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Special Issue

Gender Gaps in Digital Labour Platforms

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## Article

# Socio-Labour Inclusion of Low-Income Women in the Digital Economy: A Comparison between Corporate and Cooperative Domestic Work Platforms

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**Abstract:** It is often argued that digital labour platforms entail an expansion of opportunities for women for several reasons. They facilitate the balance between paid work and household chores as a result of time flexibility, they eliminate entry and permanence barriers for typically male work sectors, they enable economic independence, and they favour the creation of professional networks. Several studies, however, have shown that the wage gap, the sexual division of labour, occupational segregation, and gender stereotypes still persist. Hence, to what extent do the new forms of labour mediated by digital platforms lead to an expansion of opportunities for women? This article analyses the socio-labour inclusion of low-income women in digital labour platforms by contrasting the model of corporate platforms against the emerging alternative of platform cooperatives. The movement of platform cooperativism advocates for the creation of platform companies based on democratic ownership and governance models that reduce inequalities in a broad sense. The methodological approach is based on the comparison of two platforms: Zolvers, which was founded in 2013 with headquarters in Argentina and which operates as an intermediary or marketplace between those who offer and those who require home cleaning services, and Up & Go, which was founded in 2017 in New York and is owned by six worker cooperatives that use the platform to offer various services on demand, particularly home cleaning services. Whereas Zolvers offers job opportunities with possibilities of formalisation but no guarantee of stability, Up & Go is owned and managed by worker cooperatives that seek to guarantee living wages for their worker-members. Concerning working conditions, Zolvers reproduces power asymmetries of domestic work, subordinating workers to the platform and the hirers. On the contrary, Up & Go empowers women workers to decide on their schedules and hirers, among other issues. Finally, whereas Zolvers does not enable the participation of workers either in governance or in technology design, the cooperative nature of Up & Go promotes their involvement.

**Keywords:** digital economy; platform cooperativism; gender inequality; intersectionality; Global South



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## 1. Introduction

Since the second decade of this century, within the framework of the digitalisation of the economy, a prolonged decrease in industrial profitability, and a growing emphasis on financialisation, capitalism has turned to data as a way to sustain economic growth, and platform companies are the kind of company that has emerged in this new reality (Srnicek 2018). These are digital infrastructures that allow interactions between different groups of users in the cloud. Based on users' profiles, activities, and interactions, platforms collect, analyse, and use an immense amount of data to train algorithms and give them a

competitive edge. Such an edge lies in concentrating on more users and data, i.e., generating “network effects”, giving rise to large monopolist and global companies.

The emergence of platform capitalism has brought about new forms of labour. Even though they represent income-generation opportunities for workers, they also pose several challenges and concerns (Del Bono 2020; Graham et al. 2017; Mourelo and Pereyra 2020). One of the main concerns is that the platforms offer precarious jobs, with forms of contracting that assume equality between the parties, disregarding the normative commitments typical of an employment relationship (Palomino 2020). In general, workers of these platforms lack paid vacations, leave, family allowance systems, and severance payments, and they are excluded from workers’ compensation and also lack union representation (Berg et al. 2019). Therefore, although workers are incorporated into platforms in the capacity of (micro)entrepreneurs, independent contractors, or freelancers, in fact, the business model relies on the precariousness and flexibility of labour conditions.

This issue calls for even more attention in Latin America, where labour informality and precariousness are long-standing. Additionally, migration flows over the past years have generated a large mass of unprotected migrant population, without access to the formal labour market. As a result, in many Latin American cities, digital labour platforms stand as the sole source of income for a large proportion of the population, for which access to formal labour has been historically and structurally limited. This situation explains the fast expansion of digital labour platforms in the Global South and the differences in the impact of this business model on Northern countries (Hidalgo Cordero and Salazar Daza 2020). Moreover, some platforms may worsen the precariousness of the migratory condition (Hunt and Machingura 2016; Scasserra and Partenio 2021; Van Doorn 2017). According to Fairwork’s ratings of gig economy platforms in South America, half or more of the platforms in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, and Paraguay score a 0 on a 0 to 10 scale, and Colombia is the sole exception with better-rated platforms (Fairwork 2022). The rating is based on five principles of fair work: fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management, and fair representation.<sup>1</sup> It is worth mentioning that, besides not meeting fairness measures, the ratings in these countries fall below the assessments carried out in other regions, such as Europe.

One other key aspect of these new forms of labour is the role played by algorithms, namely a series of operations that enable sorting and analysing a set of data to obtain accurate information and make decisions about a specific matter. In the platforms, work organisation is carried out by means of algorithms that assign and assess it based on users’ opinions and on monitoring workers’ activity. Such algorithmic panopticons (Köhler 2020) allow for the permanent surveillance and control of workers. As a consequence, rather than delivering promised autonomy, these platforms deepen heteronomy and subordination, along with discrimination and social inequalities. These challenges and concerns, as recommended by the ILO’s independent Global Commission on the Future of Work, can be addressed by an international governance system and a “human-in-command” approach to algorithmic management. Following these recommendations would allow labour platforms to provide more decent work opportunities (ILO 2021b). Given the lack of regulatory frameworks, there is an urgent need for technical innovation in the methods used by state agencies to exercise control, and for an appropriate regulatory design to steer employment on platforms towards the attainment of decent work (Ottaviano 2020).

