’s not really an option financially with the money that I make from the freelancing stuff. We’re basically just scraping by and no more. I wouldn’t say we’re well off. There are things that we’d maybe like to afford that we can’t afford. To have another kid on top of that, that needs clothes and food and stuff like that, would… it’s made us think twice about having any more.

Reinforcing these decision-making processes, relationships with children were also recognized as suffering from platform working, with several women worried that despite being physically proximate with their children during working hours they are relationally distant, “in the same room but not interacting”. Children themselves were recognized as actively resenting their parents gig working from home (“as soon as he sees me get my laptop out, no matter how engrossed he was in his toys, he is like, ‘no, Mummy is not doing any work!’”). Accordingly, workers also described feelings of guilt about short-changing their children through the demands of platform working, and the ways in which the “demands of the deadline have frequently hit school run or holiday or child events”:

> I’ve taken on motherhood and the online freelancing together… So, there’s a lot of guilt, am I missing out on time with my son or am I rushing around so much trying to work that I’m not noticing amazing things that are happening to him or not making his natural food or not able to spend that time that some mothers can. I feel guilty.

However, for other workers, the guilt cuts in both directions on the basis that “1 hour with my child is 1 hour of lost gig income”.

Overall then, these platform worker testimonies point to the contradictory nature of crowdwork in relation to family-friendly working—offering some advantages over previous forms of employment, but also generating multiple new problems, which are algorithmically mediated. Ironic then, given that it was a failure of WLB promises in previous employment that had prompted many women to turn to platforms in the first place, commonly centered on a disjuncture between WLB arrangements formally provided versus those available in practice. Nevertheless, interviews also point to some reticence among multiple female crowdworkers to be reclassified as employees: “no, we just want better protection as self-employed platform workers”. An optimistic interpretation might point to platform work–life flexibilities, which while modest in some cases offer “psychic value” (see, e.g., Obschonska et al., 2023). Less positive interpretations by workers themselves point to the reciprocal work obligations that would be expected of employees by a formal employer; common previous experiences of managerial discrimination around pregnancy, maternity, and female returners despite legal protections for employees; and common identification of crowdwork as merely a “short-term stop gap whilst the kids are little” through platform providers that “are not doing it to empower women, they are just taking money from people who have no other choice”.

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5.3 | Women's strategies for reducing gig work-family conflicts

Previous work–family research has identified the crucial role of informal WLB practices in reducing the hardships that employees and their families face with a particular emphasis on the role of line managers in ratifying workers' use of employer-provided WLB arrangements in practice (e.g., Maxwell, 2005; McCarthy et al., 2010; James, 2017). In the absence of a manager in the flesh—and workers' common criticisms of ineffective platform helpdesks—interviews identified three sets of informal work–family practices developed by women to maintain algorithmic visibility, work-flow, and platform income alongside personal childcare commitments, in their position as "independent contractors".

One set of gig work-care strategies centers around *targeted selection of family-friendly clients* who recognize and accept workers' childcare commitments and hence are unlikely to penalize them in feedback scores for family constraints on availability. To this end, some women include public statements of their childcare responsibilities on their platform profile pages. Others make clients aware of childcare restrictions on working hours during the bid process, typically with the aim to cultivate regular clients "who personally understand" the work constraints of family:

> I am always honest when somebody gets in touch. The first thing I will say is that I have children, I am looking for work that I can do around the children. So, I will always make sure that they are aware that I can't drop everything and be like, yes, I will do that work straight away. I will always suggest that evening work is best for me or Mondays and Fridays are good for me because my youngest goes to nursery.

> I'm trying to build up a base of customers who: know what to expect. If they don't fit that criteria, I don't need them as customers. I'm quite ruthless. But, when you've got children and you've got busy lives, you've got to be ruthless.

As an insurance mechanism, where clients had raised issues about the quality of gigs completed—often in terms of workers' availability and responsiveness around childcare commitments—women deliberately failed to submit a pay claim. The dashboard option for clients to leave negative feedback only becomes available once a gig is listed as completed and the tasker submits a final claim for payment. In this way, participants had been able to avoid dissatisfied clients posting a negative review that would otherwise have undermined their rating within algorithm searches. Participants described how the loss of income from one gig was often a price worth paying in order to maintain a high feedback score for algorithmic visibility and thereby to secure future gigs.

