

Domestic Code in the flesh

Stories of workers in cleaning services apps



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By way of introduction

“We have to produce thought
from everyday life”

Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, 2019

Listening to Silvia’s call to us, this text is based on, learns from and listens to the daily experiences of women paid domestic workers. Here are the life stories of four women who work on digital platforms — apps of domestic services or also called cleaning services — in different countries of our continent, ancestrally Abya Yala: Jessi, from São Paulo; Giselle, from Mexico City; Paola, from Bogota and Roxy, from Los Angeles. They are four women who face the technification and automation of care work through algorithmic processes that organize work in these applications. They are four women who are part of the social organization of care (Nadya Araujo 2022) and are inserted into specific care circuits marked by class, gender and ethnic-racial inequality.

Little is known about the experiences of women workers in care and domestic services apps, their socioeconomic profiles and working conditions. The increase in these digital platforms is the product of social, political and economic factors. Also, it highlights the emergence of new digital infrastructures, of new business and non-profit actors that seek to take advantage of and manage reproductive work in all its forms (Magally Miranda 2019, 7). Thus, these digital platforms are a class, racial and sexist project as a way of organizing work – as a new advance in the capital’s attack on workers – and could determine the future of care work.

Domestic or cleaning services applications have begun to increase in our region. This phenomenon brings urgent questions, but also invites us to generate names and categories to understand these transformations. The challenge is to think of concepts that enter the body; this is the need to theorize in order to understand. Adding to this urgency to reflect on

what it means to work in these apps, it is clear to me that we cannot compare and affirm that asking for an Uber is the same as hiring a woman to clean your house. As Giselle describes, “working inside a house, working as an ally [as they are called by the apps] implies entering the intimacy of a home. We know the intimacy of the client”.

And it is that intimacy —of personal and power relationships; of ties and affections; of life-sustaining activities that take place in private—which is being mediated by mathematical processes of data analysis. Is it intimacy that is at stake when the platform economy enters our homes? Or are the relations of power and inequality in this work intensified? Or perhaps the cleaning apps are a continuation of a capitalism in crisis that seeks to displace the line of dispossession?

Domestic work comes from a colonial and patriarchal history that makes it very different from driving a car. On the one hand, the etymological origin of the word domestic, in Latin *domus*, refers to the idea of domination of the slave by the master (Séverine Durin 2017, 26). The relationship between slavery and domestic service is inherent, because it was the labor of enslaved African and indigenous women who for centuries performed domestic work for the benefit of white and later Creole families. Unraveling the colonial history of this activity, we find the historical denial of humanity and subjectivity to which Afro-diasporic and indigenous women were subjected by European colonialism (Ochy Curiel 2014). On the other hand, “domestic work” or “employment” refers more to a modern, capitalist category. This work is that combination between two logics of domination: slavery and “free” capitalist relations. That makes it specific and presents a great challenge in conceptual and political terms.

Care work has historically been assigned to women; it is an invisible, unpaid and totally devalued form of labor. As Silvia Federici (2013, 18) argues, “what keeps the world moving is the immense amount of unpaid work that women do in homes”. With globalization and the neoliberal crisis of care, it is migrant and racialized women from the global south who

mostly carry out this work worldwide. Currently, according to data from the International Labor Organization, more than 14.8 million people are engaged in paid domestic work in Latin America and the Caribbean. This represents around 20% of the world's paid domestic workers. It is an activity that continues to be highly feminized; in our region, more than 91% of people employed in paid domestic work are women (ILO 2021).

Within that 91%, those who perform paid household work in our region are mostly indigenous, Afro-diasporic and impoverished mestizo women. In the platform economy — which is not outside the social fabric — work in the care and cleaning apps is also highly feminized. The profile of these workers has been little studied, but in existing research the abovementioned racialization gains visibility. How will it impact the lives of women of color who do care work—already precarious—that it is now organized through algorithms? What are the implications that the social reproduction of life is mediated by mobile applications? How does the social fabric deteriorate with these care platform practices?

These questions have led me to write these pages and carry out this project. *Domestic Code* seeks to rethink the idea of connectivity given by an algorithm built from hegemonic parameters. The proposal is to give visibility to the particularities that unite these paid domestic workers beyond the apps, their livelihood activity or their skin color.

This is a militant and politically committed investigation that is stitched together like a dialogue, a kind of simultaneous conversation, a radical listening essay and a space to imagine how we would like these apps to be. These texts are part of a broader project that I hope will be long-term, called *Domestic Code in the flesh*. The idea of the name, which is also a theoretical, methodological and communicational concept, is to think about the interconnections generated by the cleaning apps, but at the same time to challenge those violent algorithmic connections. In other words, this project is thought of as a counter-territory where the workers and those of us who work on it also connect.

It is a space to question the hegemonic reading inscribed in the skin of the bodies that carry out domestic work. It is a proposal that connects racialized women from other places and weaves untold narratives of digital applications. *In the flesh* – the Chicano theoretical concept of embodying knowledge and experience (Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa 1983) – is a bet against the automation of work, fatigue and exploitation, the dehumanization of capitalism. It is the political desire to revalue oral history as a possibility of weaving from the voice, the memory, the body and the skin. I invite you to browse these pages and learn a little about the life of women workers in cleaning apps.

Methodological Notes

“I have been working to change the way I speak and write, to incorporate in the manner of telling a sense of place, of not just who I am in the present but where I am coming from, the multiple voices within me [...] I refer to that personal struggle to name that location which I come to voice – that space of my theorizing.”

bell hooks 1990, 146.

This is an investigation of oral history through life narratives. These pages collect the life stories of Jessi, Giselle, Paola and Roxy. They are stories shared orally, through Zoom video calls, face-to-face conversations over coffee, and audio sharing on WhatsApp. It is a weaving, unweaving and reweaving of stories, coming back again and again to talk and clarify my doubts. We have decided together with these four workers that their stories should be presented in different formats, because orality is better than written text. In fact, I understand oral history as a counter reading of the capitalist, patriarchal and colonial system where the main epistemic category is lived experience. And, to reflect at least a few fragments of the invaluable richness and amalgamation of nuances of these women's life narratives, we have used different formats: texts, illustrations, comics, and podcasts; in each piece different themes are presented, but complementary to their stories.

Jessi, Giselle, Paola and Roxy have been immersed in the entire creative, graphic and editorial process of the project, deciding how they want to be represented. That is, each product from their story has been approved by each one of them before being published. For me, this is not only because of my feminist research ethic, but also a political commitment to forge other times and build consensual representations. I value the generation of spaces and practices to listen how the workers want to be read, seen and heard. Asking them if they

agree with the interpretations that have been made of their stories is an anti-algorithm gesture or an anti-hegemonic and emancipatory algorithm: here they can decide. I believe that the issue of decisions and autonomy in decisions is essential to challenge the meaning of technology.

And this implies a different notion of time! The trust between us has been built little by little. But, in addition, it implies contemplating longer creative and writing processes so that there is time to send the sketches and drafts to the workers, listen to their observations, change them and send them again. Listen, listen and listen. This is not a co-research process, nor is it a collective writing essay, but an attempt to generate more horizontal and less extractivist practices within the limits of the individual research format defined by those who finance this project. Within those margins and blurring them, I think of this space as a militant investigation.

Each story has been graphically translated by illustrators and visual artists from the same countries where the female workers live. Jessi's story was illustrated by Priscila; Giselle's, by Day; Paola's, by Sara; and Roxy's, by Mar. In some cases, the illustrators were in direct communication with the workers; in others, I was the bridge. This depended on how the app workers felt more comfortable and secure. In the same way, each worker decided if they wanted to have an anonymized name. Those who chose it that way chose their "new" name themselves.

The entire work team has been made up of women and dissidents: illustrators, graphic designers, editors, readers, transcribers, translators, researchers, communicators! Twenty women and two non-binary people have intervened in *Domestic Code in the flesh*: their work has made mine possible. It is a commitment to build in a feminine and feminist key, to weave this together among us. Among the readers, we had Fanny, a paid domestic worker from Quito, Ecuador, has taken part. She doesn't work in an app, but she has been employed in domestic services for more than twenty years. Fanny has read all the texts in this project and has contributed with her

observations to generate friendly and accessible texts that are easily understood by any type of reader. In fact, one of the objectives of this project is that the materials can be used by paid domestic workers, unions and worker organizations. This is not a text for academic dissemination only:

Because the academy cannot give us everything and it distances us from the collective pulse, from what really happens, from the things that people do. The idea is to practice decolonization through the body and that is not said, it is done (Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui 2019).