Another response to this model of corporate platforms stems from platform cooperativism. This movement advocates for the creation of platform companies based on democratic ownership and governance models (Scholz 2016). A platform cooperative is “an enterprise that operates primarily through digital platforms for the interaction or the exchange of goods and/or services and that is structured in line with the International Cooperative Alliance Statement on the Cooperative Identity” (Mayo 2019, p. 4). Because forming cooperatives can encounter legal and political obstacles (Pentzien 2020), the core characteristic of these enterprises lies in their identity, regardless of the legal entity form they adopt (Mannan and Pek 2021). Even the degree to which technology is incorporated

can vary; there are tech-driven projects but also tech-enabled and low-tech ventures (Cohen 2018; CICOPA 2021). Moreover, there exist platform cooperatives, as well as cooperative-run platforms, where a platform is an add-on to the main operations of the business (Mannan and Pek 2021). According to the Platform Co-op Directory, there are 546 projects in 50 countries.<sup>2</sup>

Platform cooperativism aims to address job insecurity and to ensure transparent data management. Overall, the movement of platform cooperativism sets out to democratise the economy, i.e., to promote the autonomy and involvement of workers and to generate increasing levels of equality. Although precariousness and algorithms are crucial to understanding work in these platforms, gender is another key dimension that merits consideration regarding digital labour. Although gender analyses in the digital economy are abundant (Grau-Sarabia and Fuster-Morell 2021), there is a need for more exploration of the gender approach within the context of platform cooperativism (Salvagni et al. 2022).

This article analyses the socio-labour inclusion of low-income women in digital labour platforms by contrasting the model of corporate platforms against the emerging alternative of platform cooperatives. Gender-responsive studies on labour highlight the current inequalities and difficulties of women in achieving social inclusion by means of formal labour. They depict not only the wide gap between men and women in terms of labour market participation but also that unemployment and underemployment affect women in greater measure (Bustelo et al. 2020; ILO 2017). In this regard, the International Labour Organization has long acknowledged the significance of cooperatives in advancing the principles of decent work and gender equality (ILO 2022).

There is a widespread belief that the new forms of digital labour entail an expansion of opportunities for women for several reasons. They facilitate the balance between paid work and household chores as a result of time flexibility, they eliminate entry and permanence barriers for typically male work sectors, they improve working conditions in the informal sector, they enable economic independence, and due to the collaborative nature of platforms, they favour the creation of professional networks (Costhek Abílio 2020; Blanchard 2023; Bustelo et al. 2019).

Various studies, however, have shown that the wage gap, the sexual division of labour, occupational segregation, and gender stereotypes still persist, as digital platforms take advantage of inequalities of gender, race, and immigration status (Rodríguez-Modroño et al. 2022). First of all, men are 21% more likely to be online than women globally, rising to 52% in Least Developed Countries (Alliance for Affordable Internet 2021). As the organisations Development of Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) and IT for Change claim, platformisation has exacerbated the existing fault lines in the global economy, reinforced global gendered labour hierarchies, and intensified the immiseration of women small farmers, micro-entrepreneurs, and workers in the Global South (Gurumurthy et al. 2018). In Latin America, although women represent 40% of overall labour markets, their participation drops to 30% in the online platform segment (Ballesty and Albrieu 2023). The data retrieved by means of the After Access survey<sup>3</sup> in five countries of the region evidence that, although online tasks are the main activity for women and men, they have a greater incidence among women. These are followed by the purchase and delivery of household supplies and cleaning services, which are also greatly represented by women. On the other hand, work for cab service applications is mostly for men (Agüero et al. 2020). This situation reproduces the occupational segregation linking women to the domestic sphere, leaving the public sphere to men.

This division of labour also exposes women to mainly exercising tasks that require few or no qualifications and which are paid for less. However, the wage gap persists even when women and men provide the same service (Hawkins 2018; Partenio 2020) due to gender-based preferences, such as the speed at which they drive a vehicle or the lower learning pace of women, in comparison to men, stemming from the non-paid work overload falling on women (Cook et al. 2021; Gaskell 2018). Moreover, meeting algorithmic demands in terms of work rating and management is difficult for women who take on non-paid work,

leaving women at a disadvantage compared to men (Scasserra and Partenio 2021). This shows that “there has been a systematic lack of acknowledgement by labour platforms of the gendered labour of social reproduction, which has led to further informalisation of work and precarisation of marginalised women” (Rani et al. 2022, p. 428). These inequalities increase if we take into account a cross-sectional perspective, articulating class, race/ethnic, gender, and sexual orientation inequalities (Scasserra and Partenio 2021).

Hence, to what extent do the new forms of labour mediated by digital platforms lead to an expansion of opportunities for women? This paper contributes to this debate through a qualitative comparative analysis between a corporate and a cooperative domestic work platform, aiming to shed light on the potentials of the cooperative model to propel the socio-labour inclusion of low-income women. Although we question the essentialisation of gender roles, we selected these platforms because domestic work and home cleaning services are currently a paradigmatic source of labour for low-income women. We believe that this comparative study provides insights to reflect on the digitisation of a traditionally feminised service sector and the issues arising from platform labour, as well as teachings and contributions from the cooperative model to build a fairer digital economy.

In the following, the methodological strategy and the cases are described. Afterwards, the two cases are analysed according to four dimensions of socio-labour inclusion: economic inclusion, working conditions, governance, and digital technology. Finally, the paper concludes by outlining the main findings and teachings, as well as by reflecting on new research questions.

## 2. Materials and Methods

The research design is qualitative, and the methodological approach is based on the comparison of two platforms: Zolvers, which was founded in 2013 with headquarters in Argentina and which operates as an intermediary or marketplace between those who offer and those who require home cleaning services, and Up & Go, which was founded in 2017 in New York and is owned by six worker cooperatives that use the platform to offer various services on demand, particularly home cleaning services. Considering that the workforces of both Up & Go and Zolvers are mostly composed of women (with a smaller number of men), we sometimes use “women workers” throughout the paper when referring to the workforce of both platforms.