These tactics also extend to *targeted platform choice* with multiple women deliberately avoiding some platforms over others because of childcare commitments—a common response was avoidance of TaskRabbit and other care platforms that would require women to enter other people's homes, commonly at times of the day (early evening, weekends) that were favorable to the client (after they had finished their work day), but which would also clash with the childcare/family commitments of the sellers. These strategies of client selection also extend to preferred bidding only on *particular types of gigs* deemed to offer a better fit around family:

> The type of work that I bid for is influenced by the children. So, I know that telemarketing work or anything where I would have deadlines I won't do purely because I can't guarantee that the kids will be quiet, or the kids will be asleep. So, this is why I tend to go for the data entry, it doesn't matter if they are up and about I would just maybe put the TV on for them to get that little bit completed.

For other women, this equates to "trying to pick jobs that I can do when my daughter's sleeping", or else simply turning gigs down when they impinge on children, on the basis that "the reason I'm doing this is because I want to be with my daughter more, not because I want to be with her less—I've had to say to people, 'I'm not working with you anymore,' when it's got in the way of that". In other instances, workers identified a preference for international

clients in order that their real-time work demands can happen during the UK night time to free up time during the day for childcare.

A second set of gig work-care strategies involves some women maintaining algorithm visibility and retaining repeat clients during times of additional childcare demands (especially during school holidays) by accepting gigs and then "subbing out some of the work" to other workers on the same platform. Previous research has identified this practice as a "*reintermediation*" *of gig work* (Graham et al., 2017) although not in relation to childcare. An alternative work-care strategy articulated by other participants involves two or more women working under a single profile to compete better for jobs based on a more extensive combined work history and combined client reviews and to provide greater flexibility to complete work around unpredictable childcare events without a loss of algorithmic visibility in requester search results.

A third set of gig work-care strategies involves *extended family and peer networks of childcare support in enabling gig work* to happen. Underpinning and enabling platforms' abilities to market a digital labor force always available to clients at a moment's notice through a smartphone app, participants pointed to an impressive support network of family members, friends, children's siblings, and other women gig workers whose (unpaid) domestic labor ultimately enables them to perform platform work. In addition to the challenges of doing gig work during school holidays, this includes regular daily and weekly childcare provided by grandparents, parents, parents in-law, partners, ex-partners, older children, neighbors, and other women gig workers "who keep the kids busy while I work" and hence which ultimately enables gigs to be completed. This support also includes tag team childcare among groups of women gig workers through their collective use of jungle gyms and soft play facilities with Wi-Fi with the aim to give each member of the group longer blocks of uninterrupted work time: "one of us can get a bit of stuff done while we can use the free Wi-Fi, while someone else watches the children". Only in a few instances did women identify any use of private childcare—whose associated "childcare fees are astronomical, as much as our mortgage" and would otherwise "wipe out my earnings from the platform". But here too, additional tactics are involved to maximize the time available to do gig work (in ways that are hidden from requesters):

> Holiday weeks, I've had to pay a childminder; they're at someone's house. It's quite far away, so rather me driving all the way home to work, I've taken my laptop and gone and worked in [a local cafe]… sit and work there, do my hours, and then go and pick them up… you juggle.

Much more than improving the work-lives of women gig workers, these family and peer support structures are fundamental in enabling platform value creation through hidden reproductive labor—but for which platforms offer no direct compensation in recognition.

6 | CONCLUDING DISCUSSION: PLATFORMING WORK–FAMILY RESEARCH

This paper advances and extends urgent debates around work–family integration in the platform economy. Despite widespread celebration of the "emancipatory" possibilities for platform workers to reconcile competing responsibilities of paid work, family and care through algorithmically mediated gig work, there remains a dearth of evidence to support these claims in practice.

Building on a growing body of research on platform work-lives, this paper theorizes how disruptive innovations by platforms to recast long-standing definitions of "work", "workers", "managers", and "employers" (as a means of sidestepping legal obligations to offer platform workers social protection) have served to position platforms as somehow outside the analytical gaze of the extant work–family research agenda. Platforms pose new challenges to work–life balance theory that is over 4 decades in the making, but which remains wedded to an employer/employee model that platforms have deliberately eschewed, through new forms of digitally intermediated work. This does not mean that platforms should remain as somehow off limits to work–family researchers. Nor is it to dismiss the important

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TABLE 3 WLB provision—comparing digital labor platforms with employers.