I have a deep love for methodologies. The methodological construction is essential for any knowledge production process. I agree with the words of Beverley Skeggs (2019), who affirms that methodology is the foundation of all theory. Thus, at the heart of this *Domestic Code in the flesh*, lies my commitment to decolonial feminism. This implies thinking about the methodology of this research in a decolonial key, reconstructing the other history, the other texts, questioning the matrix of domination (Patricia Hill Collins 1998). It seeks to think about power relations immersed in a research process to build knowledge without reproducing “epistemic violence” (Gayatri Spivak 1996) or “discursive colonization” (Chandra Mohanty 2003) and “not contributing to the rejuvenation of this domination” (Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui 2010).

Building decolonial methodologies also implies reflecting on power relations and ways of relating to people. “I am convinced that an ethic of sharing is at the heart of oral history practice” (Steven High 2015); that is, sharing is a two-way street, where I also communicate my daily experiences, my dreams, my concerns with the workers. It is a practice of sharing, generating other ties, building trust. In addition, this methodological construction entails assuming that every decision within the research process is political, thinking about the details from how the interview will be generated (the place, the time, the questions), how it will be written or not, what will be reported,

to who will be quoted, where it will be disseminated, how it will be paid, etc. These are extremely important decisions that deserve a thoughtful exercise. For me, all these practices, especially the engagement of the workers, are a fundamental part of the methodology. And, mainly, the recognition that these women are producers of knowledge (Yuderskys Espinosa, Diana Gómez, María Lugones and Karina Ocho 2013).

Jessi, in São Paulo, works for the app MaryHelp; Giselle, in Mexico City, for Aliadas; Paola, in Bogotá, for Hogaru; and Roxy, in Los Angeles, for Jan-Pro. Each of these apps it has its particularities and, among the workers, their experiences are different. This is one of the reasons why this project does not seek to give absolute conclusions or general comparisons between apps or countries; it is rather a space for connection and interconnection between workers. This methodology recognizes that “[e]xperience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted” (Joan Scott 1991, 797); distinguishes that the “oral interview is a multilayered communicative event, which a transcript only palely reflects” (Valerie Yow 2005, 305); is based on the fact that the interview can be the space where oral history is participatory and emancipatory (Kruskaya Hidalgo 2018), but, in turn, that it is a “struggle for the power to interpret and represent” (Catherine Baker cited in Steve High 2015, 19) and that “theory is always placed somewhere and always written by someone” (Grada Kilomba 2010, 32). Thus, this research calls for situated knowledge that enables “embodied objectivity” through “partial perspectives” (Donna Haraway 1988).

Care work sold on digital platforms has been a largely neglected field of study, union agenda, and area of state regulation, given that some of these apps have been in operation for a decade. It is as if the women who work in these apps didn’t exist, that nobody cared for them. But Jessi matters, Giselle matters, Paola matters, and Roxy matters! All Paid Domestic Workers Matter! This project is a grain of sand to bring visibility to the problems of those who work in these apps.

Theoretical Conversations

Within capitalist control, the transformation of care work from unpaid to paid labor has been a process of constant change. We cannot think that care work has remained monolithic over time. As Ursula Huws (2019) argues, the ways in which care work —cleaning, cooking, washing, caring for infants and the elderly, etc.— is performed has undergone dramatic changes facing waves of commodification, decommodification, and recommodification. Combined with technological changes, these have pushed modifications in the dynamics of the content and organization of reproductive work inside and outside the home.

Ursula Huws argues that we are living a moment of “time squeeze”, where adult people find themselves increasingly exhausted at the end of the day from overwork. In this sense, in this document I want to think about how we currently live a dispute over time, or even worse, a dispossession of time. A refinancing of time! We know that salaried work conditions are continuously worsened, increasing unemployment and informality. To reach the end of the month, more people must have two or three jobs and maintain shifts of more than eight working hours. So, at the end of the day there is no strength or time or energy left to do the work around the house. This is a European diagnosis and we must think about whether this perspective is relevant in Latin America. Because “the prevailing tendency of social theory is either to exclude spatiality directly from its sphere of action as an unnecessary complication, or to treat it as if it were a simple and immutable container within which social processes occur” (David Harvey 2007, 22), hiding the “social geography of capitalism” (Aníbal Quijano 2014, 785) and the “unequal geographical development of everyday life” (David Harvey 2007, 22). In this sense, unequal geographic space is “the fabric of life, accumulation by dispossession, and accumulation through expanded reproduction” (David Harvey 2007, 22) that generates the unequal changes of capitalism — in this case, between regions and countries. Therefore, understanding the changes and trends in this problem from

situated perspectives allows us to increase the complexity of the study on the intersection between the platform economy and the care economy. Additionally, thinking about a capitalist spatiality brings the body as a category of analysis: the body as a territory of capitalist accumulation.

However, for the purposes of this text, I want to focus on how capitalism looks for ways to generate profits and reduce costs of care work, particularly paid household work. Currently, we are facing different processes of reduction of the welfare state worldwide, where, as authors such as Flavia Costa (2021) defend, “neoliberalism and digital platforms are part of the successful project of moving the welfare state away from us.” The representatives of capital, through the cleaning apps, have managed to organize manual work, seeking to simplify and standardize it to market these services faster and cheaper. A multinational may offer a task that is more generic. Also, it is a way to control workers in more automated ways through algorithms. In addition, the idea that domestic work “is generic” is imposed and the fact that it implies specific knowledge is made invisible or denied.

Authors like Hildur Ve spoke of a rationality of care. This could be applied to these apps, as they seek to maximize productivity and the results of paid work within homes. Working for hours, with a timer at the start and end of each activity, differentiating and listing tasks, working in several houses in the same day, are some features of Taylorism and Fordism that are present in algorithmic management. Digital platform companies develop sophisticated apps to “facilitate” work within homes and, in turn, bring your home closer to the global market. In other words, the development of digital platforms for managing work transforms the organization of services within homes and creates new types of consumption.

Taking into account that each stage of capitalism develops its key technologies (Achille Mbembe 2003), the platform economy and artificial intelligence are the tools of the current stage of capitalism. For this reason, it is relevant to reflect on whether algorithms are a fetish, in Marx’s terms. Because the perception

of certain relationships is established — especially involving production and exchange — not as relationships between people, but as if they were between things: app-service-money and, above all, the apps understood as an entity that appears to have a will independent of those who produced it, that is, with a phantasmagorical nature. We must be careful not to contribute to the fetishization of technology and apps: they are people representing capital who are creating these tools for specific projects.

Likewise, using the thought categories of the analysis protagonists as the research backbone (José Leite 2011) is a political decision and, in turn, is a commitment to everyday theorizing. In this sense, the work of Lorena Capogrossi (2020, 1120-1121) states that together with the non-domestic cleaning workers in Argentina, the category of “fragile stabilities” or “crystal stabilities” arose, as an analytical effort to recover what these workers reinvented by comparing their previous jobs, without failing to give visibility to the precariousness of these new jobs. “This category reflects why the workers see stability and security where we saw precariousness”. For example, talking to the workers¹ of cleaning apps in this project, some report that the app gives them more stability in terms of payment security. This occurs above all because the app clients pay with a credit card when requesting the service, before the workers arrive to work. When they were self-employed without the apps, sometimes they had to deal with customers who, after the service was concluded, did not want to pay them the agreed amount. That is to say, this stability is not in terms of permanent work, social security or employment contract, but the stability of payment in the midst of precariousness. It is important to think about the category of fragile or crystal stabilities in this analysis.

¹ In this text I use inclusive language as a political position; however, I am referring to “workers in cleaning apps” in feminine plural (in the Spanish original text) because the women with whom I had the opportunity to talk identify themselves as such. In addition, as I explained in previously, it is a reminder that paid domestic work continues to be highly feminized; in our region, more than 91% of domestic workers are women.