The selection of the cases was defined based on the following aspects. Regarding the corporate platform, Zolvers was selected because it is one of the main digital companies in the homecare and cleaning services field in the Latin American market, operating in four countries: Argentina, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico (Table 1). Particularly in Argentina, it has been operating for ten years and employs approximately 160,000 workers (Blanchard 2023, p. 47). Around 35% of these workers are migrants, mainly from neighbouring countries (Pereyra et al. 2023, p. 35).

**Table 1.** Main characteristics of Zolvers’ and Up & Go’s business models.

	Zolvers	Up & Go
Business	B2C	B2C
Geographical coverage	Argentina, Chile, Colombia and Mexico	New York City and Philadelphia
Service	Marketplace or digital intermediation between those who offer and those who require home cleaning services	Digital scheduling of on-demand home cleaning services provided by six cooperatives
Digital Technology	App and website	Website

Although corporate platforms have a significant impact on home-cleaning services (Blanchard 2023), cooperative experiences are fewer or at an earlier stage, especially in

Latin America. Against this backdrop, Up & Go was selected because it represents a paradigmatic and consolidated case of a home cleaning platform cooperative. It has been operational for six years, initially comprising three worker cooperatives. It has since grown to encompass six cooperatives and has recently expanded its coverage area, including Philadelphia (Table 1). Up & Go is composed of 44 workers who are mostly Latin American women immigrants. Hence, it accounts for global care chains involving the Global South and North (Pérez Orozco 2010).<sup>4</sup> Cooperatives have been identified as an appealing avenue for migrants, particularly newcomers, many of whom are undocumented, to gain access to work (Runyeon 2016, November 7). As a consequence, several democratically governed enterprises with migrant compositions have emerged in urban areas such as New York City, facilitated by state policies and non-profit organisations (Bransburg 2011; Kim and Flores 2022; Torres-Springer and Agarwal 2016; Wallace 2018). In summary, Up & Go, a platform cooperative with six years of operation and a path of growth, provides an excellent opportunity to examine the intersection of migration and class in the socio-labour inclusion of women. Regarding the comparison with Zolvers, although Up & Go may be smaller in scale, both platforms have achieved a level of consolidation within their respective ecosystems.

It is worth mentioning that relevant cooperative experiences have recently emerged in Latin America. One of them is Asoclim, a new Ecuadorian home cleaning platform organised by unionised workers. In 2022, it obtained one of the two best Fairwork scores in that country (Fairwork 2022). Although Asoclim may be a viable case for inclusion in this study, our focus is mostly on comparing platforms with similar degrees of consolidation, considering the duration of their presence in the market as a proxy.

The methodological strategy to approach the cases was based on a documentary analysis (Sá-Silva et al. 2009; Valles [1999] 2000) of different secondary sources. It involved the review and analysis of a bibliographic corpus composed of academic research, reports from international and local agencies and institutions, and journalistic news articles and reports, with the aim of recovering relevant data and information with regard to the questions posed by this work. The mentioned sources were combined with audiovisual materials about the cases available on the Internet. As a supplement, we explored and analysed the information available on the websites, blogs, and interfaces of each platform. This facilitated the combination and contrasting of relevant data (Valles [1999] 2000). We presented a preliminary approach to the problem in a previous essay (Kasparian et al. 2021).

To carry out the comparative analysis, we defined a set of dimensions concerning the socio-labour inclusion of women in these platforms and organised them into four clusters: economic inclusion, working conditions, governance, and digital technology. With regard to economic inclusion, we focused on access to ownership of the business, workers' remuneration, formalisation of work, and fees and type of platform intermediation. With respect to working conditions, we focused on access to tasks and jobs, working time flexibility, forms of control, and workers' recruitment and assessment. Regarding governance, we explored the forms of worker participation in decision making. Finally, in relation to digital technology, we observed who owns the platform and the data, the degree to which workers participate in the design of the digital platform, and whether its design takes into account their perspectives.

The dimensions were established with the purpose of analysing platforms within their two main promises, namely creating job opportunities and providing autonomy. Therefore, this study not only examines the economic inclusion propelled by these jobs but also the working conditions, participation in governance, and involvement in technology design in order to assess the extent to which autonomy is enabled by the platforms. Concerning these dimensions, some studies show that, although domestic work platforms may increase the transparency of payments, they do not necessarily improve working conditions (Fudge and Hobden 2018). Furthermore, they contribute to the formalisation of employment and, at the same time, create new forms of social media visibility and algorithmic control (Kampouri 2022). Moreover, research suggests that they tend to benefit customers and, hence, reinforce

the unequal power relations of traditional domestic work (Hunt and Machingura 2016). On the contrary, Fudge and Hobden (2018) argued that cooperatives can provide domestic workers with economies of scale, voice, and representation, and they help formalise their work relations and ensure labour and social security.

Our concept of socio-labour inclusion is nurtured by Gurumurthy and Ganapathy's (2023) concept of "substantive inclusion", understood as "inclusion that enables women's participation in the digital economy on terms that favour them" (p. 72). These authors claim that cooperatives and social-enterprise-led platforms are better able to foster this kind of inclusion because they are more responsive to the issues faced by women. Substantive inclusion requires reducing power asymmetries through socially embedded designs that seek to empower groups belonging to historically marginalised social locations, ethical intermediation that privileges fairness and equity, and equitable data value creation and distribution strategies. The dimensions selected in this study aim to contribute to discussing the forms that the inclusion of low-income women can take in domestic work platforms.