Employer-provided WLB	Digital labor platform WLB provision
• Legal employer • Provision for employees with formal contract • Unevenness of provision by firm and by job role • Managers in the flesh ratify use of WLB arrangements • Employer-provided work-space • Negotiated request for flexible working options • Employer accepts some responsibility for WLB fixes	• No legal employer • Self-employed "independent" contractors with user agreement can access • All enrolled platform contractors can access • Managed by an algorithm, customers ratify flexible working through dashboard feedback • Worker-provided private domestic home work space • Instant flexible working options, no application required • WLB individual responsibility of worker

Abbreviation: WLB, work–life balance.

contributions made by work–family scholars through a focus on employees in standard employment relationships. Rather, that new modes of platform work represent more than an interesting case to add to the existing WLB field that otherwise remains unchanged. "Independent" platform workers demand a more fundamental shift in WLB research away from an employee-centered mode of analysis from which they remain analytically excluded. (In the current mode of analysis, any work-family analysis of PeoplePerHour or Upwork, for example, would be restricted to the small group of workers formally employed to run those platforms—including developers, technicians, managers, marketing, and others—but not the thousands of gig workers who use PPH or Upwork to access "independent" paid work opportunities.) Such a shift also demands that WLB researchers situate worker decision-making in relation to the platform algorithms from which workers crave visibility and which manage workers virtually in ways not easily accommodated by the figure of line manager in the flesh who still populates most WLB analyses.

By bringing the WLB and digital labor research agendas into productive conversation, this paper extends a vital research agenda that connects platform labor studies and work–family research in new ways. By situating and contextualizing platform workers' work–life choices in relation to previous job histories, the analysis identifies a vicious circle of work–life conflict, as women employees with extensive childcare responsibilities turn to crowdwork platforms in pursuit of increased spatial and temporal flexibility of paid work relative to their previous employers, and to reduce previously experienced conflicts between paid work, home and family in "analogue labor markets". In the wake of the failed WLB provision by previous employers, platforms become the new inheritors of women's campaigns for WLB (see also Ticona, 2022), and the WLB research agenda needs to respond accordingly. Platforms claim to offer new work–family flexibilities, including spatial flexibility of work, and temporal flexibility of work (including annualized hours, compressed hours and term-time only working), alongside uncapped emergency leave, and simplified work commutes—and all without the need for any formal application or managerial sign-off (Table 3).

While the gendered challenges of juggling gig work, home and family might be seen as bearing some commonalities to the lives of self-employed "offline" women contractors previously documented (e.g., Reynolds & Renzulli, 2005; Jennings & McDougald, 2007; Annink & den Dulk, 2012; Gold & Mustafa, 2013; De Clercq et al., 2021), women crowdworkers are also subject to new forms of algorithmically mediated work–life precarity in ways that "offline" women entrepreneurs are not. These include the role of algorithmically motivated late night and weekend working and unpaid overtime, as a result of client demands for instant response, and workers' constant efforts to avoid negative client feedback and thereby remain visible in the platform algorithms that route out work to potential taskers, and to avoid the constant threat of platform deactivation: fired from a job you never had, by an employer who never employed you (Aloisi & De Stefano, 2022). Also divergent from previous studies of "analogue" female entrepreneurs, multiple platform-mediated health outcomes of gig work–life conflict result from women crowdworkers fighting to stay visible to requesters, alongside the intimate consequences of platform income precarity for workers' children, and for children not yet born.

Thus to theorize online gig workers as some digital labor force accessible 24/7 at a moment's notice to platform requesters by simply "downloading their labor from the cloud" (cf. Blanke, 2014), is to perpetuate a set of analytical

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caricatures of the platform economy, its embodied sources of economic value, and the social sustainability of current patterns of digital (over)work. Women's engagement with digital labor platforms is closely related to key family events in the life course around pregnancy, maternity, children starting crèche, birth of a second child, alongside other shifts in personal circumstances such as separation or divorce, an increase in their partner's working hours, or household relocation to a new town. Poor WLB provision by previous employers, uneven gender divisions of household labor, and childcare responsibilities powerfully shape workers' patterns of engagement with digital labor platforms. Workers engage with platforms not as individuals, but as members of families and households and often as parents with caring responsibilities, and this has major implications for how platforms create value.