Lastly, I want to make explicit the use of the terms “domestic work”, “domestic services” and “paid domestic work”. In this text, “paid domestic work” is used intentionally, supporting the demands of the groups of paid domestic workers in Ecuador, especially the National Union of Domestic Workers (UNTHA), who seek the recognition and appreciation of the household chores as forms of work. It is a political fight for dignified and decent work, challenging the rhetoric of “you are part of the family”, “it is a duty of love”, etc. However, the words “service” and “domestic” are used by paid domestic workers in apps to describe their work activity, demonstrating the everyday nature of these concepts. So, I present those everyday uses that show the contradictions, but also reveal the colonial background and political struggles.

Approaching the Cleaning Apps

At the end of the 1990s, some web pages started putting people who needed certain services in contact with those who offered them: Elance, founded in 1999; Odeska, in 2003; or Amazon Mechanical Turk, in 2005 (Ursula Huws 2019). However, the first digital platform company or app that offered domestic paid work was created in 2008, in Boston, the United States. It was initially called RunMyErrand and, in 2010, it became TaskRabbit. It started as a platform to solve urgent needs, based on the idea of “calling my neighbor to help me.” Currently, it works as an online labor market where suppliers and clients of a service meet. If a person posts a need, called a “task”, TaskRabbit sends you three providers of that service based on its algorithm. Its business and operations model has been the basis for hundreds of apps in the United States and the world, virtual platforms that offer a number of services, including domestic work. It is important to mention that TaskRabbit was created a year before the famous Uber app.

In Europe, from 2016 to 2017, we can identify the rapid expansion and growth of cleaning and housework apps. In Latin America, the boom of these apps started in 2020, but several apps have been created since 2014. Even if there are more than a hundred of these apps around the world, and each one has its particularities, there are some key and widespread elements in this type of digital platform that will allow us to understand how it works.

To start, I want to highlight the ways in which subordination is established between workers and applications. To be hired, the workers of a domestic service or cleaning app must register and accept the conditions established by the digital platform companies without any margin of negotiation. The platforms define standard rates for the domestic services offered, of which they keep a part as their own commission and the rest is paid to the workers (Ambika Tandon and Aayush Rathi 2021). The percentage that digital platform companies retain varies from app to app, but in all the cases studied in this research,

they keep a margin as their own payment. In addition, workers must have regular access to a smart device and mobile data to accept work orders. In other words, most of the digital platforms outsource the direct and indirect costs of running the business and leave them to the workers, justifying this through the absence of an employment relationship, and alleging that they have the status of “independent contractors”. This allows them to operate without significant overhead.

Work orders are sent to workers based on factors such as ratings. Geographical proximity is generally not an aspect that they take into account. The companies also monitor the work through digital tools such as ratings, stopwatch, facial recognition and workplace photos. These apps have the profile of each worker — which includes their photo, age and comments received. Customers rate workers after they work for them and leave comments; workers cannot do the same with clients. In the workers’ profile, it is clear if they have previously canceled services, which affects their ratings, and also remains in their public record. It is important to mention that within the domestic service or cleaning apps, the platforms model, placement processes and configuration of the supply chain are more diverse than the uberization model (Ambika Tandon and Aayush Rathi 2021).

Most of these digital cleaning platform companies generate controls and barriers to prevent the organization of their workers. Within the apps, workers cannot see the profiles of the other colleagues, nor are there mechanisms to communicate with each other. There are companies that among their clauses explicitly request that the workers not speak to anyone about the apps; that is, they require extreme confidentiality. This generates fear among workers, because they know that if they get organized they could lose their job. Besides, unlike other sectors of the platform economy — such as on-demand delivery companies —, women workers in cleaning apps cannot distinguish their peers in the streets, nor do they have meeting points; then, union organization is much more difficult to achieve.

Regarding the characterization of these companies and the origin of their capital and market practices, it is a challenge to find information with international perspectives and to establish trends because there is a diversity of actors and a multiplicity of care services. There are apps focused solely on domestic paid work; others also offer accompanying services for the elderly; others, child care; or nursing, making the analysis more complex. Referring to the companies where Jessi, Giselle, Paola and Roxy work, and a few others apps from Latin America focused mainly on cleaning services, on several occasions they were created as national startups; such is the case of Hogaru in Colombia; Aliadas and Homely in Mexico; or Yana in Ecuador. In other cases, already consolidated employment companies and domestic service recruitment agencies tried to modernize and developed apps: Mary Help in Brazil or Cleon in Ecuador. In all the companies mapped in this research, the owners of these digital platforms are businessmen. For now, none of these apps operate in other countries, that is, they are not multinationals, but Hogaru has announced that it plans to expand to Chile and Mexico.

On the one hand, within the anthropology of work there is a line of studies that describe how clients occupy diffuse positions as foremen, as work supervisors or as employers themselves. In this sector of apps, paid domestic workers cannot evaluate clients, but the clients can evaluate workers, to a large extent defining the ratings at work and intensifying power relations. In the stories of the women workers, it is evident that the clients exercise control practices, putting cameras in their houses, filming them, checking their bags when leaving, reporting to the apps if they break something, etc.

On the other hand, through language, these companies seek to distance themselves from labor relations, using terms such as “keepers”, “cleaning professionals”, “independent”, “entrepreneurs” and not “workers”. Also, it strikes me how in the Brazilian case, the app is called Mary Help (María helps), using a woman’s name that is associated in various Latin American countries with domestic service and the indigenous

population. Thus, discursively, race, gender and class-based categories are being used.

Focusing on the apps where Jessi, Giselle, Paola and Roxy work, we will talk about the specifics of Mary Help, Aliadas, Hogaru and Jan-Pro.

Mary Help, Brazil

The company Mary Help began operations in 2011 and is one of the apps most used for domestic work in Brazil. Currently, it has become a franchise and is present in 16 of the 27 states of the country, such as: São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Brasília, Goiânia, Salvador de Bahia, Rio Grande do Sul. With this app, workers cannot choose commuting distances or areas of the city where they work. The app forces them to buy the uniform and deducts it from their pay. Payment is made biweekly. It is estimated that Mary Help keeps 64% of the pay rate. Here the workers are not hired by the app, they do not have social security or legal benefits.

Aliadas, Mexico

It is a digital platform that was created as a pilot test, in 2014. By 2015, Aliadas formalized its operations in Mexico City and expanded its coverage to the metropolitan area. In the Aliadas app, paid domestic workers must choose the services they will offer in their profiles. They choose between five activities: cleaning, ironing, washing, cooking or taking care of pets. You can choose just one or several. Once the activities are selected, they appear in their profiles and are filtered by the algorithm when a person requests a type of service through the app. The workers can choose the areas of the city where they will work. This app makes the workers choose the range of price per hour they wish to earn, which ranges between 57 and 99 Mexican pesos; here we can see the creation of mechanisms of competition and fragmentation of the group of workers. In this case the workers are not hired by the app, they do not have social security or legal benefits.

Hogaru, Colombia

In 2013, Hogaru started operations through a website and, in 2015, launched its digital platform. It has coverage in Bogotá, Medellín and Cali. Unlike others apps in the region, Hogaru directly hires its paid domestic workers, giving them social and legal benefits. That is, this app hires the domestic workers and, from there, assigns them the services requested by the clients. This app ensures that workers earn the local minimum wage. In the Fairwork report, a project that evaluates working conditions on digital platforms worldwide and ranks them based on how fair they are, Hogaru is the app with the highest rating in Latin America (Fairwork 2021). However, with this platform, workers cannot choose the areas where they will work and orders are not assigned to them based on their geolocation.

Jan-Pro, United States

Currently, Jan-Pro works as an online labor market where clients and workers meet. That is, the workers are considered suppliers of cleaning activities that have their own business. Jan-Pro is one of the largest cleaning and sanitizing franchises in the United States. Here the workers are not hired by the app, they do not have social security or legal benefits. To open a profile and promote their business, workers are required to make a non-refundable deposit; they can invest money to get better houses or offices to clean. It is a kind of auction to compete for a place that will be cleaned on a monthly basis.

