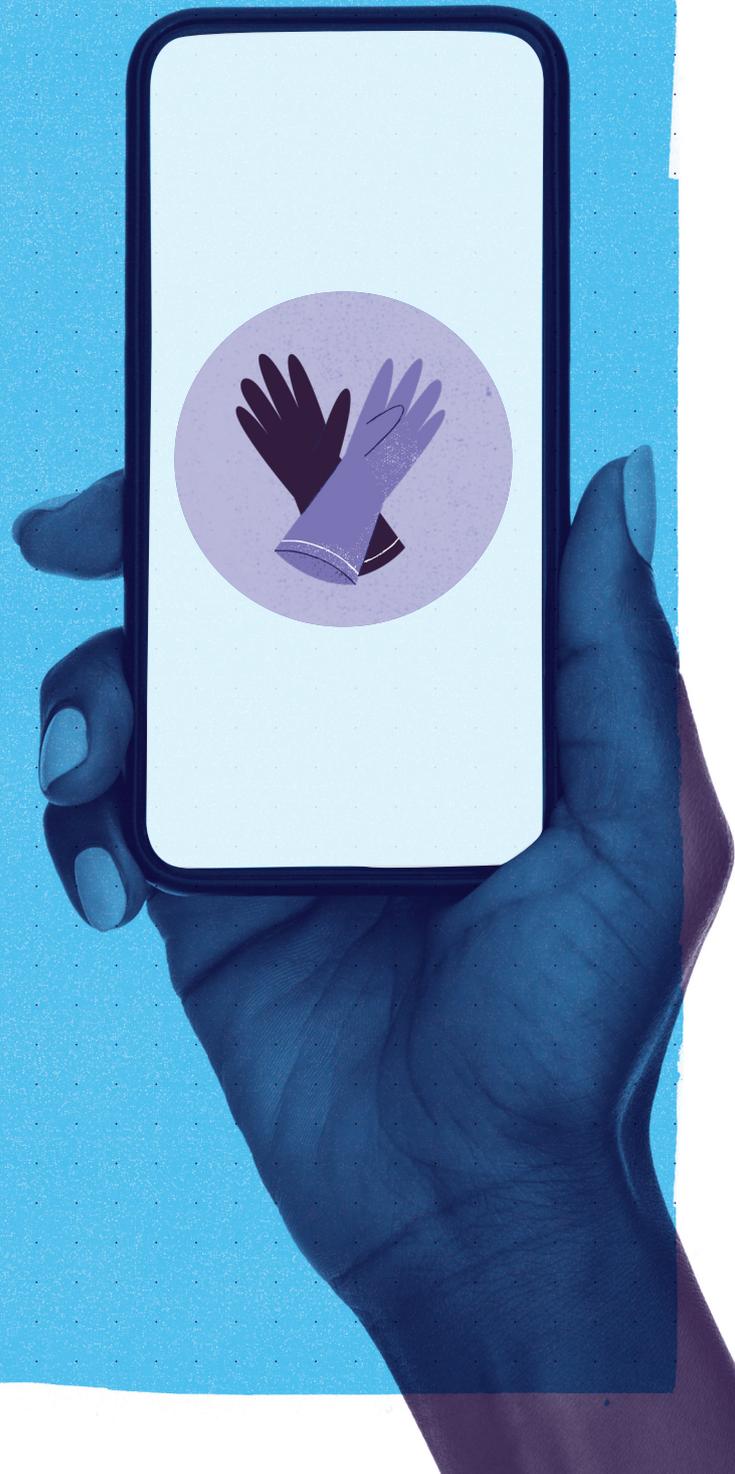


Fairwork

DOMESTIC PLATFORM WORK

Middle East and North Africa



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Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the domestic service sector in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and identify challenges and problems regarding the working and living conditions of domestic workers, with a focus on specific challenges for women and migrants in this sector of the economy.

By attempting to answer the question: “Can the introduction of digital labour platforms improve working conditions in the domestic work sector?”, this study provides an analysis of the socio-economic context for this work and describes the development of digital labour platforms and their impact on employment and working conditions in the sector. By shedding light on these conditions within a highly invisible and informal sector, the study aims at impacting policy and platform managers. This is the motivation for our work on assessing fair working conditions in domestic platforms and its challenges, working towards setting decent work standards for domestic workers in MENA.

Finally, the report provides evidence-based takeaways from fieldwork on fair working conditions in the digital labour platforms in the domestic work sector in Tunisia and Turkey.¹ It is important to note that this report offers a general overview of the issues relevant to domestic platform work in the MENA region as a whole, it does not claim to offer exhaustive coverage of all the pertaining issues. In this vein, the evidence collected from platforms in Tunisia and Turkey is meant to be illustrative and explorative.

The report is divided into five sections. The introduction defines the region, the domestic platform economy under study, and explains the research. The second section examines the socio-economic context of domestic platform work in the MENA region, with a focus on female and migrant workers in the region, especially in the post-pandemic context in which women bear the brunt of paid and unpaid care work. The third section briefly describes the legal and policy landscape surrounding domestic work

in the region. The fourth section provides an analysis of the challenges encountered by domestic platform workers, and the final section five concludes with proposed ways forward to improve conditions for these workers.

This report covers the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, with special emphasis on Turkey and Tunisia. Despite being grouped into one region, MENA countries are not homogeneous in nature. While there are certainly similarities in their general political and cultural contexts, the region’s countries also embody significant differences, notably in their economic environment due to the variety of their natural and human resources. This ultimately impacts the skill composition and potential of each country’s domestic labour, which impacts the overall economic performance of these countries.

When attempting to group parts of the region together, we follow the World Bank classification and cluster the region according to the availability of natural resources and population size. First the high-income, resource-rich, labour-importing countries with a high percentage of expatriates, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. Next are the middle-income, labour-abundant countries, that have varying resource levels (some are resource-rich, like Algeria, while others are resource-poor, such as Lebanon, Egypt and Tunisia). Third, are the low-income countries; some of which are resource-rich and labour abundant but also suffering from political instability, such as Syria and Yemen, and others of which are resource-poor, such as Palestine and Mauritania.²

Domestic Platform Work Defined

Domestic Work

Domestic work is defined in this report as services provided by individuals in the home. Examples include, but are not limited to, cleaning, babysitting, caring for the elderly, gardening and cooking. For this study, we adopt the International Labour Organization (ILO) definition of domestic work, that is, “any work performed in or for a household... Employees may work for one or multiple households on an hourly or daily basis, and the definition is inclusive of both part-time and full-time, and live-in and live-out workers”.³

The ILO estimates that 19 per cent of the world’s domestic workers live in the Arab States.⁴ In the GCC countries of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and also in the Arab States of Jordan and Lebanon, 2.1 million people are engaged in domestic work.⁵ In Egypt, there were around 457,000 domestic workers in 2018, according to estimates by labour force surveys.⁶ In reality, the figures could be higher. Turkish trade unions organising domestic workers have reported that the number of domestic workers in Turkey exceeds one million.⁷

Globally, the domestic work sector is female-dominated, and thus embodies gender and migration-related nuances, among other issues. Domestic work in the MENA region is also dominated by women, many of whom are migrants. Women’s domestic work in the platform economy is part of a larger context of layered complexities related to women’s work, migration, education, and digital connectivity. These take place in a larger framework of informality and embedded gender norms that disadvantage women, furthered by an unfavourable legal and policy environment. The COVID-19 pandemic unveiled many of these difficulties, especially the prevalence of the paid and unpaid care work shouldered by women.

Platform Work

While this report provides background on domestic work

in general, our research is focused on domestic work in the platform economy mediated through digital labour platforms. A digital labour platform “is a company that mediates and facilitates labour exchange between different users, such as businesses, workers and consumers”.⁸

In this report, we focus solely on “geographically-tethered” digital labour platforms⁹ which require workers to be in a specific location to work (for example, delivery and ride-hailing, as well as domestic work, such as cleaning, care work etc.).

Domestic work in the Platform Economy

The domestic platform work we focus on in this report includes services such as cleaning and childcare. The sector is growing, with 28 domestic work platforms operating worldwide in 2010, rising to 224 in 2020.¹⁰ While the nature of the work, the stigma surrounding it, and the dangers of working in a stranger’s home remain unchanged, involving a digital labour platform between the worker and the client has introduced certain advantages to workers in the sector.

The platforms “broke down the physical barriers and aggregated workers”.¹¹ While previously, domestic workers had to rely on word-of-mouth or go “door to door”¹² to find customers (with all the precarity and risk that entails), now the matching of supply and demand facilitated by platforms makes the whole process significantly safer and easier, for the most part.

That said, the introduction of digital labour platforms into the domestic work model does not erase the multiple problematic features that characterise this sector, including “a lack of guaranteed hourly rates, unpaid travel costs, lower rates for domestic and cleaning work and the segmentation of women into these roles”.¹³ These conditions hinder the potential advantages that platforms could introduce into the sector and perpetuate the stigma that devalues the essential work done by domestic workers.

Assessing the quality of labour on domestic work platforms – the Fairwork approach

This report focuses on the platform economy in the field of domestic work in the MENA region following the Fairwork approach. Fairwork evaluates the working conditions of digital labour platforms and ranks them on how well they do. Ultimately, the goal is to show that better, and fairer, jobs are possible in the platform economy.

To do this, Fairwork uses five principles that digital labour platforms should ensure to be considered as offering ‘fair work’: fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management, and fair representation. The five Fairwork principles were developed through an extensive literature review of published research on job quality, stakeholder meetings in Geneva (involving platform operators, policymakers, trade unions, and academics), and in-country meetings with local stakeholders.