### 3. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1. Zolvers

Zolvers is a platform founded in 2013 with headquarters in Argentina and a presence in Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. This platform functions as an intermediary or marketplace between those who offer and those who require household cleaning services, as well as office cleaning services, care of the elderly, maintenance, and general home, electric, and gas repairs, among others.

Zolvers accounts for several improvements regarding platforms operating in Argentina in general (Blanchard 2023; Hopp and Kasparian 2021; Pereyra et al. 2023; Reygadas 2020). One of the positive aspects that is worth mentioning is the economic inclusion achieved by means of the promotion of labour formalisation of women working in private households. As per ILO (2021a) data, cleaning work in private households in Argentina involves approximately 1,300,000 women workers, out of which over 75% are employed in informal conditions. Research carried out by Pereyra et al. (2023) showed that the formalisation of job posts obtained by means of the platform reaches 40%, which is significantly higher than that of the sector as a whole (p. 41). As stated by other studies on the role of intermediaries in domestic work formalisation (Fudge and Hobden 2018), the platform fosters the fulfilment of legal obligations regarding labour relations, which is linked to greater access to labour rights. It is worth highlighting, however, that national labour regulations are key to assessing if and how platforms foster formalisation. In the case of Argentina, domestic work is governed by Law No. 26844, enacted in 2013.<sup>5</sup> This law acknowledges labour rights for domestic workers, who had long been marginalised.

The platform provides a series of incentives and facilities for the registration of women workers. Among them, the Zolvers Payments service, launched in 2017, allows employers to formalise workers by means of their registration before the national agency of social security, the payment of wages online and in automated manner, the payment of employers' contributions and those corresponding to the labour risk insurance company, the management and tracking of worked hours, extra hours and leave, and the printing of pay stubs. The platform provides free counselling for employers to support such processes.<sup>6</sup> Once they are registered, women workers can access free bank accounts, debit and credit cards, and other benefits. Moreover, studies have highlighted how easy it is to search and access jobs, allowing workers to obtain work and be integrated in a relatively fast manner (Pereyra et al. 2023). With regard to intermediation, the platform is solely the intermediary in the payments when using Zolvers Payments, and it charges a fee to the clients hiring the cleaning services only and not to the women workers. The range of this fee varies in terms of the type and number of hours of the service required (Zolvers 2022a).

However, even though the platform promotes labour registration, it lacks the capability to enforce regulations, and it does not refrain from offering the intermediary service to employers not formalising the work relation. Hence, Zolvers indicates on its website and

application that labour laws include the obligation to register the worker but that such registration is optional when using the platform, and it should be jointly agreed upon with the worker individually. This may be connected with the fact that the economic inclusion of women workers is part of a business strategy more than a social inclusion strategy from the perspective of rights. In this regard, Cecilia Retegui, the cofounder of Zolvers, pointed out that the business strategy is focused on the “base of the pyramid” (Diamante 2017). This perspective argues that, upon including social groups with the lowest income as customers, suppliers, or distributors, there is not only a generation of business opportunities but also a reduction in poverty. Because platforms rely on highly volatile markets and particularly on venture capital, providing socio-labour inclusion for low-income women in the long term seems unlikely.

Regarding working conditions, Zolvers is among platforms that establish less dependency and control over women workers in Argentina (Madariaga et al. 2019). For instance, as pointed out by Reygadas (2020), the workers do not need to stay connected to the platform interface continuously during a work shift. Additionally, the platform gives them more visibility to access jobs. The flexibility to select and accept jobs is another favourable aspect, as it offers possibilities to determine work shifts in accordance with the specific needs of each worker. Despite these improvements in the working conditions of women in this sector (Madariaga et al. 2019; Reygadas 2020), several limitations have been identified (Hopp and Kasparian 2021; Pereyra et al. 2023).

The platform reproduces inequality in negotiations between women workers and employers, which is inherent to the sector, throughout the entire process. Firstly, Zolvers intervenes in the initial contact between each employer and employee, and after that, negotiations about wages, tasks, and working conditions are carried out individually. In the event of disagreements, women workers may contact the platform and request information, but in general, the platform does not mediate in labour relations and it does not ensure stability or working conditions (Pereyra et al. 2023).

Second, the recruitment process deepens the mentioned asymmetries. This includes the compiling of personal data, the recording of documentation images, and the confirmation of work experience and references from previous jobs. In addition, employers may leave public feedback and recommendations regarding the women workers. All this information is provided to the employer when selecting a profile. Therefore, they may accept it and begin contact, or they may reject it and request another profile. In contrast, the platform does not carry out the same selection process among those wishing to hire its services, and women workers lack background information about their employers' characteristics.

Third, once contracting is agreed upon, it is possible to “change” the “Zolver”—which is what the platform calls employees—up to four times if it is deemed that they fail to meet the requirements, and finally, it is possible to request a refund (Zolvers 2022b). Employers have a 30-day “satisfaction guarantee”, during which they may submit a claim with the reasons of disconformity, which may include absenteeism, a breach of the requested requirements, unavailability in the shift, and workers' lack of ethics or morale (Zolvers 2015). If approved, the platform contacts the hirer to learn about the causes in detail and reactivate the request to assign another worker. If there is another disconformity issue, the downpayment is refunded. In contrast, workers have greater difficulties in ending the work relation or in unassigning a job because they may get penalised (Zolvers 2023a). In the case that a client changes the service conditions (number of hours, days, and/or place), workers are able to cancel the job if they cannot meet the new parameters, but they must notify the platform so that they may contact the client and validate information to avoid affecting their profile (Zolvers 2023c).