Here is a brief comparative table:

Table #1: Comparison between apps


Temáticas/Apps	Mary Help	Aliadas	Hogaru	Jan-Pro
Work contract			X	
Affiliation to the national social security scheme			X	
Minimum wage guarantee			X	
Choice of work areas		X		X
Assignment of orders by geolocation				
Mandatory to wear company uniform.	X	X	X	X
The workers must buy uniform.	X	X		X
Meeting mechanism between workers provided by the company			X	

Own elaboration

Here are short extracts of the life stories of four women: Jessi from Brazil, Giselle from Mexico, Paola from Colombia and Roxy from the United States. Fragments of their stories are present in different formats that are not repeated. The podcast episodes tell a part of their story; the illustrations, another; and this text, another. The assembly of these pieces delves a little deeper into their experiences working in cleaning apps, but it is still only a small brushstroke of their lives. With that in mind, the purpose of the following pages is to disclose some of the problems that these women face in their daily work and weave a radical, sororal and vulnerable listening.

I met Jessi through a Brazilian journalist who had interviewed her and published a story about her work in apps. I spoke with her for the first time at the beginning of May 2022 and since then we have had several WhatsApp calls, exchanging messages, audios, photos, etc. We are in constant communication, in which we communicate in Spanish, Portuguese, and Portoñol. I got Giselle's contact from a friend of a friend. He used the app to hire domestic services and asked Giselle if I could interview her, so we started talking. Our first virtual contact occurred in April 2022, and after some conversations on WhatsApp and phone calls we were able to meet in person in June in Tlalpán. I went to Mexico City for a few days and we met for a coffee and talked for a few hours. I got in touch with Paola through a Colombian trade unionist who met her in one of her workshops. We have been in contact since July 2022 and our communication is completely through WhatsApp. And finally, I met Roxy through a Chicana researcher and activist in Los Angeles who had an exchange with migrant domestic workers and knew Roxy through the organization. We have been in contact since July 2022 and our communication is fully supported by WhatsApp and Zoom.





“ NÃO É UM
PREÇO JUSTO,
AINDA MAIS NOS
DIAS DE HOJE,
COM 91 REAIS
A GENTE NÃO
FAZ NADA NO
MERCADO HOJE
EM DIA; TÁ TUDO
MUITO CARO, O
CUSTO DE VIDA
É UM ABSURDO.
E 91 REAIS NÃO
DÁ NEM PRA
COMPRAR A
MISTURA DO DIA
AS VEZES.

Jessi, Brazil

São Paulo, like all the big Latin American metropolises, is marked by social inequality. Luxurious neighborhoods, gigantic buildings, sports cars and even private heliports can be found in the financial center. Meanwhile, thousands of people live in *favelas*, neighborhoods with little access to basic services, areas with minimal state infrastructure. It is in this city, the most populous urban center in Latin America, where Jessi—an Afro-Brazilian woman—lives, works, struggles and dreams.

Jessi is 24 years old and lives on the outskirts of São Paulo, in Freguesia do Ô, one of the oldest neighborhoods in the city. It is located far from the center and does not have a good public transport infrastructure. It is not considered a *favela*, but it was constituted by settlements and land takeovers. Since she was little, Jessi was in charge of caring for her mother, who is a functionally diverse person. Her mother's life has motivated her to study medicine and become a doctor; however, currently, she does not have the time or resources to fulfill this dream. She lives with her mother and grandmother and is the breadwinner for her family. She has done domestic work since she was 16 years old; in 2017 she began cleaning houses and offices through Mary Help.

In Brazil, this is one of the most used apps for paid domestic work. Currently, Mary Help is present in 16 of the 27 states of Brazil, including São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Brasília, Goiânia, Salvador de Bahia, and Rio Grande do Sul. This cleaning app does not let the workers choose the areas where they will work; in addition, it only notifies them where they will go in the morning of the same day that they have to carry out the service, that is, before leaving home: only then will they know the gender of their client, in which direction they should move and what work they will perform: cleaning, cooking, ironing...

Sometimes, Jessi must travel for three hours to get to work—more than 20 km separate the periphery where she lives from the middle- and upper-class neighborhoods where customers

reside. “Through the platform, I have already faced a lot of racism, a lot of prejudice. I wear braids in my hair; so, people look at me in a strange way... it’s complex”. She is sure that her experience is not isolated and that many women workers also experience discrimination when they come to houses and offices to clean. In fact, the conditions of the women who work at Mary Help are precarious and earning so little in the app only worsens the situation.

Many of us work with an empty stomach, many do not eat, many customers do not even offer us water. The houses that offer something to eat are rare, and we are even afraid to accept something because, generally, they offer us food and then they tell the company that we ate, that we are starving and the company complains to us. Many workers are even hungry during the day, feeling bad, with low blood pressure. They work with a bag of salt in their wallets so that their blood pressure doesn’t drop or because they don’t have time to stop.

Since she started working for the Mary Help app in 2017, the company has not updated the rates they pay to workers. It should be noted that the payment made by clients to Mary Help is not the same as the app delivers to domestic workers. It is calculated that the app keeps 64% of each fee. For example, Mary Help charges 152 reais (approximately USD 29) for a four-hour service, but pays workers only 55 reais (approximately USD 10). For an 8-hour work day, Jessi receives only 91 reais (USD 17 approximately). With the inflation that Brazil experiences annually, the rate that the app pays to workers is not enough to cover basic needs.


It is not a fair price, and with inflation, it is getting worse. With 91 reais, you don’t buy anything in the market. Everything is very expensive and the cost of living is absurd. And 91 reais is sometimes not even enough to buy the food for the day. We have to choose: either we buy the food for the day or buy personal hygiene products.

Jessi tells me about this disturbing situation, because her salary is not enough to cover her basic needs. It is not easy having to choose between food or sanitary pads, medicines or body care products. That is not a life with dignity! Besides, Mary Help pays her biweekly, but the clients pay the app on the same day of the service. As if that were not enough, sometimes the app takes longer to pay domestic workers.

Jessi has demanded on several occasions that Mary Help increases the payment they transfer to workers. However, “one swallow does not make a summer”, she says between laughs and sighs, remembering the many times her voice was not heard. She believes that if more workers demanded higher pay rates, pressure could be brought to bear, but they just don’t listen to her. And therein lies the challenge: how to organize women workers who are so isolated?

Mary Help does not allow domestic workers to have contact with each other or with clients. In fact, through the app, they cannot contact other workers or see their profiles or know who or how many workers are there. Besides, the app blocks their profiles if they find out that workers are chatting with each other or organizing. That is to say, the app prevents the organization among workers! The app, from its design, generates isolation! When asked about the reasons for the app not allowing them to be in contact, Jessi says that “it’s a security method for the app because they are afraid of the employees getting together.”