Further details on the thresholds for each principle, and the criteria used to assess the collected evidence to score platforms can be found in the Appendix.

For this study, after identifying twenty-five domestic work platforms operating in the MENA region through desk research, the team held a series of consultative meetings with subject matter experts in several countries¹⁴. Due to the sensitive nature of the research as well as travel restrictions due to COVID-19, successful completion

of fieldwork was not feasible in GCC countries. Of the remaining countries surveyed, we were able to secure partners in Tunisia and Turkey.

Following the Fairwork methodology, desk research reviewing the landscape of domestic platform work was supplemented by fieldwork in Tunisia and Turkey. Seven domestic work platforms¹⁵ were surveyed through worker and manager interviews¹⁶. Worker interviews allowed us to understand the workers’ experience working for the platform through the lens of Fairwork’s five principles. Manager interviews provided insights into how the surveyed platforms operate and provided us with evidence that, supplemented by the desk research and workers’ responses, allowed us to award each platform a score out of ten. Each score was then peer-reviewed by our team, Fairwork’s central team at the Oxford Internet Institute and the Berlin Social Science Center (WZB), and reviewers from other country teams.



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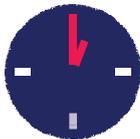
STEP 1

The five principles



Fair Pay

Workers, irrespective of their employment classification, should earn a decent income after taking account of work-related costs and active hours worked. We assess earnings according to the mandated minimum wage in the home jurisdiction, as well as the current living wage.



Fair Conditions

Platforms should have policies in place to protect workers from foundational risks arising from the processes of work. They should take proactive measures to protect and promote the health and safety of workers, including compensation for workers who are unable to work due to sickness or injury.



Fair Contracts

Terms and conditions should be accessible, readable and comprehensible. The party contracting with the worker must be subject to local law and must be identified in the contract. Workers should be notified of proposed changes in a reasonable timeframe before changes come into effect. The contract should be free of clauses which unreasonably exclude liability on the part of the platform, and which prevent workers from seeking redress for grievances.



Fair Management

There should be a documented due process for decisions affecting workers. Workers must have a clear channel of communication and the ability to appeal management decisions affecting them, such as disciplinary actions and deactivation, and be informed of the reasons behind those decisions. The use of algorithms must be transparent and not result in inequitable outcomes for workers. There should be an identifiable and documented policy that ensures equity in the way workers are managed on a platform (for example, in the hiring, disciplining, or firing of workers).



Fair Representation

Platforms should provide a documented process through which worker voice can be expressed. Irrespective of their employment classification, workers should have the right to organise in collective bodies, and platforms should have mechanisms that enable workers to have a meaningful say in the conditions of their work.



STEP 2

Methodology Overview

The Fairwork project uses three approaches to effectively measure fairness of working conditions at digital labour platforms: desk research, worker interviews and surveys, and interviews with platform management. Through these three methods, we seek evidence on whether platforms act in accordance with the five Fairwork Principles.

We recognise that not all platforms use a business model that allows them to impose certain contractual terms on service users and/or workers in such a way that meets the thresholds of the Fairwork principles. However, all platforms have the ability to influence the way in which users interact on the platform. Therefore, for platforms that do not set the terms on which workers are retained by service users, we look at a number of other factors including published policies and/or procedures, public statements, and website/app functionality to establish whether the platform has taken appropriate steps to ensure they meet the criteria for a point to be awarded against the relevant principle.

In the case of a location-based work platform, we seek evidence of compliance with our Fairwork principles for location-based or ‘gig work’ platforms, and in the case of a cloudwork platform, with our Fairwork principles for cloudwork platforms.

Desk research

Each annual Fairwork ratings cycle starts with desk research to map the range of platforms to be scored, identify points of contact with management, develop suitable interview guides and survey instruments, and design recruitment strategies to access workers. For each platform, we also gather and analyse a wide range of documents including contracts, terms and conditions, published policies and procedures, as well as digital interfaces and website/app functionality. Desk research also flags up any publicly available information that could assist us in scoring different platforms, for instance the provision of particular services to workers, or the existence of past or ongoing disputes.

The desk research is also used to identify points of contact or ways to access workers. Once the list of platforms has been finalised, each platform is contacted to alert them about their inclusion in the annual ranking study and to provide them with information about the process. All platforms are asked to assist with evidence collection as well as with contacting workers for interviews.

Platform interviews

The second method involves approaching platforms for evidence. Platform managers are invited to participate in semi-structured interviews as well as to submit evidence for each of the Fairwork principles. This provides insights into the operation and business model of the platform, while also opening up a dialogue through which the platform could agree to implement changes based on the principles. In cases where platform managers do not agree to interviews, we limit our scoring to evidence obtained through desk research and worker interviews.

Worker interviews

The third method is interviewing platform workers directly. A sample of 6-10 workers are interviewed for each platform. These interviews do not aim to build a representative sample. They instead seek to understand the processes of work and the ways it is carried out and managed. These interviews enable the Fairwork researchers to see copies of the contracts issued to workers, and learn about platform policies that pertain to workers. The interviews also allow the team to confirm or refute that policies or practices are really in place on the platform.

Workers are approached using a range of different channels.

The interviews were semi-structured and made use of a series of questions relating to the 10 Fairwork (sub) principles. In order to qualify for the interviews, workers had to be over the age of 18 and have worked with the platform for more than two months

Putting it all together

This threefold approach provides a way to cross-check the claims made by platforms, while also providing the opportunity to collect both positive and negative evidence from multiple sources. Final scores are collectively decided by the Fairwork team based on all three forms of evidence. Points are only awarded if clear evidence exists on each threshold.

How we score

Each of the five Fairwork principles is broken down into two points: a first point and a second point that can only be awarded if the basic point has been fulfilled. Every

platform receives a score out of 10. Platforms are only given a point when they can satisfactorily demonstrate their implementation of the principles. Failing to achieve a point does not necessarily mean that a platform does not comply with the principle in question. It simply means that we are not – for whatever reason – able to evidence its compliance.

The scoring involves a series of stages. First, the in-country team collates the evidence and assigns preliminary scores. The collated evidence is then sent to external reviewers for independent scoring. These reviewers are both members of the Fairwork teams in other countries, as well as members of the central Fairwork team. Once the external reviewers have assigned their scoring, all reviewers meet to discuss the scores and decide final scoring. These scores, as well as the justification for them being awarded or not, are then passed to the platforms for review. Platforms are then given the opportunity to submit further evidence to earn points that they were initially not awarded. These scores then form the final annual scoring that is published in the annual country Fairwork reports.

**FURTHER DETAILS ON
THE FAIRWORK
SCORING SYSTEM ARE
IN THE APPENDIX.**



Gendered Work

Given that domestic platform work in the MENA region is done predominantly by women, this report examines the sector through a gendered lens. Globally, the MENA region lags behind all other regions when it comes to gender equality at work. The region has the lowest rates of female labour force participation (19 per cent in 2021) and the highest rates of female unemployment (20 per cent in 2021).

Within the region, Tunisia has one of the highest female unemployment rates at 24.7 per cent¹⁷, while Egypt is at 24.3 per cent¹⁸, Turkey at 15.6 per cent¹⁹ and Morocco at 13.5 per cent.²⁰ These unemployment rates are all higher than those in previous years, indicating a general rise in female unemployment in the region.

The gender employment gap reaches almost 80 per cent in Jordan and Algeria, and 69 per cent in Egypt.²¹ For example, Egypt was ranked 146th out of 156 countries in the Global Gender Gap 2021 Report when it came to economic participation and opportunity for women.^{22,23} In Turkey, only 38.5 per cent of women participate in the labour market, translating to a gender gap of 50 per cent.²⁴



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Women dominate the domestic work sector, with 60 per cent of immigrant domestic workers in the MENA region being women, and 67 per cent of underage domestic workers being girls.²⁵ Moreover, women also tend to be overrepresented in other “invisible work”²⁶ that takes place in the home, such as house chores and childcare, which they are unpaid for—furthering the “layers of uncaptured inequality”²⁷ they face within the informal sector.

In Egypt, around half of working women are working informally.²⁸ In Turkey, research suggests that informal employment is more prevalent among women compared to men in the labour market. Indeed in 2015, 94 per cent of women in the agricultural sector, 29 per cent in the industrial sector and 23 per cent of women in the services sector had informal jobs.²⁹ Working class (especially migrant) women in Turkey tend to find work for pay in the informal sector,³⁰ and there still exists gender segmentation³¹ of women into lower quality jobs, hence they are more likely to find themselves in more vulnerable sectors such as family farming or the platform economy through domestic work.³²

Access to work in the platform economy, especially on digital labour platforms, requires digital connectivity, which is generally lagging when it comes to women in the MENA region. According to the International Telecommunication Union, the gap between men and women concerning the Internet penetration rate is largest across the Arab States, when compared to other world regions.³³ The divide

remains wide; 56 per cent of women are using the Internet (12 percentage points lower than men with 68 per cent using the Internet).³⁴ In Turkey, 22.5 per cent of women did not use the Internet in the first quarter of 2021, according to the Turkish Statistical Institution (TurkStat) survey on the usage of information and communication technologies (ICTs) by households and individuals.³⁵ In 2020, the gender gap in mobile ownership and mobile internet use across the region was 9 per cent and 17 per cent, respectively.³⁶ Indeed, a total of 63 million women in the MENA region are not using mobile Internet.³⁷ These statistics highlight the digital gender gap in the region, which presents a hurdle to women’s ability to find work and partake in work on digital labour platforms, compared to their male counterparts.