Finally, Zolvers has a rating and reputation system. In agreement with the conditions and the behaviour policy of the platform (Zolvers 2023b), the reputation of each worker depends on the jobs performed and the ratings given by clients. As the services fulfilled and positive ratings received increase, the score on the worker's profile also increases, whereas negative ratings, the rejection of already assigned jobs, absences, or unfulfilment



of assumed commitments decrease this score.<sup>7</sup> Zolvers does not show new postings to workers with low reputations, and it may even deactivate them without a reactivation commitment. Being subject to the rating system reduces the ability of workers to determine the organisation of their own work and increases their subordination to the interface and platform algorithms (Köhler 2020; O'Neil 2016; Scasserra 2018). Moreover, as pointed out by Scasserra and Partenio (2021), for workers that undertake care-giving tasks, the fulfilment of reputation policy requirements becomes particularly difficult. These aspects strain the argument that the flexibility of the platform model facilitates greater levels of autonomy for workers and more possibilities to balance paid work with home care chores (Bustelo et al. 2019).

On the other hand, employers do not face similar or equal validation and qualification conditions, given that women workers do not have the option to leave feedback or ratings that may affect the reputation of clients. This leaves room for different arbitrary, biased, and discriminatory actions by employers. As previously pointed out, this kind of system reproduces the discriminatory structures that are inherent to domestic work (Blanchard 2023; Fudge and Hobden 2018). In relation to these issues, a study that focused on domestic work platforms in Argentina proposed a series of recommendations, such as including the possibility for workers to rate their employers to improve working conditions and enhancing communication between the company, workers, and employers (Pereyra et al. 2023, pp. 65–68).

Concerning governance, the platform does not enable a means of participation for workers. As pointed out in the recommendations of Pereyra et al. (2023), even communication between the company and the workers needs to be enhanced. This initial step could serve as a starting point for progressing towards increased participation of women workers. Lastly, with regard to technology, like most corporate platforms, Zolvers owns the data that enable the selection of workers and the data generated with the use of the digital interface. Moreover, as mentioned, it monitors the different aspects of the work process by controlling assignments, workers' activity, and the rating system. In contrast, the technology's design does not allow workers to select or evaluate hirers, nor does it protect them against arbitrariness.

As a result, in accordance with Hopp and Kasparian's (2021) findings, we argue that the position of workers is subordinated both regarding the hirers as well as the labour intermediation platform. Although there have been improvements in economic inclusion and working conditions for domestic workers, it is important to address the power imbalance between workers and hirers in order to promote fairer working conditions. Additionally, governance structures should incorporate democratic mechanisms that allow for the inclusion of workers' voices. Furthermore, technology should be designed not only to meet the needs of clients but also to provide benefits for workers. Undertaking these actions would contribute to ensuring socio-labour inclusion that reduces power asymmetries, as pointed out by Gurumurthy and Ganapathy (2023).

### 3.2. Up & Go

Up & Go is a platform cooperative that provides professional services for household and office cleaning and manual work, such as moving services and pet grooming and walking. The platform allows users to request such services on demand. With headquarters in the city of New York, it is operational in Queens, Manhattan, the Bronx, Brooklyn, Staten Island, and Philadelphia. It was founded in 2017 from the initiative and funding of non-profits working with the promotion of cooperatives and poverty-derived problems, together with three cleaning cooperatives, after which three additional cooperatives joined. Up & Go is composed of 44 workers who are mostly Latin American women immigrants (Novick 2018, August 8; Pereira 2022).

The composition of migrant women members is key to the identity of the cooperatives comprising Up & Go and is a specific concern of the institutions collaborating in the project. The Center for Family Life of Brooklyn (CFL) is a non-profit organisation dedicated to pro-

viding family and social services that facilitated the establishment of the cooperatives, and it coordinates the Up & Go initiative. This organisation operates mainly in a low-income neighbourhood with a significant migrant population from Puerto Rico, Central America, and South America (Bransburg 2011; Wallace 2018). Emma Yorra from the CFL asserts that the foundation considers the promotion of cooperatives “as a way to provide work opportunities that pay living wages and offer dignified working conditions to long-term immigrants” (Platform Cooperativism 2015, November 13). Through a grant, the Robin Hood Foundation partnered with the CFL to create the platform cooperative. This organisation, which aims to reduce poverty in New York City, addresses the relationship between ethnicity, race, and poverty in its projects (Robin Hood Foundation n.d.).<sup>8</sup> Therefore, Up & Go is primarily composed of cooperatives of immigrant women from various countries, including Mexico, the Dominican Republic, and Bangladesh (Bader 2010; Novick 2018, August 8).

This platform cooperative has several characteristics contrasting the corporate model. Up & Go is structured by means of democratic management and a collective ownership model in which women workers of the cooperatives are co-owners of the platform. This not only implies economic inclusion but also key changes in platform governance. As opposed to Zolvers, which lacks mechanisms for workers’ participation, at Up & Go, the members are part of decision making regarding all aspects of the development and operation of the platform and work organisation. This scheme also implies the nonexistence of intermediation between those requesting the service and the women workers. Up & Go promotes significant advancements concerning workers’ status. As highlighted by the cooperative members themselves, “It gives me a feeling of dignity to finally have other people to see us as we see ourselves: professionals providing a valuable service. As a member of my cooperative business and Up & Go, I am not only a professional house cleaner, but also an accountant, a marketing strategist, and a business owner”. (Dominguez 2018, March 8).