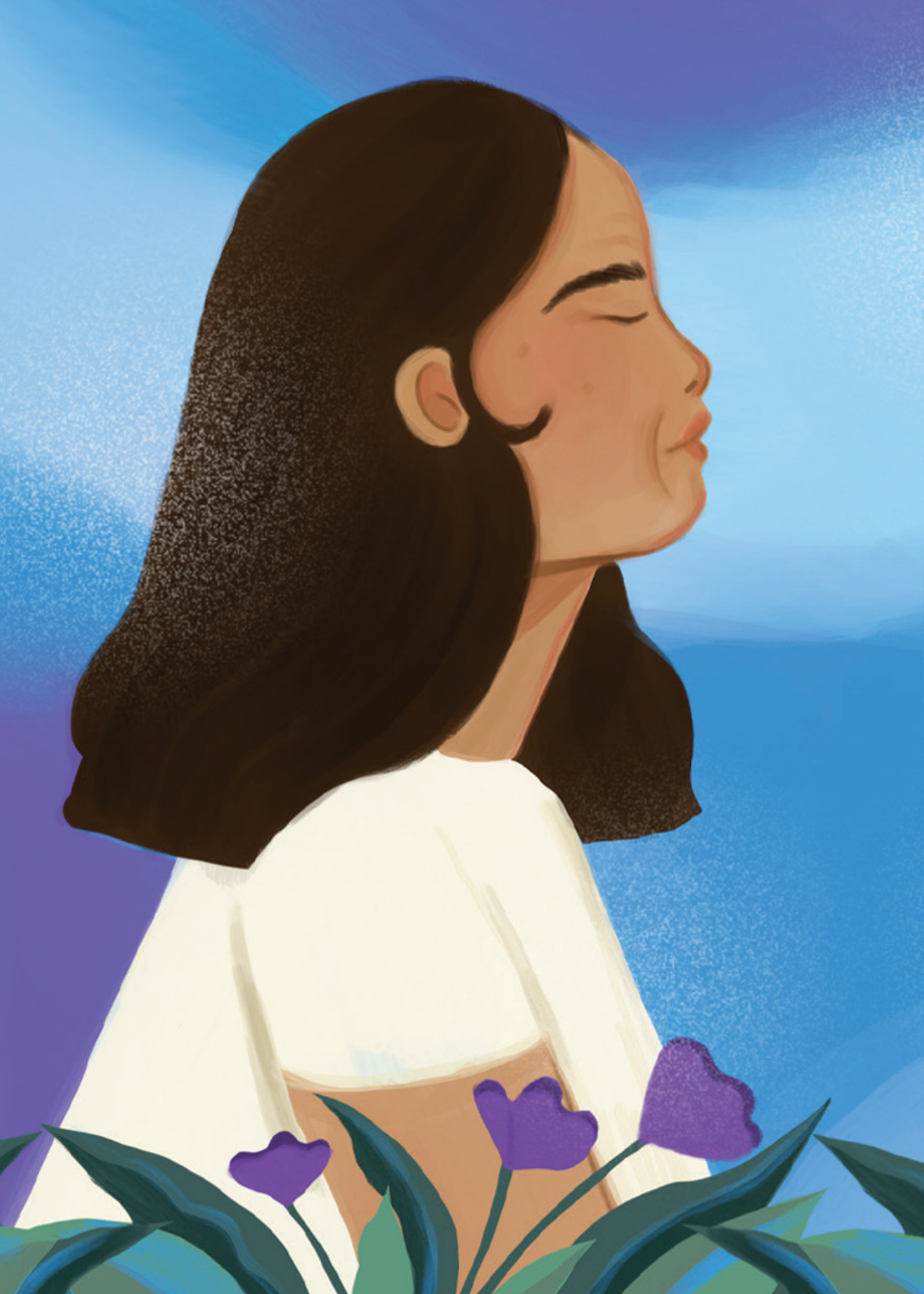
In addition to cleaning work, Mary Help has on several occasions asked Jessi to train new workers. This means going to a home or office with another worker, supervising her work, teaching her cleaning techniques, and submitting a performance report to the app. Jessi receives no additional payment for this training job. But, also, to the new girls who are being trained, Mary Help does not pay them for their workday, they only give them 5 reais (less than 1 USD) for the bus tickets.



The girl was with me from 8:30 to 14:30; she helped me with work, I taught her the tasks. She didn't bring lunch and I shared my lunch with her. She was with me, she learned the job and she didn't earn anything for what she did, exactly nothing, just the value of the bus ticket, not even lunch. The girl had just arrived from Minas Gerais, she was really in need, desperate to work, and the company did that to her, telling her that she was in training. They don't pay much, and it wouldn't be hard for them to pay her something! It was so sad...

Jessi would like to organize Mary Help workers to demand the formalization and guarantee of their labor rights. Among the changes that she would like to achieve within the app, she mentions access to social security, the formalization of the employment relationship, the increase in her salary, the possibility of choosing work areas — or at least delimiting the distance — and having more flexible working hours. All these changes are possible, we can join in requesting improvements for paid domestic workers from the apps like Mary Help and the government.

As Jessi continues in this struggle, she is also looking to consolidate clients outside the app. Among her reasons for betting on working with direct employers is pay: she earns more working without Mary Help. But, in addition, Jessi points out that paid domestic work leads to creating bonds with whom you work, a kind of intimate relationship. With the app, this is lost because every day you have to go to work in a different house with people you do not know and, many times, you will not work in that person's house again.



"A NOSOTRAS NOS LLAMAN ALIADAS.
TÚ ERES UNA ALIADA QUE NOS
AYUDA A HACER LA LIMPIEZA
Y ASÍ "



PERO
SOMOS
TRABAJADORAS

Giselle, Mexico

Giselle lives in the south, in Tlalpan, one of the 16 territorial demarcations of Mexico City; it is the municipality with the largest territorial extension. Giselle is a single mother of three girls. She decided to separate from the father of her daughters because it was a violent relationship. When she left him, she started working in domestic services. “Since I am a single mother, my needs were greater, I had to take care of my daughters and I had to look for another type of income”. It was a subsistence decision to support her family, but also to show them and prove to herself that she could get by without a man to support her. Since then, she has raised her daughters with the conviction that they are free and independent. In 2020, after her sister’s suggestion, she started working on the Aliadas app. Her sister already worked there and recommended her to the company. Aliadas is the first cleaning app in Mexico, was created in 2014 with a pilot project and, in 2015, began commercial operations. It provides services in Mexico City and the metropolitan area. This app offers five services: care for pets, ironing, washing, cooking or just cleaning.

According to its creator, Aliadas was conceived to improve the working conditions of paid domestic workers and, in turn, provide clients with the services. One of the things that the app takes into account is the geographical distribution of the city and this allows workers to choose the areas where they want to work. The distribution is calculated through the subway stations. That is, they can choose how far they want to travel to go to work. However, it is in the wealthier neighborhoods — located in the north of the city — where there is more demand for the service: in particular, the neighborhoods of Polanco, Condesa, Roma and Santa Fe. “I can change my zone every day, but usually I leave it as it is. When there are no people available for Santa Fe, they send messages through the app or by WhatsApp. They ask us who can cover a service at such time.”


Giselle says that the option to choose the work areas is a great advantage. Another benefit is the number of services requested: you have more work with the app than “on your own”. Also, she mentions that the app gives her more security and guaranteed payment, because when she was self-employed, sometimes those who hired her did not pay or gave her less than the agreed price. However, the rate paid by clients to Aliadas is not the same as what the workers receive. To Giselle, the app allows her to choose how much she wants to charge per hour of work in a range between 57 and 99 Mexican pesos (between 2.81 and 4.88 USD, approximately). Giselle chose the rate of 99 pesos, but the app charges 120 pesos for her hour of work. That is, 21 pesos more per hour (approximately USD 1.04) that the company retains. When asking Giselle about the reasons or motivations for the app to make them decide the rate, she says that Aliadas tells them “you decide what your work is worth.”

The idea of this “decision” is very curious, because in the capitalist system it would seem that there is a choice, but there are market rules and systems of oppression that operate, making it impossible for this to become a real possibility. The workers, when entering Aliadas, choose the lowest rate to try to have more orders and better comments on their profiles. Giselle opted for a fee of 57 pesos at the beginning. In addition, for customers, when they request a service, different values are displayed and there will be those who choose the cheapest rate. The minimum number of hours that can be hired from the app is three hours.

At Aliadas, clients can see the profiles of all domestic workers. This includes the photo of the woman, her age, and the comments that previous clients have left about them and their work. Women are rated each time they finish cleaning a house. However, workers cannot rate clients or leave comments. They also cannot see customer profiles. “Here it seems that the customer is usually right,” reflects Giselle, telling me with a sigh. The ratings go from a maximum of 5.0 to the minimum 4.0. If workers do not consistently accept services, they lower their rating. If they cancel an accepted service, their rating

drops too; and the app can even charge them for the cost of the service not performed. For example, if Giselle cancels a job, she is charged the amount the client paid, not what she would have earned. That is, they charge her more than they would have paid her. “If I cancel the day before, they charge me 100 pesos. If I cancel the same day, they charge me the full service. They charge what the app charges, as is.”

Giselle claims that there are more men than women customers using Aliadas in Mexico City, or at least she is requested by more men, single men. She also states that men, to select the worker who will go to their home, are guided by the appearance of the woman, that is, they see her photo and her age.



The client has access to our profile, which has a photo, data, age. I think that's why they have access to photos. For example, there is my face and that of all the girls. They do not allow us to have another type of photo: they have to see our appearance. I think that's what led a client to harass me. I am 36 years old; age also counts; I suppose he must have thought that I am young and that's why it happened.