Women entrepreneurs in the region also face challenges when it comes to information, market and financial service access.³⁸ A telling statistic is that only 38 per cent of women in the region have access to their own bank account, compared with 57 per cent of men.³⁹ Women in Turkey are 29 percentage points less likely than men to have a bank account at any financial institution.⁴⁰

Like elsewhere, care responsibilities in the MENA region fall predominantly on women, and this is considered their main priority over paid work in the labour market. This partly explains the noticeably lower female labour force participation rate in the region.⁴¹ This hidden form of unpaid work has yet to be acknowledged in policy-making, research and interventions.

Domestic Work and the Care Economy

The limited engagement of women in the labour market (but the need for their economic contribution) is directly related to them being placed at the forefront of the care economy. This refers to the private and public sectors of the economy that focus on providing both paid and unpaid services caring for the elderly and undertaking work that aims to “nurture and reproduce” future generations.⁴² It involves two types of work: direct care work, which is usually in-person care activities such as babysitting and elderly care, and indirect care work, which refers to tasks that complement direct care work such as cleaning and cooking.

Care work can be performed in a private household or an institution, however, when conducted domestically it is either unpaid (and considered “a woman’s job”, according to culture and tradition, combined with conservative values) or is done by hired domestic workers who are typically vulnerable and socially marginalised.⁴³ Employed domestic help is more common among higher-income families who can afford to hire help from the private market, which is usually sourced from lower-income families or lower-income country migrants.⁴⁴

DOMESTIC HELP IS MORE COMMON AMONG HIGHER-INCOME FAMILIES AND IS USUALLY SOURCED FROM LOWER-INCOME FAMILIES OR LOWER-INCOME COUNTRY MIGRANTS.

Migrant Domestic Workers

In line with the above, domestic platform work in the MENA region is part of a larger context of domestic work being dominated by women, many of whom are migrants from Asia and Africa. The Arab States alone have the highest number of female migrant domestic workers globally, around 1.6 million, or possibly much higher.⁴⁵ In countries like Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia and Morocco, domestic work is primarily done by women and underage girls coming from countries such as Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Ethiopia.⁴⁶ At least 60 per cent of MENA region migrant workers are women, and almost 70 per cent are children and girls.⁴⁷ Similarly, with the Gulf countries being the highest “migrant labour-receiving” region globally, it is estimated that over 80 per cent of migrant domestic workers in the Gulf countries come from Asian and African countries.⁴⁸

There is a clear gender segmentation when it comes to domestic work, with over two-thirds of women migrant workers in the Gulf countries being employed in domestic work.⁴⁹ With official figures likely to be underestimated, and a high level of precarity and lack of documentation due to the nature of the sector, it is difficult to have an accurate estimate of the number of domestic migrant workers in the Gulf region. One of the largest figures is an estimated two million migrant domestic workers located in Saudi Arabia alone, making up almost half of the total female employment in the country.⁵⁰

Of course, migration of domestic workers can also be internal to the country, as we see in Turkey in the form of rural-to-urban migration⁵¹ as part of the overall urbanisation

trend observed in the country. Domestic work is perceived as one of the few paid occupations open to rural or lower-class women who lack access to formal education or other resources in the cities.⁵² Turkey also receives large amounts of migration from neighbouring countries who also engage in domestic work, usually as live-in domestic workers.

**OVER TWO-THIRDS OF WOMEN
MIGRANT WORKERS IN THE
GULF COUNTRIES ARE EMPLOYED IN
DOMESTIC WORK.**

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic brought additional levels of challenge to women in domestic work, including migrant women. The pandemic increased overall unemployment, whilst hitting the most vulnerable the worst. Typically, sectors with high female concentration such as the service industry were disproportionately affected.⁵³

In addition, with lockdowns being the most effective way to curtail the virus, unpaid domestic care work skyrocketed, and women at home bore the burden of multiplied household and childcare responsibilities, which impacted their ability to retain their jobs.⁵⁴ This was especially the case in countries with a significant gender gap in the labour force, such as Egypt.⁵⁵ Even as both women and men have increased their contributions to unpaid care work, women still bore the brunt of unpaid care work with “33 per cent of women versus 26 per cent of men increasing their time spent on at least three activities related to unpaid care work.”⁵⁶

With the changing nature of work following the pandemic—for example, care work at home pushing women to accept flexible work—flexible and online opportunities for women have emerged in the platform economy.⁵⁷ This is not always beneficial, as women can end up falling into the trap of searching for flexibility, and thus accepting less-than-optimal work choices that perpetuate gender norms rather than changing them.

The spread of the virus also forced excessive amounts of work onto domestic workers, especially those who are live-in cleaning or childcare nannies. In that context, “forced or compulsory labour” has become a concern to ILO during the pandemic, especially for migrants who are unable to return to their home countries or even send remittances.⁵⁸

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, the informal sector was therefore hit hard, and the impact on the lives and livelihood of women informal workers has been significant. In particular, domestic workers’ invisibility from policy became obvious when it came to social protection

measures and aid that was handed out during the pandemic.⁵⁹ According to the ILO’s report titled *Domestic Work Calls for Creating More Social Protection and Secure Employment for Domestic Workers*, “domestic workers could not enjoy the social protection measures and aids provided”⁶⁰ during the pandemic. Instead, those who were able to find work during the pandemic had to work longer hours to make up for lost income, or in the case of live-in domestic workers they had to deal with more tasks due to all household members being at home; all the while dealing with the increased health hazard of contracting the virus. In Turkey, the COVID-19 outbreak exacerbated the hardships of most informal domestic workers, with most of those who lost their jobs experiencing a loss of income due to the lack of work security and limited access to basic rights such as housing, food and healthcare.⁶¹ Because of the informal nature of the work, domestic workers were largely excluded from state benefit schemes and provisions in this period, and thus had to resort to ad hoc measures provided by municipalities and charities.⁶²

The situation of female migrant workers has especially deteriorated as a result of the pandemic. Countries such as the GCC, Jordan and Lebanon, all of which have large numbers of female domestic migrant workers, imposed lockdowns and curfews in response to COVID-19, which resulted in health and safety risks for domestic workers, including a spike in gender-based violence and domestic violence.⁶³ Other cited repercussions of the pandemic on domestic workers included loss of jobs, loss of income due to increased work precarity, and difficulty in making ends meet on basics such as rent, food and health care.⁶⁴

General Overview

Domestic work is a prominent sector in the (informal) labour market, and as already discussed, is dominated by women who constitute over 60 per cent of domestic workers in the MENA region, and over 90 per cent in Turkey.⁶⁵⁶⁶ Recognising this, laws and policy practices relating to domestic work should therefore focus on protections specific to women in the sector.

Some promising practices taking place in the region include laws that cover domestic workers under labour legislation in both Morocco and Jordan, and specific labour protection schemes in Egypt, Algeria and Morocco. However, in many countries, almost 97 per cent of these workers have no contract, to begin with,⁶⁷ and hence their relationship with their employer is not protected or bound by any laws.

For the most part, MENA countries exclude domestic workers from their labour law, with a few exceptions.⁶⁸ Furthermore, no MENA country has ratified the Domestic Workers Convention (ILO Convention 189),⁶⁹ which aims to grant domestic workers the same rights as any other paid labour.⁷⁰ This absence of a legislative framework is reflected by the fact that the highest level of exclusion from minimum wage experienced by domestic workers is found in the Middle East, along with Asia and the Pacific.⁷¹ As a result, standards are quite low, and very few rights are granted to domestic workers through regulations outside general labour laws. For example, at least 70 per cent of domestic workers in Turkey are without effective social protection.⁷²

Migrant domestic workers in some Arab countries experience a further layer of oppression in the sponsorship system they enter upon arrival, namely the kafala. Within kafala, all the immigrant workers' legal status, such as their residency, is directly tied to their sponsor (the kafeel)—and hence all their rights are monitored and controlled by the sponsor including “entering the country, resigning from a job, transferring employment, and in some cases not leaving the country without first obtaining explicit permission”.⁷³ This shows how migrant workers can become susceptible to abuse at every stage of their employment/

migration process. This process of exploitation begins in the immigrant's home country where it is common for them to receive false or deceptive details regarding their work arrangement such as their monthly wage, nature of work and working conditions.⁷⁴ During their stay in the destination country it is quite common for women migrant domestic workers to deal with false charges such as theft from the families they work for to excuse their mistreatment.⁷⁵

Despite the rise of recruitment of domestic workers across the region, their legal rights remain absent. While there are means by which a domestic worker could file a complaint against their employer in the region, only a few cases have been sent to court, as most complaints or conflicts end in “amicable settlement”⁷⁶ through a non-governmental organization (NGO) or embassies. This is most likely to work against the worker and in favour of the client because in most cases the recruitment agency (or agent in most cases) is the mediator, who will most likely favour the client.⁷⁷

Another reason that worker's rights are usually ignored is due to the “invisibility” of domestic work, which is only reinforced by the nature of the workplace itself, that is, the private household.⁷⁸ Enforcement of labour law is difficult when work is being performed in a private household, which is not regulated as a workplace and is governed by separate legal protections to ensure their privacy. The invisibility of domestic work is also derived from the unavailability and/or inaccuracy of statistical information on domestic workers,⁷⁹ given the majority of domestic workers are not registered. This, in turn, translates into data gaps⁷⁹ that prevent domestic workers from being captured effectively in policy-making decisions.