With respect to economic inclusion, the business model of Up & Go prioritises the professionalisation of the cleaning service and the maintenance of wages and fair working conditions. This is reflected in the fee scheme and the appropriation and use of income. As indicated on their website, 95% of the price that is charged is destined for workers’ salaries, and the remaining 5% is allocated to the maintenance of the digital infrastructure. This contrasts corporate platforms dedicated to cleaning services, in which workers usually obtain only between 50% and 25% of the fee (Haas 2020). In this regard, the cooperative opts for prioritising wages instead of allocating funds to technology development, for instance, to extract economic profit from the use of data. The fees for services are decided and debated upon by the women workers, and the wage amounts and updates are collectively established. In this way, individual negotiations between workers and employers that are typical of Zolvers are avoided, guaranteeing a base pay. Moreover, as argued by Fudge and Hobden (2018), the fact that the women workers manage the platform means there are greater securities that those hiring the services will abide by the terms of employment and the agreed working conditions. However, when assessing economic inclusion and long-term sustainability, two market challenges should be highlighted: funding and competition.

In terms of funding, platform projects require economic resources for the launch, development, and maintenance of the technology, and for operating costs. Corporate platforms typically rely on venture capital, and the cooperative sector tends to seek support from foundations and governments (Bunders et al. 2022; Scholz 2022). Opinions are divided on whether cooperative enterprises should forego one source or another (Coca 2017, August 28; Thompson 2019, April 22). Among the advantages of obtaining funds from organisations and governments, it can be mentioned that there is a lack of dependence on short-term profit maximisation objectives, usually contrary to workers’ wages. However, the opposite argument argues that the reliance on grants from foundations contradicts the goal of achieving financial independence in the long term. Reflecting on the data management of the cooperative may open potential avenues for generating additional

income that enhance wages, provide autonomy, and, at the same time, contribute to public or community initiatives pertaining to data.

With respect to competition, the platform model relies on network effects to create monopolies. This poses a difficult scenario for cooperative experiences to thrive. However, digital infrastructures also facilitate innovative and collaborative marketing tactics that have broadened the scope of client outreach for associated workers. As the General Manager of the Cooperative Cleaning of New York asserts, “We can’t compete, not individually, and Up & Go brings us all to that ability and level to do that. It’s a stepping stone.” (Cited in [Rosenblum 2017](#), June 6). Platform cooperatives do not scale like corporate platforms; they scale by creating networks of companies that eventually compete against large companies ([Kasparian 2022](#); [Scholz 2022](#)). This entails two challenges: firstly, maintaining cooperative values and principles while expanding. In large-scale structures, democratic participation and a sense of belonging, among other concerns, may be overlooked.

Appealing to a specific kind of customer, a conscious consumer, at least during the initial stages of the experience, is the second challenge. Unlike corporate platforms that compete on the basis of costs and coverage capacity, Up & Go appeals to other values. On the one hand, it offers a service that provides social benefits and complies with fair working conditions. Hence, higher costs for clients are explained by the values of transparency and honest prices. On the other hand, the quality of the services is also highlighted. In contrast to the strategies of corporate companies that tend to be based on individual qualifications and worker rankings ([Zundl and van der Meulen Rodgers 2021](#)), as shown by Zolvers, the aim is to generate trust by communicating the professionalism of the cooperatives, the experience and training of their workers, the local and friendly nature of the experience, and the close relationship that allows for clear agreements.

Nevertheless, it is imperative to acknowledge the necessity of evaluating the sustainability of the platform model in general. In the context of platform capitalism, the pursuit of profit is heavily reliant on cost reduction, hence compromising the objective of upholding equitable working conditions, a key focus of cooperatives. However, even reducing costs may not be enough; there are concerns over the capacity of corporate platforms, especially labour platforms, to maintain long-term sustainability ([Srnicek 2018](#)). On the contrary, specific elements of the cooperative model have the potential to facilitate sustainability ([Coca 2017](#), August 28). For instance, worker ownership fosters motivations for the long-term viability and expansion of the business, as well as for the establishment of networks within the cooperative ecosystem, as evidenced by the case of Up & Go. Furthermore, it is important to consider that the viability of cooperatives is also dependent upon legal and regulatory frameworks, which frequently prove to be inadequate, insufficient, or less advanced in comparison to those regulating corporate companies.

In terms of working conditions, this cooperative platform gives greater control to women workers over the organisation of work shifts and the stability of job positions. This occurs because jobs are distributed to guarantee stability and regularity of income, according to the availability of members. Moreover, they can request sick leave without the risk of losing their job. Thus, they enjoy greater security and more possibilities to adjust employment to their individual needs and care tasks.

The Up & Go model allows for the reduction in inequalities between workers and those hiring their services. Additionally, the collective determination of wages and the elimination of the intermediary figure, upon initiating the request, employers must provide a series of data regarding the working conditions and the required tasks. Upon requesting a service, details about location size, the provision of work supplies, job characteristics, and tasks to be performed are required. Then, workers receive this information and decide whether to accept or reject the job ([Cannon et al. 2020](#)).

The platform does not have or use an individual rating and reputation system for workers. Those who hire the services lack the option to score or make comments about individual workers; they can only rate the service of Up & Go. They have a system for reviewing quality and assessing customer satisfaction which, even though it considers their

comments and claims, protects workers in the case of arbitrary situations. Hence, how does Up & Go deploy internal dynamics that guarantee a quality service?

As indicated in the service policy of Up & Go that is available on the website, they have two mechanisms to document that the work has been properly performed: taking pictures of the spaces after completing the service and, if the customer does not authorise this action, asking them to complete a brief form confirming their satisfaction with the cleaning service. In the case that employers are not satisfied or have concerns, they have a 48 h turnaround time to notify Up & Go by means of a form. The review of each submitted claim is performed on a case-by-case basis, and settlement is based on the criteria and standards fixed by the workers collective of Up & Go. The settlement of claims prioritises safeguarding wages; hence, it does not include a refund for completed works. In this manner, Up & Go is involved in the entire process of the assessment and resolution of problems, so balanced mediation is ensured, reducing asymmetries between employers and workers.