Giselle recounts her experience of sexual harassment working with Aliadas: a man who hired her service tried to push up on her. On that occasion, Giselle did not report the situation. However, she mentions that if a client harasses a domestic worker and she reports it to the app, the app only prevents the client from contacting her again, but does not suspend him from the service. He could harass other women. When Giselle left that house, she told Aliadas what had happened: “After I left, they blocked access so that he could no longer find me on the platform and I would not go to his home again.” I asked Giselle if she could warn the other co-workers of the situation: “we don't have communication between us, I don't know if other girls have gone through the same thing [being harassed], but the client has access to our profiles.”

If something breaks while the workers are cleaning the house, they must notify the app and the client. In this way, the value of the damage that the client reports will be deducted from their payment. “If something breaks, we do have to notify the client, because the client may charge for it.” In addition, clients worry that paid domestic workers will steal from them. In several houses they put cameras and the workers are not notified that they are being recorded. When they finish work, there are clients who ask them to open their bags to check them.

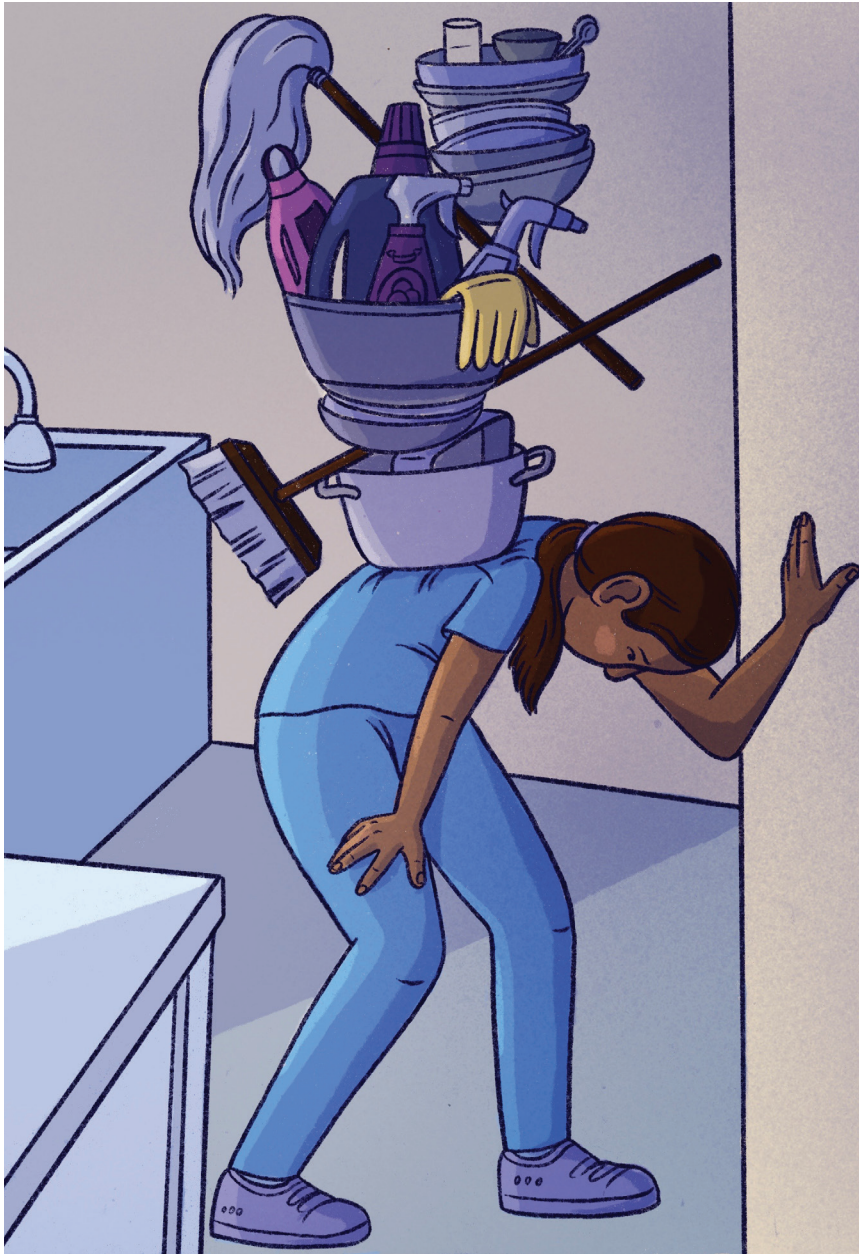
“Most of the clients worry about that, there have been houses where they have cameras and all that. One or two cameras in the rooms, in the kitchen.”

But, apart from the recordings and inspections of their bags, paid domestic workers — inside and outside the app — face discrimination, classism, racism and sexism. There are clients who do not treat domestic workers well, who do not value the work they do. As Giselle states, “many say that’s what they pay for, but the treatment has nothing to do with the payment; the treatment must be the same.” She says, with sadness, that there is a devaluation of paid and unpaid care work: “Sometimes people say ‘I work as a cleaner and you, as a lawyer’, but even lawyers hire cleaning services. It is the same, nothing changes due to the fact that you are sitting and I am sweeping... it is a job in the same way and deserves recognition and respect.”

The app company does not pay the social security fund, does not give them a work contract and does not recognize them as employees. “They call us allies. You are an ally who is going to help us clean up and so on”, but they are workers. Among the demands that Giselle has, she says, “I would suggest that Aliadas have us in social security because it allows us to have a retirement pension.” To guarantee their dignified retirement!



AGUSTINA



Paola's Illustrations by Sara Agustina

Paola, Colombia


In Laches —one of the poorest neighborhoods in Bogotá that was born from the occupations and land grabs on the slopes of the Guadalupe and La Peña hills— Paola lives with her parents, her 17-year-old daughter and her 2-year-old grandson. From a very young age, Paola has worked as a gardener, cook, waitress and as a paid domestic worker. Job uncertainty has been very present in her life: she lives without knowing if she will have a job the next day, if she will take money home at the end of the day... Looking for ways to escape her restlessness, Paola found an ad on social media about a company app for cleaning services. She applied by filling out an online form, she didn't think they would call her, but there was nothing to lose by trying. They contacted her within a week, she passed several filters (medical exams and interviews) and, then she was hired by the Hogaru app. She has been working there for two months.

Hogaru is the first company with a cleaning app in Colombia. It is defined as “a digital platform to book cleaning and cafeteria services”, but it also offers a basic escort service for people. It operates in three cities: Bogotá, Medellín and Cali. On its website, it profiles 624 paid domestic workers, but there may be more. Hogaru affiliates its workers to the social security system, gives them a labor contract, a work schedule of eight hours a day and all the legal benefits. For this reason, we could say that it is an atypical case among its peers in the region, since the other apps observed do not guarantee labor rights as Hogaru does. However, there are things that could be improved in the company, says Paola.

Domestic work is physically demanding: “There are times when it is too heavy. It's a lot of work,” says Paola in distress. It is 9 pm and we are talking on the phone. Her daily routine is so strenuous that she can only find time in the evening — when she returns home — to talk.

The Hogaru app allows hiring cleaning services for four or eight hours, but, on several occasions, the established time is not respected: the clients want the workers to stay longer. “They tell us eight hours and they want me to work more than eight hours. My departure time is established and sometimes they don’t let me leave at that time,” she tells me annoyed. In the app you can have split shifts, that is, work in different houses on the same day. The time spent between houses is not contemplated within her eight-hour work schedule. So sometimes she is away from home for more than 15 hours. When she has split days, one shift can be in the north of the city and the other, two or even three hours away, to the south. In other words, with Hogaru, the workers cannot choose the areas where they will work.

Paola lives in a lower-income sector of the city, she belongs to the working class; meanwhile, those who contract the service from the app live in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods. “They send me to the neighborhoods of the rich”, she describes while laughing. In general, Paola goes to work in the neighborhoods of Chicó Norte, Mazurén, Cedritos, Las Margaritas and also “all over the Séptima, for example, 86, 158, 200 and these are very nice houses.” Inequality can be seen from the moment you reach the neighborhood to when you enter those houses. Even if Paola doesn’t mind going there and confronting the abysmal differences in her life and that of those people, these disparities are very marked and allow us to see the social differences.