Comparative Analysis of Domestic Labour Laws in the MENA Region

In this section, we offer a comparative overview of the status of domestic labour laws in key countries including Tunisia, Egypt, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia, and Lebanon. The UAE has a domestic labour law that entitles domestic workers to certain rights and privileges concerning working hours⁸⁰ and conditions, insurance, wages, and for migrants, the right to retain their IDs at all times.⁸¹

In the case of disputes that require litigation, employers should go to the UAE's Ministry of Human Resources and Emiratization, and any cases filed by workers that move up to the courts will be exempt from court fees and should be heard promptly.⁸² The law also protects domestic workers from discriminatory action, underage employment (classified as anyone under 18), sexual harassment, physical harm or exposure to it, and work tasks that were not written into the contract.⁸³

Similarly, Saudi Arabia has a regulatory framework that governs migrant domestic workers. This includes a contract that is written in Arabic (though this should be noted as problematic in the case of migrant workers who do not speak Arabic), which is referred to in the case of a dispute.⁸⁴ But unlike in the UAE, migrant workers in Saudi Arabia do not have an applicable minimum wage, do not have an overtime rate and are not included in the Saudi Wage Protection System. They are entitled to receive their wages by the end of every Islamic calendar month, which again could be considered confusing and problematic if workers

are not familiar with the Islamic calendar. Other things the law considers include working hours, days off, the working environment, and healthcare to be provided by the employer. However, a crucial gap in the protections is that employers are not prohibited from confiscating the worker's passport, or from exposing workers to potential exploitation and forced labour. Finally, labour law only permits the establishment of worker councils for locals, meaning that while trade unions are not prohibited outright, they don't exist in practice.⁸⁵

In Tunisia, a domestic workers' bill was passed in 2021 aiming to improve working conditions for domestic workers, in accordance with the Constitution and international conventions.⁸⁶ In Egypt, a draft law under discussion calls for the establishment of a domestic work department at the Egyptian Ministry of Manpower. Collecting data on domestic workers will thereby enable the Ministry to specify working hours and minimum wages, ensure social and health insurance, and protect working women from violence and discrimination.⁸⁷ All of these specifications are also



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mentioned in the Tunisian workers' bill. In both countries, domestic work undertaken by children is prohibited and punished with a fine and/or imprisonment.⁸⁸⁸⁹

In 2012, there was an attempt in Egypt to establish a domestic workers' syndicate, part of the larger push for independent trade unions in Egypt. The Ministry of Manpower initially did not approve the union and refused to acknowledge domestic workers. However, later in the year, in August 2012, they approved the establishment of the union with a name change to "Syndicate of Monthly Wage Female Workers"—although there is as yet no record of the next steps taken to actively create the syndicate and involve workers in it.⁹⁰

On the other end of the spectrum, Lebanon has no formal records of including domestic workers in its national legal landscape through any set labour laws. Nevertheless, Lebanon has a Decree that prohibits employers from confiscating migrant domestic workers' passports, and regulates the working hours and leave days, but it does not specify a minimum wage. As for freedom of association, because domestic workers are outside of the Labour Code, they are unable to join trade unions.⁹¹

Compared to Lebanon, in Turkey, there is also no legal regulation laying down job descriptions of domestic workers and the scope of their work⁹². It is also common in Turkey

that migrant women work informally and irregularly without any work permit due to the overall nature of domestic work. They can stay in Turkey legally with a tourist visa; however, their stay becomes illegal after exceeding their visa term duration, which in turn leaves them seeking unprotected, irregular and informal jobs.⁹³ They also resort to intermediary agencies who are engaged purely in informal activities despite being established as companies. These agreements are never supported by formal contracts and women's passports may be withheld in the process of job placement. Agencies normally receive commissions from employers for their services and offer new workers in case the latter is not satisfied with earlier workers.⁹⁴

A recent regulation, Article 6375 of the International Labour Force Law was passed in the Turkish Parliament in 2016. This law now governs the labour relations of foreigners in the country. With the introduction of this law, employers of foreign domestic workers are now required to register them directly with the labour authorities. If it is found out that employers are found to be employing foreigners without registration and the necessary permits, the law requires both the employer and the employee to be fined. If the same employer is found to be employing foreigners without the necessary permits and registrations again, then the fine they are required to pay doubles. Employers are required to undertake the costs of foreign workers whom they employed informally to return to their countries, as

foreign workers who are found out to be working without the necessary residence and work permits are reported to the Ministry of Interior for deportation.

Although the law started the process of regulating the employment rights of foreigners in Turkey, it has important drawbacks for domestic workers. Firstly, foreigners receive work permits only in relation to a single employer, and they are not able to transfer this permit, should they wish to change employers – without requiring a new permit. This means that, if workers face abuse or poor treatment at work, they are limited in terms of their ability to report it, as losing their employment can also mean their right to reside in the country. Secondly, work permits and residence permits of foreigners are not co-dependent, that is, having a work permit does not grant foreigners the right to reside, or vice versa, having a residence permit does not grant the right to work. This entails that, if a worker's residence permit is independent of their work permit, when they lose their work permit, they may lose their livelihood and this might adversely affect their continued residence in the country; especially considering that some (if not most) foreign domestic workers work based on a live-in arrangement in employer's household. Third, employers are required to cover the costs of the work permits for foreigners and not all employers might be willing to undertake these costs. This means that workers need to invest significant time and effort to find a new employer, and changing employers might not be a fast process – even when they may need to do this change urgently due to mistreatment at work. Although the regulation could be imagined to increase the visibility of foreign domestic workers in the country – due to the requirement of their registration – it is unclear whether, in reality, it did so. This is because while some employers might shy away from the registration fees, some workers also shy away from registration – as this limits their ability and flexibility to change employers and residence addresses (due to the work permit being attached to employers).

In 2015, local domestic workers in Turkey were integrated into the Labour Law with a new regulation (Article 6552). This new regulation resulted in the addition of a new paragraph to Article 5510 of the Social Security and Public Health Law (Add. 9), making it easier for households to provide social security coverage to domestic workers. Based on this new regulation, domestic workers who work for the same household for 10 or more days within a month are part of the long-term employment and social security

directive. Domestic workers who work for less than 10 days are only considered in labour law for cases of work-related illnesses and work accidents; those who work for less than 10 days, however, are not part of the long-term employment and social security directive. Instead, they may register for their own account in a voluntary social security system. It is also important to note that domestic workers remain excluded from Article 4857 of the Labour Law, preventing them from accessing the rights and benefits regular employees are entitled to. They also remain excluded from Article 6331 Work, Health and Safety Law⁹⁵.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO SHED LIGHT ON THE WORKING CONDITIONS OF DOMESTIC WORKERS WITHIN THIS HIGHLY INVISIBLE AND INFORMAL SECTOR TO IMPACT POLICY AND PLATFORM MANAGERS.

This system, although to an extent inclusive of domestic workers, still requires that they pay for their social security expenses out of pocket. It also creates a divide between domestic workers who work 10 or more days per month for a single employer and those who work less. Given, also, that many domestic workers rotate through working for several employers, this new law perpetuates the long-standing informality of domestic work, particularly because employers may employ domestic workers for less than the ten-day requirement to avoid paying the social security premiums; or domestic workers might directly ask employers to be paid cash-in-hand to receive higher salaries, negotiating the social security premiums (or part of them) to be paid to them instead.

Based on the above, it is commendable that some countries in the region are attempting to promote registration (and hence more visibility) and also better standards for domestic workers, as the working conditions of this vulnerable category of work are often overlooked. It is therefore important to shed light on the working conditions of domestic workers within this highly invisible and informal sector to impact policy and platform managers. This, as noted earlier, is the motivation for this work.

DO DOMESTIC PLATFORM WORKERS IN THE MENA REGION FACE SIMILAR CHALLENGES TO TRADITIONAL DOMESTIC WORKERS?

Challenges Faced by Traditional Domestic Workers

As already discussed, domestic work in the MENA region is highly dominated by women and is one of the lowest-paying jobs in the labour market. This is partly caused by the low level of skill and educational requirement for these workers, in addition to their vulnerable social status, lack of social protection, high incidence of informality and lack of collective representation leading to weak bargaining power. This gender-based undervaluation of domestic work is further exacerbated by the fact that female domestic workers traditionally take up the unpaid role of care and household tasks within their households.

In addition, domestic workers are often invisible in governmental data and statistics, which in turn translates into their absence from policy discussions on their social protection. This invisibility and vulnerability often push workers to accept poor conditions and lower pay. These workers typically land a job through their network or agencies—but in neither case are there formal contracts or agreements to safeguard their rights, and lack of a contract leads to exploitation.

The majority of live-in workers in the MENA region are migrants—estimated by the ILO at 1.6 million, or 19 per cent of the world's domestic workers⁹⁶. Live-in workers often suffer from a lack of privacy, wherein most do not have their own rooms and sleep on the kitchen floor instead. As

they rely on accommodation within the household, their ability to move around and leave the house is controlled by the employer, and their availability in the house means that they are expected to work whenever needed and for as many hours as possible.⁹⁷ This is a significant challenge for many, as domestic work arrangements in the region are mostly characterised by live-in workers, many of whom are migrants, both from rural areas or other countries mainly in Africa or South East Asia.

In-kind compensation in the form of food and accommodation explains the very low wages, and domestic workers exercise little to no bargaining power to negotiate it.⁹⁸ This lack of bargaining power can be due to several reasons. Firstly, domestic workers (particularly

undocumented migrants) are subject to discrimination, and working without a work permit puts them at risk of arrest and/or deportation. As a result, they are careful with their employers and tend to forgo their rights and needs to avoid conflict. Additionally, as opposed to other labour relationships, the nature of the relationship between the employer and the domestic worker is personalised, and emotional ties tend to develop.⁹⁹ Some workers, as such, tend to keep it that way and are not persistent or demanding of their rights. This, ironically, is not a challenge for domestic platform work, as the digital labour platform to some extent separates workers from care seekers.