In contrast to the corporate platform, functions that are delegated to the algorithmic and rating systems, such as the assignment of tasks and services, are reclaimed by the women workers of Up & Go, given that they are the ones who distribute and organise their own work in terms of their criteria and needs. The workers' control over the platform provides greater autonomy and influence over the work dynamics. As the founder of one of the cooperatives involved in Up & Go pointed out in an interview, "We can choose our own schedules, determine the prices, deal professionally with clients. The clients know that we're not just a worker, we're an owner" (Novick 2018, August 8).

Another noteworthy aspect regarding democratic governance of the platform lies in the collective nature of the platform cooperative, which favours the creation of an environment for meeting and sharing (Fuster-Morell et al. 2021; Around the world.coop 2020). In this way, the cooperative proposal appeals to a collective construction, which disrupts the idea of individual progress and the entrepreneurship logic inherent to platform capitalism. Corporate platforms tend to fragment the labour force and fail to facilitate meeting and communication spaces. In contrast, the model of the cooperative organisation and operation of Up & Go is based on democratic processes, which allow women workers to establish contact between them and the different organisations involved, enabling the exchange of resources and knowledge, the deployment of joint strategies, and the creation of networks and alliances with the cooperative ecosystem (Wallace 2018). Also, Up & Go is in a permanent exchange with other cooperatives located in the city of New York. This is especially important, given that, as posed by Bunders et al. (2022), institutional and organisational support is a key aspect of platform cooperatives' feasibility in general and of those linked with the cleaning and care sector in particular (p. 6).

Lastly, the intellectual property of the software is owned together (Scholz 2022). The use given to technology ensures the incorporation of the workers' interests. The technology cooperative CoLab Cooperative developed the application. The involvement of the three founding cooperatives from the beginning has guaranteed that the software developed by the technology cooperative contains the criteria, values, and needs of the members (Crow Expedition 2018). For instance, the application draws attention to the collective trajectories of organisations instead of presenting individual profiles of workers like the corporate platforms. Additionally, the implementation of the platform has made it easier for non-native English-speaking cleaners to overcome language barriers without giving up power. As noted by some Up & Go worker-owners, language-related difficulties used to curtail opportunities for expanding and developing their work (Dominguez 2018, March 8). The technological platform has allowed for the streamlined organisation of work and efficient communication with clients through the ability to hire, request services, and pay fees set by the cleaning workers themselves on the platform. Following Salvagni et al. (2022), the participation of women workers in all stages of the cycle is a distinctive aspect in the construction of platforms based on design justice, which implies "incorporating

equality of class, gender, race and sexuality into the design of platforms and not only in the work organisation" (p. 713).

In summary, as opposed to the individual strategy proposed by the labour intermediation platform Zolvers, Up & Go guarantees work stability and increases workers' share in the fee, positioning them in a stance of greater autonomy and self-esteem from where they themselves can make decisions. Therefore, being part of a cooperative and joining Up & Go, in addition to guaranteeing decent work and fair wages, has allowed them to participate in all the roles involved in the development of the project, gaining different skills, from the design of the application and the acquisition of its ownership to business and marketing strategies (Table 2). In this way, the management of the cleaning cooperatives and the platform cooperative that they run together inter-cooperatively grants labour insertion to women and generates empowerment. This is particularly relevant for this demographic group and for a sector characterised by precariousness, low income, arbitrary employers, and discrimination (Scholz 2018). In this case, technology seeks to include historically marginalised social groups (Gurumurthy and Ganapathy 2023).

**Table 2.** Summary of the comparison between Zolvers and Up & Go.

Dimensions	Zolvers	Up & Go
Economic Inclusion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fosters labour registration.</li> <li>• Low intermediation.</li> <li>• Charges only applied to customers.</li> <li>• Low barriers to accessing employment.</li> <li>• Lacks the capability to enforce regulations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperatives own the business.</li> <li>• No intermediation.</li> <li>• 95% of the fee is destined for workers.</li> <li>• Guaranteed access to a minimum income.</li> <li>• Market challenges: funding and competition.</li> </ul>
Working Conditions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low dependence and control.</li> <li>• Time flexibility.</li> <li>• Subordination to hirer and platform: individual negotiations, finalisation of work relations, recruitment, and rating and reputation systems.</li> <li>• Algorithmic assignment of work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time flexibility with security.</li> <li>• Paid sick leave.</li> <li>• Lower subordination to the hirer: cooperatives establish prices, intervene in work relations, obtain information to select hirers and jobs, and no individual rating and reputation systems.</li> <li>• Human assignment of work.</li> </ul>
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No participation of workers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cooperatives make decisions.</li> <li>• Networks with other organisations.</li> </ul>
Digital Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zolvers owns data.</li> <li>• Technology does not allow workers to select or evaluate hirers, nor does it protect them from arbitrariness.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The intellectual property of the software is owned together.</li> <li>• Participation of cooperatives in technology design.</li> <li>• Inclusion of workers' perspectives; collective trajectories on website.</li> </ul>

As emphasised by scholarly research in the cooperative field (Rebón and Kasparian 2020; Scholz 2016), when evaluating the success of cooperatives, it is crucial to account for their social impact. In light of the expansion of platform capitalism and the increase in labour precariousness, these experiences offer alternatives that prioritise the welfare of workers and communities. Up & Go has not only remained operational but has also expanded its member cooperatives and coverage area since its creation. Thus, this case serves as an example that is suitable for replication and enables the sharing of resources and knowledge to foster the inclusion and growth of other similar projects, contributing to strengthening the cooperative ecosystem and, at the same time, to a more equitable digital economy.