When you enter one of those houses, it is like “Holly Jesus!” The houses are like, they have everything, the type of thing you have never seen before. When you arrive at their house you say “oh, well, thank God I have a place to live, I have a house, but you say “Holy Mother of God, this is a real mansion”... When I arrive home, I tell my mom that I was in a house in which the kitchen of the lady is bigger than our three-rooms home.

In Hogaru they are paid 500,000 Colombian pesos (approximately USD 115.83) every 15 days. That is, between 30,000 and 33,000 Colombian pesos per day (approximately between USD 6.95 and 7.64). However, Paola affirms that outside the app they can earn 60,000 to 70,000 Colombian pesos a day (approximately between USD 13.90 and 16.22). That is, on the one hand, on your own, you could earn twice as much as with the app, but without legal benefits. On the other hand, the app charges clients 87,950 Colombian pesos (approximately USD 20.37) for four hours of service and 116,950 Colombian pesos (approximately USD 27.09) for eight. In other words, for an eight-hour day, Hogaru keeps about 72% of the pay: the worker receives 28%. That is to say, almost three quarters of the payment of the workers is expropriated from them. Now domestic and care work is valued – a historical demand –, but it is appropriated by others.

Paola says that the payment is not justified, that it is too low. She says her colleagues also think it is low. They must spend on bus tickets (even if the app covers part of it), they must bring food or buy food on the streets, going from one place to the other all daylong. Her day is eight hours of work plus all the commuting from house to house.

The truth, the truth is that is not enough... I leave here, from my house, at five in the morning and I arrive at seven, eight at night. These are fifteen hours out of my home for 33 thousand pesos. It is not justified.

Paola reports that even if with the app she has a stable salary and a permanent job, there are very strenuous days. It is more than twelve or fifteen hours outside the house to go to work. She works from Monday to Saturday. On Saturdays they do not pay more money for their work. Also, when you have to ask for one free day, the app deducts two days from your payment.



Supposedly the companies always discount you on the day you ask for the leave, but in this company, they discount us for two days. In other words, if I ask for a leave tomorrow, well, they give me the free day tomorrow, but they deduct tomorrow and the day [after] when I go to work; the other day. They discount two days, 60 thousand pesos that they take from me for one day of leave. That's what I don't understand.

Paola has a little grandson, with whom she would like to spend more time, take him to the park to play... Leaving her house at 5 or 6 am and returning at night, she misses spending time with her family. When she needed to ask for a free day in Hogaru, she has done so to take her parents or grandson to medical appointments and she believes that flexibility should be allowed in those circumstances.

Also, they discount part of her pay if she is late for a service. This happens especially when they are in split turns; paid domestic workers take time to get to the houses because they do not know the directions or there is no public transportation to all the exclusive neighborhoods where they must go to work. If she is late, they discount up to 11,000 Colombian pesos (USD 2.55) from her. "You have to arrive at work on time. If I'm late, then they'll deduct from my salary right there," Paola says with concern.

Digital cleaning platforms should provide labor rights. Hogaru is an app that hires paid domestic workers in compliance with the provisions of the law in Colombia. However, Paola mentions some issues that could be considered to improve the living and working conditions of the women who work in the app. Paola demands an increase in the payment rate, a system for selecting distances for work shifts, and a more flexible leave policy. With this, she seeks fairer working conditions and a dignified life for all her colleagues. The cleaning apps can be improved and it is the workers who have the knowledge of the changes that must be made!





Roxy, United States

It's been 22 years since Roxy left Mexico City with a suitcase and crossed the border to enter the United States. She escaped from structural violence, from drug trafficking, and from the government. She decided to go with her boyfriend at the time — who is now her husband — after he was kidnapped in Mexico. They migrated out of fear that something like this would happen again. They arrived in California and stayed in Los Angeles; there they made their new home. Roxy is 41 years old, with a 21-year-old daughter and 18-year-old twins. She is still fighting for her regularization in that northern country. She has worked in cleaning and maintenance of real estate since she arrived in California, going through word-of-mouth recruitment, various agencies, web advertising sites and different apps. Her two decades of work experiences show the changes in the care labor market in the United States and, above all, the technification and capitalist competition in the paid domestic work.

One of the first experiences she tells us in the cleaning area was between 2004 and 2007, when she worked for a beach house cleaning agency in Venice Beach. One day she came with another work colleague to clean a house and while she was dusting the kitchen shelves, she found a gun. They were both very scared.

I opened the spoon drawer and found a gun. So, I grabbed it and went and locked the door. There was only one door to enter and exit. I told my partner: “We have to close it because they are going to come for it” and it scared us.

Roxy then called the agency supervisor and tried to explain the situation to her: “I spoke a little English and she a little Spanish, so I told her that ‘there was a *gun*² in the *apartment*’.”

2 Note that my conversations with Roxy have been in Spanish. However, when she speaks, she uses certain words in English. In the words of Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) this reveals the language of the borderlands, a working-class English, a slang English, a Mexican Spanish, a Chicano Spanish, a Tex-Mex; in short, the complexity of migrant communities and the myriad of languages they speak. For this reason, we will italicize all the words she says in English in her original story.

The supervisor told her to leave the gun in the drawer and to leave the place immediately. “That’s when I said ‘no more, I don’t want this job anymore, I don’t want to put my life at risk, and for so little money’”. It was so that she stopped working with that cleaning agency and, shortly after, she joined Craigslist — a classified ads website. With Craigslist she worked for more than eight years.

Delving into Roxy’s experiences in the platform economy, she has worked with different cleaning apps, including: Jan-Pro and Care. In none of the apps where Roxy has worked fellow paid domestic workers could rate individual clients; they couldn’t leave comments either. However, customers do rate them and do leave comments on their profiles, which are public. For Roxy, the way that the app rates them is unfair. In addition, several times clients rate them poorly for subjective reasons and prejudice, such as their nationality, and not because of the work they do.

“I would like to rate customers. I could also give them little stars and say ‘be careful with this person because this happened to me with her’”.

Roxy tells us insistently that the apps do not allow paid domestic workers to be in contact with each other. So, they do not have any way to alert others if a client is harassing, discriminating, racist, etc. For this reason, Roxy demands that they, as workers, can also leave comments and rate them.

One of the barriers that Roxy and many migrant workers face is language. Her command of English is sometimes low or intermediate and this generates tensions with clients.

They see us as ignorant because of our accent, because we don't speak English very well. Sometimes, they [the clients] well, they don't speak Spanish and they get frustrated because they think that we don't understand them or something... I understand a little bit of English, but my sister didn't go to school here or anything, and she doesn't understand anything. With her it's more of a problem. So, I told her to take a photo if there is something wrong and I immediately send the client a message to tell what is happening and so on.

There are barriers often related to discrimination, racism, xenophobia. They are not just difficulties, they are pains. It is the match and mismatch between various forms of oppression; it is the incarnation of “borderlands subjectivities” in the words of the Chicana Gloria Anzaldúa.

Some cleaning apps in the US demand workers that are American citizens. Others request residency visa and others, the social security number. But the control is not very strict, the need to work is pressing and there are many irregular workers working with the apps. As the motto says, “we are everywhere” and the migrants are in the apps also.

Many of these platform companies offer large cleaning venues such as offices and multi-story homes. So, if the workers “win” that offer, they must hire more people. That is, the app does not assign shifts but rather they must compete to win the job. In most cases, they subcontract people in the process of regularization or irregular workers in order to have competitive prices and win the bid. Besides, the women hire their relatives, people from their community, and other migrant people to give them a hand.

The app says that if you need to hire people to help you, they have to be legal in this country; then, there is where you get into trouble because it is not true. I, for example, am just in the process of regularization.

Roxy's dream is to have her own business app. An app that pays a fair price, that provides accident insurance to the workers, that cares for the well-being of the colleagues and thinks about the cleaning products used at work.

I would like to have my own app and help domestic workers to have insurance and get jobs. I would do pretty *flyers, business cards* and I would have letters of recommendation. All good so that they don't have to struggle like I did, so they don't suffer so much!

Roxy mentions that the products that customers have for cleaning offices and homes are, most of the time, very toxic. The use of these products affects the health of workers and also the environment.