THERE IS MOSTLY NO UNION OR RECOGNISED COLLECTIVE REPRESENTATIVE ENTITY THAT CAN BARGAIN FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS' RIGHTS. OR EVEN WHEN THEY EXIST, THERE ARE IMPORTANT LEGAL BARRIERS TO THEIR FULL PARTICIPATION IN COLLECTIVE BARGAINING DISCUSSIONS OR REPRESENTING WORKERS IN COURT.

In line with this, there is mostly no union or recognised collective representative entity that can bargain for domestic workers' rights. Or even when they exist, there are important legal barriers to their full participation in collective bargaining discussions or representing workers in court. Usually, domestic work is characterised by a low worker-to-employer ratio, thus no co-workers to liaise and lobby with.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, live-in workers have no means to get in touch with other domestic workers, where they can share experiences and best practices for accessing their rights.

Finally, domestic work challenges in the MENA region are made worse by the lack of governmental interest and limited policy implementation. Migrant domestic workers in particular are mostly disadvantaged within the domestic work sector. The crossing between their gender, low social status and migration status in highly discriminatory societies puts them at higher risk of abuse, and the challenges met are highly difficult to overcome.



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The Challenges Faced by Domestic Platform Workers

Digital labour platforms have arguably transformed the “door to door” work model that was mentioned by many domestic workers in our fieldwork, and have created new opportunities for women domestic workers.

However, digital labour platforms have also carried forward many of the persisting challenges of non-digital domestic work and introduced additional challenges that must be addressed. Most of these challenges could be addressed if digital labour platforms were held accountable for their business models and the working conditions they provide to workers, which tend to exclude platforms from all liability, and place all work-related risks and hardships onto the platform workers.

The first and most prominent challenge that platform work entails is an erosion of workers’ rights¹⁰¹ to benefits like social protection, medical insurance, and minimum wage, with poor working conditions offered in exchange for a job opportunity.¹⁰² Platform business models allow for these challenges to persist in the platform economy through a process of “selective formalisation”.¹⁰³ Platforms formalise certain aspects of platform work that are the primary value proposition for clients and workers, while keeping other aspects undocumented and unformalised, strategically refraining from a formal employment status.¹⁰⁴ Which in turn, excludes platforms from all liability and to which workers must agree to access work on the platform. In many ways, this is presented as an advantage to platform workers, who associate formalisation with things like binding contracts and a daunting interview.¹⁰⁵

The second challenge concerns minorities such as immigrants and women. The female domestic workers we

interviewed told us that their biggest concern was being in a client’s home that they knew nothing about, and how unsafe that made them feel. They also highlighted how the stigma of domestic work was persistent and still held by clients, and hence they felt disrespected when working. These aspects are only exacerbated when the platform’s interface offers workers no contact with management or online support on or off the job, holds no screening process or information on the clients and holds no brand identity that workers can relate to or feel a part of.

FEMALE DOMESTIC WORKERS INTERVIEWED TOLD THEIR BIGGEST CONCERN WAS BEING IN A CLIENT’S HOME THEY KNEW NOTHING ABOUT, AND HOW UNSAFE THAT MADE THEM FEEL.

Women, especially in the Global South, face “racialised and gendered market hierarchies”¹⁰⁶ that place them towards the lower end of job quality. These biases extend to the digital world through profiling preferences based on consumer preferences¹⁰⁷. One extreme example of this is the domestic worker sector in many GCC and Arab countries, where female domestic workers are marketed on social media platforms or e-commerce websites. The BBC



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documentary “Maids for Sale: Silicon Valley’s Online Slave Market” highlights this, focusing on a case study in Kuwait which paints a vivid picture of the inhumane treatment women face in domestic work — a reality which has become platformised¹⁰⁸.

Domestic platform work reproduces many of the challenges faced by traditional domestic workers. Like traditional domestic workers, most domestic platform workers are invisible in governmental data, which materialises, as discussed above, in the erosion of their rights to social protection, a decent wage, and decent working conditions. Like in traditional domestic work, employment in domestic platform work is also informal in nature. This is because many platforms do not require documentation for workers to join, with some of them even assuming a hands-off approach to worker-customer relationships,

leaving domestic platform workers as vulnerable as their traditional counterparts. As such, the processes that place women towards the bottom of the work hierarchy exist both in the traditional and domestic platform work, presenting in perhaps different ways but resulting in the same inequalities. Therefore, while domestic platform work reproduces some of the challenges in traditional domestic work, it presents a significant opportunity to many women due to its flexible nature.

Domestic Platform Work – Assessment of Fair Work in a Context of Challenges

In light of the above analysis, this subsection provides an assessment of domestic work platforms amidst a context of layered challenges.

The assessment is done according to the Fairwork principles and is informed by fieldwork data. Using the Fairwork research methodology, as detailed above, we scored the working conditions in digital labour platforms according to five Fairwork principles, that is fair pay,

fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management and fair representation. Fieldwork was conducted in Tunisia and Turkey, with thirty-one and twenty-two interviews respectively, and the Fairwork ratings are presented in the tables below.



Tunisia

Minimum standards
of fair work

Homeschool

2 /10



Bambinosit

0 /10



iJeni

0 /10



Homeschool scored two points, for:

3.1:

Workers have access to their contract at all times, it is available in French, and the terms and conditions are clear and comprehensible. Most notably, workers are notified of changes ahead of time, which is one condition many platforms fail to meet.

4.1:

Home School workers can appeal low ratings, non-payment issues, and deactivations.

Turkey

Minimum standards
of fair work

Ara

0/10



Armut

0/10



Bubiteklif

0/10



**Evde Temizlik Var
(EVD)**

0/10



Linking the Old Challenges with the New Through Fairwork Fieldwork

Through our analysis of the platforms we surveyed, we consider the similarities and differences between traditional domestic work and domestic platform work. Such analysis allows for the realisation of possible opportunities where platforms and legislative environments can play a positive role in improving working conditions for domestic workers.



FAIR PAY

Fair pay refers to the right of workers to earn a decent income that takes into account work-related costs irrespective of their employment classification. This includes being paid on time and being paid for overtime or idle waiting times.

Domestic workers often earn below the minimum wage across the world, and most (especially live-in domestic workers), receive an in-kind payment in the form of food and accommodation. Most domestic workers in the platform economy are also paid below the minimum wage, especially when taking into consideration the costs they incur, including transportation, the cost of providing task-specific equipment, and waiting times between jobs. None of the seven platforms we scored could be evidenced to meet the thresholds for the fair pay principle.

There is thus an opportunity here for platforms' management to set a minimum wage which takes into account work-related costs and to ensure that policies are in place to guarantee that workers earn at least a local living wage. This represents a difference from the traditional domestic market where careseekers are not inspected by authorities and where there is no supervision, so careseekers can set their wage as they please, often undervaluing the work of domestic workers.



FAIR CONDITIONS

Fair conditions refer to platform policies that protect workers from foundational risks on the job and where their health and safety are prioritised and promoted.

These conditions are generally absent in traditional domestic work, where workers are exposed to long working hours, often finding themselves having to sleep on the floor, finding that their mobility is controlled, and where they are exposed to violence, whether it be psychological, physical, or sexual.¹⁰⁹ In the case of migrants, their passports are sometimes confiscated.

Domestic workers have no safety nets and they cannot access social protection. They are invisible in governmental data. If a worker is sick or injured, the family will often let them go and find a replacement; leaving the domestic worker to her own devices when dealing with an injury or illness.

Conditions slightly differ for traditional domestic workers versus domestic platform workers, where the former's dire conditions are related to their confinement within a household.

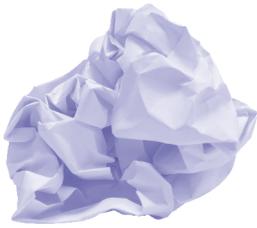
However, domestic platform workers often go unprotected against safety risks they face in the course of their jobs. Most platform domestic workers do not undergo safety training, and their data managed by the platforms is not protected.

For example, the fieldwork we undertook in Tunisia and Turkey revealed that workers face numerous risks in the course of their work. The main risks are safety issues since domestic services are performed in the homes of strangers. Workers also reported non-payment issues, abuse and disrespect. Workers also have no safety net. For example, if a worker is sick or sustains an injury while at work, the platform does not offer compensation. Further, domestic platform workers have no right to claim social protection. Similar to traditional domestic workers, domestic platform workers are also not included in governmental data.

In terms of data protection, none of the platforms had an adequate and ethical data protection policy in place except for one platform in Turkey, Armut.

While both types of domestic workers face unfair work conditions, the mediator role offered by platforms can be a tool to protect domestic workers. Fieldwork evidence indicates that this is not currently the case, but there is a potential positive role for platforms to improve the working conditions of domestic workers.

Platform policies need to ensure the minimum safety measures and to facilitate humane and fair work conditions. In addition, platforms need to put supervision structures in place to detect violations made by either party (workers and careseekers), and deal with them accordingly.



FAIR CONTRACTS

Fair contracts refer to the ability of workers to access transparent and concise terms and conditions. The platform contracting the workers must be identified in the contract and the contract must be subject to local law. Workers must be notified of proposed changes to their T&Cs in a reasonable timeframe. Additionally, the contract should not include clauses which prevent workers from seeking redress for grievances and exclude liability on the part of the platform.