However, it should be mentioned that Up & Go is an experience harbouring a few more than 40 women workers, in contrast to a company that provides job opportunities to over 100,000 women, like Zolvers. In this regard, several challenges have been analysed concerning the scope and sustainability of the experience in the context of the digital

economy: funding and (in)dependence, market competition and scale, and cooperative identity and customer policies. At present, one of the most pressing challenges of platform cooperativism lies in the development of organisation, technology, and business models that enable sustainability and an increase in social empowerment experiences. The case of Up & Go provides suggestive avenues for advancing in this direction.

#### 4. Conclusions

Over the last years, the gender perspective has gained attention in the analysis of the digital economy. This article seeks to contribute to this line of research based on the comparison between a corporate platform and a cooperative in the field of domestic work regarding socio-labour inclusion offered to low-income women workers.

Our analysis examines the extent to which corporate platforms deliver on their promises of job opportunities and autonomy, as well as the alternatives and contributions that the cooperative platform model offers to create equitable and fair forms of work. In order to do this, we focus on the dimensions of not only economic inclusion but also the working conditions, governance, and technology design of the two platforms.

Although Zolvers provides economic inclusion, i.e., job opportunities with a greater formalisation rate, together with other studies, we deem that the cooperative avenue constitutes a feasible option for women to improve their working conditions and living standards by means of economic and political participation. The example of Up & Go illustrates how cooperativism and the social and solidarity economies advance on collective solutions to address the issue of low-income women's socio-labour inclusion, as well as to develop wider social change strategies. By means of the participation of women in governance and technology design, this cooperative challenges gender stereotypes, the sexual division of labour, and technological arrangements that seek to individualise work. Therefore, this experience highlights the critical importance of considering inclusion from a social and rights-based perspective, rather than simply a business strategy component.

Up & Go also shows that the cooperative framing of platforms allows them to adjust to workers' needs and not the other way around. However, it is worth clarifying that the possibility of balancing paid work with household chores should not disregard the need to rethink care in our societies and design social systems of care that de-familiarise and de-feminise them. On top of this, although it should be noted that the gender assignment of positions in the labour market is not modified in this case, we believe that this change cannot be hoped for on an individual case scale. On the contrary, public policies involving states, institutions, and organisations must be developed to broaden women's job opportunities outside typical reproductive tasks in the public sphere.

The creation of a cooperative platform also brings about a new way of managing data: The work dynamics do not resort to algorithms to control and penalise workers, as is the case in corporate platforms. The need for human beings to reclaim functions delegated to algorithms is assumed in order to achieve the transparent management of data. In fact, the platform does not organise work by means of algorithms, but it opts for human work. This human audit enables a conscious task of re-educating algorithms and eliminating biases, such as, among others, gender biases. Experiences such as that of Up & Go, in which migrant, low-income women workers intervene in the process of technology design, constitute decisive steps towards the progressive reversion of such marginalisation.

In summary, the Up & Go experience shows the potential for establishing an alternative model based on democratic ownership and a governance structure that facilitates women's labour and social inclusion. Additionally, this cooperative provides valuable insights for corporate enterprises to improve women workers' labour conditions and increase their participation. These platforms can develop participative mechanisms to enhance women's involvement in how the platforms manage their working conditions. These can contribute to the creation of a more equitable digital economy.

Finally, future research should address the limitations posed by this study. Firstly, research delving into the internal dynamics in the interaction of the six cooperatives

comprising Up & Go can shed light on the challenges that cooperative governance entails and, hence, on the relatively less-explored relation between gender equality and democratic governance structures. Second, the technology design and data management of both models should be further analysed with detailed data. Teachings from a deeper understanding of the technological dimension of Up & Go and the process of women's participation in its design can inform the design of policies directed at enhancing gender equality in domestic work mediated by platforms.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Each principle is divided into two thresholds. For each principle, the scoring system allows the first point to be awarded when meeting the first threshold and an additional second point when meeting the second threshold. A platform can therefore receive a maximum Fairwork score of ten points. For a fuller account of the methodology, see <https://fair.work/en/fw/methodology/> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- <sup>2</sup> To explore the projects' details, see <https://directory.platform.coop/#14.77/-40.66842/-46.83338> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- <sup>3</sup> The After Access surveys are part of a global initiative that collects information on ICT access and use in the Global South. In 2017–2018, they were conducted in Latin America and collected information from roughly 1500 households and individuals in Argentina, Colombia, Guatemala, Paraguay, and Peru (After Access 2018).
- <sup>4</sup> According to Zundl and van der Meulen Rodgers (2021), 92% of domestic employment in the United States comprises women, and one third of the total workforce comprises migrant populations. These values represent a much higher range than that in other occupations in the country (p. 1).
- <sup>5</sup> Law No. 26844 “Special Regime for Work Contracts for Private Household Personnel”. Available at <http://servicios.infoleg.gob.ar/infolegInternet/anexos/210000-214999/210489/norma.htm> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- <sup>6</sup> In its website, there is also information regarding labour regulations for domestic work: <http://blog.zolvers.com/todo-empleadas-domesticas-argentina/> (accessed on 15 July 2023).
- <sup>7</sup> Zolvers' behaviour policy lists a series of events that automatically affect workers' scores and that may result in the deactivation of their accounts: to be absent in a confirmed job, to not communicate with the client after confirming a job, to cancel a job because it is far away from their home, to cancel a service with little advance notice, to accept several assignments for any reason, to receive negative ratings from clients, and to confirm a job without meeting the requirements (Zolvers 2023a).
- <sup>8</sup> The British bank Barclays and the Robin Hood Foundation funded the platform cooperative.

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