I want to use liquids that do not harm us or the client. What I always tell them when I go to an office and see commercial liquids is "*oh, to be honest, I don't like this kind*". Sometimes I ask for *baking soda and vinegar*.

Inside the app of her dreams, Roxy would like to offer organic cleaning products, a brand of products that matches the different cleaning tasks... More than distant horizons, Roxy's proposals are clear strategies on how to improve the apps. These are changes that contemplate a dignified life for paid domestic workers and, in turn, that commit to more conscious and respectful forms of production, consumption, action and relationship with nature and the planet.

Final thoughts. The App of Our Dreams

When I met Roxy, she told me that one day at the Popular Education Institute of Southern California (IDEPSCA) where she studies, the colleagues who were leading a workshop on labor rights for migrant workers asked them to draw the app of their dreams. All the present women drew on a piece of paper how they imagined a digital platform that would respond to all of their demands and needs. I would love to see those drawings, however, there are no photographic records of them. That exercise of *the app of our dreams* remained resonating with me; I found in it a creative way to capture the wisdom of each *compañera*. But, in addition, it clarifies the premise that the debate on the platform economy is not about whether or not these companies should exist, but about how they should operate. I learned about this proposal together with the Platform Observatory — a collective of which I am a part of — by accompanying the struggle of the workers of on-demand delivery and driving platforms in Ecuador. Those who work there do not want digital platforms to cease to exist, but to guarantee decent working conditions and a dignified life.

In the case of paid domestic workers in apps, their demands are also about working conditions. They have the expertise to propose the changes and modifications that must be made to digital platforms to improve them in favor of working people. Among the main topics, Jessi, Giselle, Paola and Roxy stress that, as workers, they should have the possibility to rate and comment on clients. This would be a way of balancing the power that the app and the clients have, but apart from that it would be an alert and protection mechanism for the workers: a complaint channel in the event that a client commits violence. Another of the issues they demand is choosing the areas where they will work (except Giselle, who has that with Aliadas) and a mechanism for assigning shifts based on geolocation. Another important point is the affiliation to social security to have a decent retirement plan.

The fundamental and widespread demand is the issue of compensation, an increase in payment rates. The workers denounce that the apps keep a large percentage as commission, something that is prohibited according to article 15 of Convention 189 of the International Labor Organization (ILO) on Domestic Work. Increasing their payments would allow them to access a better life and not be forced to work every day of the week without rest.

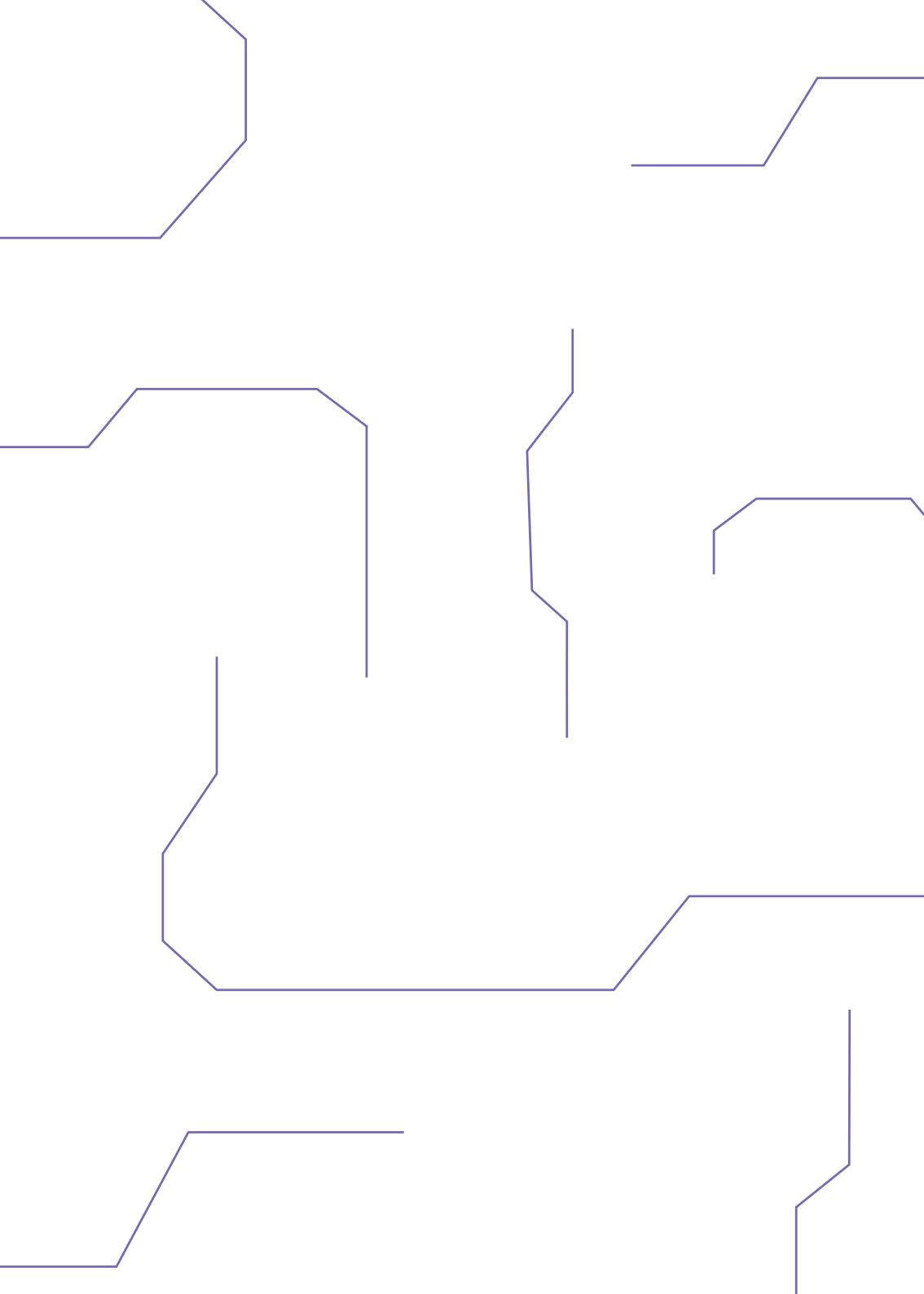
A very present theme in all the life stories was the fact that every day they change employers; they go to different houses. Historically, the sector of paid domestic work has the peculiarity that each worker has many employers, but with digital platforms, this turnover is maximized. What does this imply in terms of work organization? Within the platform economy, the challenge to organize workers is much stronger because labor relations are atomized. You no longer know who the boss is, there is no human resources department, there is no known specific workplace to meet your peers. In the case of cleaning app companies, systems that isolate workers and different forms of control are generated to make organizing even more difficult. These women recount how the apps companies forbid them to talk to each other, and suspend their accounts if they find out that they are organizing.

The level of control is so high that the workers distrust their peers during the few times they work together because they do not know if any of them will pass information on to the company. But, in addition, rotation presents a challenge for the personal relationships between workers and clients/ employers: intimacy is at stake. I find it interesting to think of intimacy as something that may occur in these cases and this raises several questions for me. How is the working process of intimacy? How is intimacy managed? Taking into account that it is an intimacy within relations of power and inequality.

The app of our dreams also alludes to Roxy's desire to create an intersectional approach, that addresses other areas of the lives of the workers: an app that takes into account about health, migration, nature, violence... It is an approach that

allows workers to have their own hiring and management mechanisms. This idea is a political proposal for the platform economy; there are on-demand delivery apps in various countries that function as cooperatives and that belong to the workers. This can be a horizon of struggle and action for paid domestic workers in the future and a line of action for governments, public and private institutions, study centers and militant groups.

Lastly, *las compañeras* seek dignity and appreciation in their work. It is something that digital platform companies, governments and society should provide. Care work sustains the world and enables the reproduction of life. Jessi, Giselle, Paola and Roxy have dreams, desires, projects; they are women with families and stories. They deserve dignified treatment and recognition of their work. “Many people think that it is just another job, but I think that all of us who dedicate ourselves to this work do a lot to others”, says Giselle. May these pages be part of that struggle and that recognition.



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