Like most workers in the informal sector, domestic workers do not have contracts that lay out the terms and conditions. Oftentimes the workers' educational levels are low, and they may be illiterate, so they might not understand the terms in a contract, even if there were one. In the case of migrants, many of them have little to no local language skills and they learn the language on the job. So, if offered a contract they would not necessarily know what they were signing up to. Additionally, in countries like Egypt and Lebanon, the employment relationship between a domestic worker and employer is considered personal and is excluded from the labour law (Egyptian domestic workers are still not formally protected by labour law, despite the draft bill). As such, if a breach occurs there is no recourse to the labour law.¹¹⁰

Most platform workers have terms and conditions available to them either in the form of a hardcopy contract or through the application or platform interface. However, the terms and conditions are often not clear or transparent. On most of the platforms we scored, changes to the terms and conditions are not communicated in due time and more importantly, platforms have a liability clause where providers (workers) are solely responsible for their actions.

From the fieldwork conducted, only one platform – “Homeschool” in Tunisia – was able to provide evidence for the first point of fair contracts. The terms and conditions are laid out clearly in the official language and under Tunisian jurisdiction.

It is also worth noting that Homeschool providers are notified before any changes in the terms and conditions. Another unique practice is that Homeschool has a litigation clause where it confirms that it will assist the provider in resolving any dispute with a user. Liability in this case is not limited to the worker only but is shared with platform management.

Digital labour platforms provide an excellent opportunity for domestic work to be regulated and overseen. The availability of terms and conditions and the enforceability of these have the potential to mitigate any risk associated with exploitation. Additionally, if platforms along with governmental bodies can create a mechanism for reports of violations of the terms and conditions, careseekers will be deterred from abusing workers.



FAIR MANAGEMENT

The fair management principle entails that platforms should have a documented due process for decisions affecting workers. This includes an identifiable and documented policy that ensures equity, the use of algorithms should be transparent, and workers must be able to appeal decisions that affect them, such as deactivation.

In the traditional domestic labour market, there is no management per se, as employers are households/individuals directly, and it is assumed that employment agencies play this role, if they are involved in the process. However, as the literature and evidence show, some employment agencies take advantage of workers and often lie to and mislead workers into a job/working conditions that they have not signed up for.¹¹¹ For live-in workers, employment agencies do not follow up on their conditions upon arrival. They simply take their commission and leave the worker under the care of the employer. There is a lack of evidence in the literature that employment agencies have positively engaged in communication with employers and have negotiated with the employer to grant the workers their rights. Further, workers and migrants in particular are discriminated against and there is no mechanism or entity that can protect these workers from discriminatory actions.¹¹² Finally, traditional domestic workers cannot negotiate or appeal a decision that is made by their employer. They can get fired without any prior warning or notice.

On the other hand, in the platform economy, there is management and most digital labour platforms provide a communication channel between the service provider and management. That said, the efficacy of this is questionable—some are highly responsive, others less so.

From the fieldwork conducted, only one platform in Tunisia, Homeschool, had a meaningful appeals process. Additionally, only one platform in Turkey, Armut, had an anti-discrimination policy among users in the contract. For the rest of the platforms, we could not find evidence that there is a due process where workers can appeal decisions that affect their ratings, deactivation, payment issues, etc.

The nature of the relationship between the worker and the employer in the traditional domestic market is dyadic and invisible. The platform economy, however, introduces a third party. This shift provides an excellent basis for workers to be listened to, to appeal, to raise concerns, and for management to respond and address these issues. Digital labour platforms provide an opportunity for this market to be inspected and regulated. It also provides an opportunity for data to be gathered on working conditions. All of this is important for policy and governments to better the conditions of workers.



FAIR REPRESENTATION

Fair representation refers to a documented process, provided by the platform, where workers' voices are expressed. Workers should also have the right to organise collectively and platforms should cooperate and negotiate in return.

In the region, except for Turkey, there are no domestic workers' trade unions or collective entities where their concerns are expressed. Traditional domestic workers often work alone and are unable to meet or communicate with other workers.

Workers in the platform economy in the region, irrespective of their particular occupation (domestic worker, driver, courier, etc.) are not part of a trade union or collective body. While there are trade unions that workers could theoretically join, platform economy workers rarely participate in them. The lack of participation is largely due to these workers being deeply invisible from data, and there is a lack of understanding of platform work and its classification.

Additionally, restrictions for public meetings in various countries in the region make the conditions required to meet the Fairwork principle nearly impossible.

Digital labour economy platforms can provide data on this type of work. Having a collective body that workers can sign up for can also help governments gather data on domestic workers in the platform economy. Accordingly, policies can be put in place and better inspection and regulation will follow.



SYNTHESIS

The fieldwork undertaken by the research team has shown that platform work offers more options for work and greater ease in finding a job. One of the interviewees said that they are a “call away” from getting a job through the application. Another key takeaway from the interviews is flexibility.

This is a positive aspect for many workers, as they are in control of their working hours, and have freedom over their work schedule to a large extent, by being able to decline work within a reasonable timeframe. This is in contrast to traditional domestic work, where the relationship is between two parties, i.e the worker and the employer, with the employer in complete control of the relationship. Despite the benefits of flexibility, it must be interpreted alongside other features of domestic work in the platform economy. The precarity that comes with flexibility is unbeneficial to the worker-employer relationship in this sector, as it is one that is highly reliant on trust, familiarity and care. It is also important to note that with such flexibility available to workers, it is rare that platforms confine them to a set of working hours, which sometimes results in working hours that are unaccounted for and therefore, unpaid.

In light of the above, whether it be traditional domestic work or domestic platform work, there is much to be done for the implementation of the Fairwork principles in this sector. However, the platform economy provides an opportunity for platforms to model best practices and improve working conditions for workers. While this might not always be the first priority of platforms, policy making and civil society can play a role here in incentivising platforms to adopt decent work standards. This is in contrast to traditional domestic work arrangements that happen behind closed doors with no supervision, inspection or regulation.

Fairwork Principle

Traditional Domestic Work Challenges

New Challenges to Domestic Work in the platform Economy, Highlighted in Fieldwork



FAIR PAY

Domestic workers earn below the minimum wage globally. Oftentimes, they are paid in-kind (accommodation and food).¹¹³

Most domestic workers in the platform economy are also paid below the minimum wage, especially when taking into consideration the costs incurred by workers while on the job.

We could not evidence that any of the platforms evaluated for this study met the thresholds for this principle.



FAIR CONDITIONS

Domestic workers are exposed to unfair conditions, including long working hours, sleeping on the floor, passport confiscation, and violence.¹¹⁴

Domestic platform workers are often not protected against safety risks they face in the course of their jobs.

We could not evidence any safety training provided to workers.

Domestic workers have no safety net and they cannot access social protection. They are invisible in governmental data.



FAIR CONTRACTS

Most domestic workers do not have contracts that lay out clearly the terms and conditions. In the case of migrants, many of them lack local language skills, so, if offered a contract they would not know what they would be signing up to (e.g. in Arabic).

Most domestic platform workers have terms and conditions available to them either in the form of a hardcopy contract or platform interface. However, the terms and conditions are often not clear or transparent.

Changes to the terms and conditions are not communicated in due time and more importantly most platforms have a liability clause where providers (workers) are solely responsible for their actions.

From the fieldwork conducted, only one platform, “Homeschool” in Tunisia, was able to provide sufficient evidence to be awarded the first point for fair contracts.



FAIR MANAGEMENT

Employment agencies take advantage of workers and often lie to and mislead workers into a job that they have not signed up for.¹¹⁵ For live-in workers, employment agencies do not follow-up, instead taking their commission and leaving the worker under the care of the employer.

Traditional domestic workers cannot negotiate or appeal their employer's decisions. They can get fired without any prior warning or notice.s

Most domestic work platforms provide a communication channel between the service provider and management, however, their effectiveness is uncertain. Some are highly responsive, and others much less so. We were unable to find sufficient evidence to award platforms this point.

Except for one platform in Tunisia, Homeschool, was able to evidence a meaningful appeals process, and hence was awarded a point.



FAIR REPRESENTATION

In the region there is a limited number of domestic workers' trade unions or collective entities where their concerns are expressed. Workers often work alone and are unable to meet or communicate with other workers.

Workers in the platform economy in the region, irrespective of their particular occupation (domestic worker, driver, courier, etc.) are generally not part of a trade union or collective body.

Conclusions and Way Forward

This report sheds some light on the possible impacts of domestic work platforms in the MENA region by drawing on seven case studies. As this is the first report assessing domestic work platforms in the MENA region, the purpose is to engage with platforms, relevant stakeholders and policy-makers to work towards improving working conditions for domestic workers in the region, and implement positive changes in the platform economy. This is a preliminary step towards more advocacy efforts in addressing the problems relating to domestic platform workers and setting standards for a new and improved platform economy.

As app-based services are taking the world by storm, domestic workers in the region are witnessing a shift in the labour market. Recruitment via digital labour platforms for paid domestic work is now more convenient for both consumers and workers. However, our interviews with domestic platform workers suggest that workers still face persisting and inherent challenges associated with domestic work in the region and new challenges associated with domestic platform work. These include a lack of workers' rights and selective formalisation, gender biases, and poor working conditions associated with a high incidence of informality. The process of directly engaging with domestic digital platforms has highlighted context-specific challenges in the domestic work sector, but also the role of platforms in offering income generation opportunities for the unemployed (particularly women and migrants), and extra income for workers seeking part-time jobs. However, notwithstanding the claims that digital labour platforms match 'supply with demand', the reality is that these platforms still exercise control over the jobs they mediate and have the ability to implement improvements in working conditions.