For some commentators, platforms might then be understood as usefully filling a major void in corporate provision of family-friendly working opportunities to women with extensive childcare commitments. However, rather than theorizing platforms as a positive choice for women, in multiple cases, this represents a basic *lack of choice*, as many employers remain highly skeptical of the "business case" for providing family-friendly working arrangements and meaningful WLB support for workers. In neoliberal welfare states, WLB has become an individualized problem for workers and their families to solve. This pattern goes unchallenged by digital labor platforms, instead it is reinscribed online. Platform workers are left to organize their own WLB solutions, with platforms also refusing to identify as their employers, to sidestep the legal obligations to workers' social welfare which that would otherwise entail. In the absence of a legally recognized employer, coupled with the ineligibility of many platform workers from welfare and maternity supports for self-employed workers, platforms advance a neoliberal model of feminist "choice" in which responsibility for solving work–life conflict is further displaced down to the individual level of workers. At the same time, platforms also fail to challenge deeper gendered social constructions of care, which continue to position WLB as primarily about how to flexibilize women's paid work hours around an assumed female majority responsibility for unpaid domestic labor. In a few instances, some male partners of female participants in this study have adjusted their working arrangements to take up greater share of household care tasks, but in general dominant gender asymmetries remain or else are worsened as women crowdworkers are assumed to slot extra care tasks into their day because they are "at home".

With over 163 million platform workers worldwide, there are multiple possibilities for extending this research agenda. Comparative work–family studies are needed with larger cohorts of women across multiple crowdwork platforms, as they transition into and out of platform working and formal employment, and also with men using crowdwork platforms to combine paid work with increased childcare responsibilities. The comparison of work–family outcomes with non-profit platform cooperatives is also needed. Future research must also deepen the analysis of the WLB juggling tactics that women use to maintain algorithmic visibility, workflow, and platform income alongside personal childcare commitments. A vital aim, then, is to identify and encourage more progressive platform architectures, algorithmic designs, and user agreements, which offer workers meaningful opportunities for reconciling gig work and family in practice. As part of this, new research is needed to explore the prevalence of the gendered health outcomes documented here among much larger cohorts of workers spanning multiple platforms and platform types (crowdwork, microwork, geographically-tethered work) and to share best practice strategies for their amelioration at the levels of workers, families, urban infrastructures of care, and national gender welfare regimes. In the absence of national labor force datasets accurately documenting platform workers, innovative large-scale comparative work is also needed to document and compare women crowdworkers within and across national welfare regimes with different state provision of childcare support and legal protection for platform workers—also to include change over time. The exponential growth of the platform economy—and its opportunities and threats to raising the quality of women's work-lives—simply cannot be omitted from the next 4 decades of work–family research. As shown throughout this paper, there is too much at stake.

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Economic Geography (Cologne 2018). This research was funded by a British Academy Mid-Career Fellowship (2018–2019). For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available on request from the author.

ENDNOTES

[1] A lack of formal employee status means platforms bypass minimum wage protections, unemployment benefits, paid holiday leave, sick pay, parental leave, and pensions.

[2] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer of this paper for codifying this key point.

[3] Google scholar search (4 July 2022): Crowdwork 10,400, digital labor 2.2 M, gig work 212,000, gig economy 82,000, platform economy 2.5 M, sharing economy 4 M.

[4] Subsequent phases of fieldwork revisited these workers, alongside an additional cohort of new platform entrants during COVID, to yield a total 111 interviews with 79 women crowdworkers in the UK. These COVID experiences are explored in a larger monograph by the author.

[5] Participants multi-apped across 24 crowdwork platforms including: PeoplePerHour, TaskRabbit, Fiverr, Copify, Spare5, Part Timers, Freelancer, Appen, Tomedes, Upwork, YunoJuno, WeLikeToWork, WorkIt, TimeEtc, Guru, Consus, Upwork, Bark.com, WeWillWork, FreelancerNearMe, ByDay, Take Note, TeachersToYourHome, TutorHunt.

[6] To avoid workers tailoring their answers in favor of a higher task rating, and to even up lopsided power relations in the client/tasker relationship, all participants were given maximum feedback ratings regardless of interview quality.

[7] Following Duggan et al. (2020): A platform algorithm is a "computational formula that autonomously makes decisions based on statistical models or decision rules without explicit human intervention… a sequence of instructions telling a computer what to do within a set of precisely defined steps and rules designed to accomplish a task… Algorithms increasingly make decisions that have tended to be the remit of managers and HR professionals" (p. 119).

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