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Digital labour platforms offering domestic services in the region are still considered nascent, and as such there is much room to guide them to set decent work standards and model fair work practices for domestic workers. The most direct pathway to change is by trying to guide platforms to work towards the Fairwork principles. As we rate domestic work platforms against measures of fairness (pay, conditions, contracts, management, and representation), the aim is to shed light on good and bad practices and encourage a move to fairer working conditions. By disseminating the ratings, we provide consumers with access to information about labour practices that will allow them to be intentional with the platforms they want to work with. This, in turn, will pressure platforms to improve their scores and working conditions.

In addition to evaluating working conditions on digital platforms, the Fairwork Project also actively engages with workers and unions, platform companies, civil society organisations, and policymakers to help shape a more equitable future of work in the digital platform economy.



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The Fairwork Pledge

To this end, the Fairwork Project has launched the Fairwork Pledge: Under the umbrella of the Fairwork Pledge, a wide variety of organisations from the fields of academia, civil society, business and public administration are working together with Fairwork to promote fairer working conditions in the digital platform economy – for example, by committing to using Fairwork ratings as a selection criterion when contracting services through digital labour platforms. In efforts to raise awareness about fair labour standards in the platform economy, we will ask organisations across the region, which share a vision to bring about a fairer future of work, to sign the pledge.

We would like to continue to engage directly with domestic service platforms operating in the MENA region and expand our research in more countries. We also seek to collect more data and undertake more fieldwork across the region to complete the picture on the ground and expand the scope of our study of domestic work conditions in the platform economy.

**MORE INFORMATION ABOUT
THE PLEDGE, AND HOW
TO SIGN UP, IS AVAILABLE AT**

FAIR.WORK/PLEDGE



APPENDIX

Fairwork Scoring System

Which companies are covered by the Fairwork principles?

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines a “digital labour platform” as an enterprise that mediates and facilitates “labour exchange between different users, such as businesses, workers and consumers”.¹¹⁶ That includes digital labour “marketplaces” where “businesses set up the tasks and requirements and the platforms match these to a global pool of workers who can complete the tasks within the specified time”.¹¹⁷ Marketplaces that do not facilitate labour exchange for example, Airbnb (which matches owners of accommodation with those seeking to rent short term accommodation) and eBay (which matches buyers and sellers of goods) are obviously excluded from the definition. The ILO’s definition of “digital labour platform” is widely accepted and includes many different business models.¹¹⁸

Fairwork’s research covers digital labour platforms that fall within this definition that aim to connect individual service providers with consumers of the service through the platform interface. Fairwork’s research does not cover platforms that mediate offers of employment between individuals and employers (whether on a long-term or on a temporary basis).

Fairwork distinguishes between two types of these platforms. The first, is ‘geographically-tethered’ platforms where the work is required to be done in a particular

location such as delivering food from a restaurant to an apartment, driving a person from one part of town to another or cleaning. These are often referred to as ‘gig work platforms’. The second is ‘cloudwork’ platforms where the work can, in theory, be performed from any location via the internet.

The thresholds for meeting each principle are different for location-based and cloudwork platforms because location-based work platforms can be benchmarked against local market factors, risks/harms, and regulations that apply in that country, whereas cloudwork platforms cannot because (by their nature) the work can be performed from anywhere and so different market factors, risks/harms, and regulations apply depending on where the work is performed.

The platforms covered by Fairwork’s research have different business, revenue and governance models including employment-based, subcontractor, commission-based, franchise, piece-rate, shift-based, subscription models. Some of those models involve the platforms making direct payments to workers (including through sub-contractors).

How does the scoring system work?

The five Principles of Fairwork were developed through an extensive literature review of published research on job quality, stakeholder meetings at UNCTAD and the ILO in Geneva (involving platform operators, policymakers, trade unions, and academics), and in-country meetings with local stakeholders.

Each Fairwork Principle is divided into two thresholds. Accordingly, for each Principle, the scoring system allows the first to be awarded corresponding to the first

threshold, and an additional second point to be awarded corresponding to the second threshold (see Table 1). The second point under each Principle can only be awarded if the first point for that Principle has been awarded. The thresholds specify the evidence required for a platform to receive a given point. Where no verifiable evidence is available that meets a given threshold, the platform is not awarded that point. A platform can therefore receive a maximum Fairwork score of ten points.

Table 1 Fairwork: Scoring System

Principle	First point	Second point	Total
 Principle 1: Fair Pay	 Ensures workers earn at least the local minimum wage after costs	 Ensures workers earn at least a local living wage after costs	 2
 Principle 2: Fair Conditions	 Mitigates task-specific risks	 Provides a safety net	 2
 Principle 3: Fair Contracts	 Provides clear and transparent terms and conditions	 Ensures that no unfair contract terms are imposed	 2
 Principle 4: Fair Management	 Provides due process for decisions affecting workers	 Provides equity in the management process	 2
 Principle 5: Fair Representation	 Assures freedom of association and the expression of collective worker voice	 Supports democratic governance	 2

Maximum possible Fairwork Score



Principle 1: Fair Pay

1.1 – Ensures workers earn at least the local minimum wage after costs (one point)

Platform workers often have substantial work-related costs to cover, such as transport between jobs, supplies, or fuel, insurance, and maintenance on a vehicle.¹²⁹ Workers' costs sometimes mean their take-home earnings may fall below the local minimum wage.¹²⁰ Workers also absorb the costs of extra time commitment, when they spend time waiting or travelling between jobs, or other unpaid activities necessary for their work, which are also considered active hours.¹²¹ To achieve this point platforms must ensure that work-related costs do not push workers below local minimum wage.

The platform takes appropriate steps to ensure the following:

- Workers earn at least the local minimum wage, or the wage set by collective sectoral agreement (whichever is higher) in the place where they work, in their active hours, after costs.¹²²

1.2 – Ensures workers earn at least a local living wage after costs (one additional point)

- In some places, the minimum wage is not enough to allow workers to afford a basic but decent standard of living. To achieve this point platforms must ensure that work-related costs do not push workers below local living wage.

The platform takes appropriate steps to ensure the following:

- Workers earn at least a local living wage, or the wage set by collective sectoral agreement (whichever is higher) in the place where they work, in their active hours, after costs.^{123 124}

Principle 2: Fair Conditions

2.1 – Mitigates task-specific risks (one point)

Platform workers may encounter a number of risks in the course of their work, including accidents and injuries, harmful materials, and crime and violence. To achieve this point platforms must show that they are aware of these risks and take steps to mitigate them.

The platform must satisfy the following:

- There are policies or practices in place that protect workers' health and safety from task-specific risks.¹²⁵

- Platforms take adequate, responsible and ethical data protection and management measures, laid out in a documented policy.

2.2 – Provides a safety net (one additional point)

Platform workers are vulnerable to the possibility of abruptly losing their income as the result of unexpected or external circumstances, such as sickness or injury. Most countries provide a social safety net to ensure workers don't experience sudden poverty due to circumstances outside their control. However, platform workers usually don't qualify for protections such as sick pay, because of their independent contractor status. In recognition of the fact that most workers are dependent on income they earn from platform work, platforms can achieve this point by ensuring that workers are compensated for loss of income due to inability to work.

The platform must satisfy BOTH of the following:

- Platforms take meaningful steps to ensure that workers are compensated for income loss due to inability to work commensurate with the worker's average earnings over the past three months.
- Where workers are unable to work for an extended period due to unexpected circumstances, their standing on the platform is not negatively impacted.

Principle 3: Fair Contracts

3.1 – Provides clear and transparent terms and conditions (one point)

The terms and conditions governing platform work are not always clear and accessible to workers.¹²⁶ To achieve this point, the platform must demonstrate that workers are able to understand, agree to, and access the conditions of their work at all times, and that they have legal recourse if the other party breaches those conditions.

The platform must satisfy ALL of the following:

- The party contracting with the worker must be identified in the contract, and subject to the law of the place in which the worker works.
- The contract is communicated in full in clear and comprehensible language that workers could be expected to understand.
- The contract is accessible to workers at all times.

- Every worker is notified of proposed changes in a reasonable timeframe before changes come into effect; and the changes should not reverse existing accrued benefits and reasonable expectations on which workers have relied.

3.2 – Ensures that no unfair contract terms are imposed (one additional point)

In some cases, especially under ‘independent contractor’ classifications, workers carry a disproportionate amount of risk for engaging in a contract with the service user. They may be liable for any damage arising in the course of their work, and they may be prevented by unfair clauses from seeking legal redress for grievances. To achieve this point, platforms must demonstrate that risks and liability of engaging in the work is shared between parties.

Regardless of how the contractual status of the worker is classified, the platform must satisfy BOTH of the following:

- Takes appropriate steps to ensure that the contract does not include clauses which exclude liability for negligence nor unreasonably exempt the service user and/or the platform from liability for working conditions.
- Takes appropriate steps to ensure that the contract does not include clauses which prevent workers from effectively seeking redress for grievances which arise from the working relationship.

Principle 4: Fair Management

4.1 – Provides due process for decisions affecting workers (one point)

Platform workers can experience arbitrary deactivation; being barred from accessing the platform without explanation, and potentially losing their income. Workers may be subject to other penalties or disciplinary decisions without the ability to contact the service user or the platform to challenge or appeal them if they believe they are unfair. To achieve this point, platforms must demonstrate an avenue for workers to meaningfully appeal disciplinary actions.

The platform must satisfy ALL of the following:

- There is a channel for workers to communicate with a human representative of the platform. This channel is documented in a contract and available on the platform interface. Platforms should respond to workers within a

reasonable timeframe.

- There is a process for workers to meaningfully appeal low ratings, non-payment, payment issues, deactivations, and other penalties and disciplinary actions. This process is documented in a contract and available on the platform interface.¹²⁷
- In the case of deactivations, the appeals process must be available to workers who no longer have access to the platform.
- Workers are not disadvantaged for voicing concerns or appealing disciplinary actions.

4.2 – Provides equity in the management process (one additional point)

The majority of platforms do not actively discriminate against particular groups of workers. However, they may inadvertently exacerbate already existing inequalities in their design and management. For example, there is a lot of gender segregation between different types of platform work. To achieve this point, platforms must show not only that they have policies against discrimination, but also that they seek to remove barriers for disadvantaged groups, and promote inclusion.

Platforms must satisfy ALL of the following:

- There is a policy which ensures the platform does not discriminate on grounds such as race, social origin, caste, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sex, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, religion or belief, age or any other status.
- Where persons from a disadvantaged group (such as women) are significantly under-represented among a pool of workers, it seeks to identify and remove barriers to access by persons from that group.
- It takes practical measures to promote equality of opportunity for workers from disadvantaged groups, including reasonable accommodation for pregnancy, disability, and religion or belief.
- If algorithms are used to determine access to work or remuneration or the type of work and pay scales available to workers seeking to use the platform, these are transparent and do not result in inequitable outcomes for workers from historically or currently disadvantaged groups.

- It has mechanisms to reduce the risk of users discriminating against workers from disadvantaged groups in accessing and carrying out work.

Principle 5: Fair Representation

5.1 – Assures freedom of association and the expression of worker voice (one point)

Freedom of association is a fundamental right for all workers, and enshrined in the constitution of the International Labour Organisation, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The right for workers to organise, collectively express their wishes – and importantly – be listened to, is an important prerequisite for fair working conditions. However, rates of organisation amongst platform workers remain low. To achieve this point, platforms must ensure that the conditions are in place to encourage the expression of collective worker voice. Whether or not platforms set the terms on which workers are retained by service users, platforms must demonstrate that they have taken appropriate steps to ensure that workers are informed of their rights (and have mechanisms in place to help protect those rights) and that workers are directed to appropriate collective bodies or trade unions.

Platforms must satisfy ALL of the following:

- There is a documented mechanism for the expression of collective worker voice.
- There is a formal policy of willingness to recognise, or bargain with, a collective body of workers or trade union, that is clearly communicated to all workers.¹²⁸
- Freedom of association is not inhibited, and workers are not disadvantaged in any way for communicating their concerns, wishes and demands to the platform.¹²⁹

5.2 – Supports democratic governance (one additional point)

While rates of organisation remain low, platform workers' associations are emerging in many sectors and countries. We are also seeing a growing number of cooperative worker-owned platforms. To realise fair representation, workers must have a say in the conditions of their work. This could be through a democratically governed cooperative model, a formally recognised union, or the ability to undertake collective bargaining with the platform.

The platform must satisfy at least ONE of the following:

1. Workers play a meaningful role in governing it.
2. It publicly and formally recognises an independent collective body of workers, an elected works council, or trade union.
3. It seeks to implement meaningful mechanisms for collective representation or bargaining.

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119 Work-related costs include direct costs the worker may incur in performing the job. This may include, for instance, transport in between jobs, supplies, vehicle repair and maintenance, fuel, road tolls and vehicle insurance. However, it does not include transport to and from the job (unless in-between tasks) nor taxes, social security contributions, or health insurance.

120 The ILO defines minimum wage as the "minimum amount of remuneration that an employer is required to pay wage earners for the work performed during a given period, which cannot be reduced by collective agreement or an individual contract." Minimum wage laws protect workers from unduly low pay and help them attain a minimum standard of living. The ILO's Minimum Wage Fixing Convention, 1970 C135 sets the conditions and requirements of establishing minimum wages

and calls upon all ratifying countries to act in accordance. Minimum wage laws exist in more than 90 percent of the ILO member states.

121 In addition to direct working hours where workers complete tasks, they also spend time performing unpaid activities necessary for their work, such as waiting for delivery orders at restaurants and traveling between jobs. These indirect working hours are also considered part of active hours as workers give this time to the platform. Thus, 'active hours' include both direct and indirect working hours.

122 In order to evidence this, where the platform is responsible for paying workers, the platform must either: (a) have a documented policy that ensures the workers receive at least the local minimum wage after costs in their active hours; or (b) provide summary statistics of transaction and cost.

123 Where a living wage does not exist, Fairwork will use the Global Living Wage Coalition's Anker Methodology to estimate one.

124 In order to evidence this, where the platform is responsible for paying workers, the platform must either: (a) have a documented policy that ensures the workers receive at least the local living wage after costs in their active hours; or (b) provide summary statistics of transaction and cost data evidencing all workers earn a minimum wage after costs.

125 Where the platform directly engages the worker, the starting point is the ILO's Occupational Safety and Health Convention, 1981 (C155). This stipulates that employers shall be required "so far as is reasonably practicable, the workplaces, machinery, equipment, and processes under their control are safe and without health risk", and that "where necessary, adequate protective clothing and protective equipment [should be provided] to prevent, so far as is reasonably practicable, risk of accidents or adverse effects on health."

126 The ILO's Maritime Labour Convention, 2006 (MLC 2006), Reg. 2.1, and the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (C189), Articles 7 and 15, serve as helpful guiding examples of adequate provisions in workers' terms and conditions, as well as worker access to those terms and conditions.

127 Workers should have the option of escalating grievances that have not been satisfactorily addressed and, in the case of automated decisions, should have the option of escalating them for human mediation.

128 For example, "[the platform] will support any effort by its workers to organise or form a trade union collectively. Collective bargaining through trade unions can often bring about more favourable working conditions."

129 See ILO (2021) World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work International Labour Office

Credits and funding

Fairwork is a project run out of the Oxford Internet Institute, University of Oxford, and the WZB Berlin Social Science Center, and draws on the expertise and experience of staff at the Access to Knowledge for Development Center (A2K4D) at the American University in Cairo's School of Business, Audencia Business School, Center for Development Evaluation and Social Science Research (CREDI), Centre for Labour Research, Chinese University of Hong Kong's Centre for Social Innovation Studies, CIPG Innovation Policy Governance, CIPPEC, CREDI, De La Salle University, FLACSO-Ecuador, Humboldt University of Berlin, Institute for a Fair Economy, International Institute of Information Technology Bangalore (IIITB), International University of Rabat, iSocial, KU Leuven, Lagos Business School, Luigj Gurakuqi University of Shkodër, National University of Singapore, Observatorio de Plataformas Perú, Phenix Center for Economics & Informatics Studies, Pollicy, Public Policy Research Center (CENTAR), Qhala, REPOA, Sapienza University of Rome, Solidarity Center, Technical University of Berlin, TEDIC, The Policy Initiative, TU Wien, Universidad Adolfo Ibáñez, Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Universidad del Rosario, Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos (Unisinos), Universitas Gadjah Mada's Center for Digital Society, University of California's Hastings College of the Law, University of Cape Town, University of Ghana Business School, University of Manchester, University of the Western Cape, Weizenbaum Institut and XU Exponential University

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Special thanks to Houeida Anouar, Nermine Nejima, Chehnez Hicheri for their efforts and fieldwork in Tunisia. Special thanks to Halil İbrahim Ayar, Nevin Kucuk and Teyfik Tokalilar for their efforts and fieldwork in Turkey

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Please cite as

Fairwork (2022) Domestic Platform Work in the Middle East and North Africa, Oxford, United Kingdom; Berlin, Germany.

Please note that this report contains sections in common with other Fairwork reports, notably the Fairwork Framework, parts of the Impact and Next Steps section, and the Appendix.

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Funders

The Fairwork Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC), The Economic and

Social Research Council through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF, grant number ES/S00081X/1), the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), commissioned by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), the Ford Foundation, and the International Development Research Centre's Future of Work in the Global South initiative (FoWIGS).

Special Thanks

Kristin Thompson, Samantha Gupta and the administration at the Berlin Social Center (WZB) for their extensive administrative support for this study, Katia Padvalkava, Duncan Passey, Maisy Gills, Sara Spinks, Lucy Hennings, Isabelle Malcolm, John Gilbert, Ornella Sciuto, Caroline Hampshire, Tabitha Baker, and David Sutcliffe at the University of Oxford for their extensive administrative support for the project since its inception. The project team is deeply grateful to Shakhlo Kakharova, Lukas Sonnenberg, and Kirsten Schuettler at GIZ for their continuing support and guidance as we take our work to the next stage. We would like to thank the University of Oxford's Business Engagement and Partnerships Development Fund for supporting some of our workshops and outreach activities. Finally, we would like to acknowledge a large number of workers and platform managers in the United Kingdom for taking the time to help us build our platform ratings. Their roles are understated by a simple acknowledgement. All of the work in this project was shared not just amongst our research team, but also amongst the stakeholders who our ratings ultimately affect.

Conflict of interest statement

None of the researchers have any connection with any of the platforms and the work undertaken received no funding or support in kind from any platform or any other company, and we declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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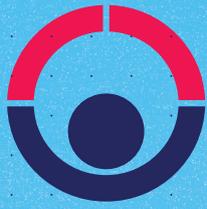
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