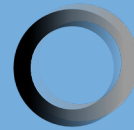


Research papers

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Labour market trajectories and conciliation efforts among female Uber drivers

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Labour market trajectories and conciliation efforts among female *Uber* drivers

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Abstract

This article examines female Uber drivers' labour trajectories, paying attention to the way in which gender-based occupational segregation is reproduced and/or challenged in the context of the platform. It also asks how female drivers balance between paid labour and care responsibilities. The analysis focuses on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on platform female drivers work-life balance. The article uses qualitative interviews with Uber female drivers, finding that the entry of female drivers into Uber comes with a significant challenge to the gender division of labour. With respect to the Argentinian context, their participation defies the idea that occupations involving driving or circulating in public spaces are inappropriate for women. However, these women's conquests find strong limits. In particular, the daily efforts to reconcile paid work (and its implications in terms of earnings levels and health) together with domestic care activities expose the omnipresent nature of a gender order that still needs to be systematically questioned and confronted.

Keywords

Digital platforms, Uber, Gender, Argentina

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Résumé

Cet article examine les trajectoires professionnelles des conductrices Uber, en s'intéressant à la manière dont la ségrégation professionnelle fondée sur le sexe est reproduite et/ou remise en cause dans le contexte d'une plateforme numérique. Il s'interroge également sur la façon dont les conductrices gèrent l'équilibre entre travail rémunéré et responsabilités familiales (de care). L'analyse se concentre sur les impacts de la pandémie Covid-19 sur l'équilibre travail-vie personnelle des conductrices de plateforme. L'article utilise des entretiens qualitatifs avec des conductrices d'Uber, concluant que l'entrée des conductrices dans Uber s'accompagne d'un défi important pour la division du travail entre les sexes. Par rapport au contexte argentin, leur participation défie l'idée que les métiers impliquant la conduite ou la circulation dans les espaces publics sont inappropriés pour les femmes. Cependant, les conquêtes de ces femmes trouvent de fortes limites. En particulier, les efforts quotidiens pour concilier le travail rémunéré (et ses implications en termes de niveaux de revenus et de santé) avec les activités de care révèlent la nature omniprésente d'un ordre de genre qui doit encore être systématiquement interrogé et confronté.

Mots-clés

Plateformes numériques, Uber, Genre, Argentine

Remerciements

Ceci est un article issu du partenariat de recherche entre l'UNGS et l'AFD pour le projet « *Platform economy and personal services in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area: Implications on working conditions and gender inequalities* ». L'auteur est reconnaissant envers les nombreux travailleurs interrogés pour rendre possible cette analyse. Elle tient également à remercier l'agence AFD de Buenos Aires et la DR, les agents du ministère du Travail et d'autres agences gouvernementales qui ont participé à l'atelier de validation du projet qui s'est tenu en août 2020 pour leurs précieux conseils. Le document a également bénéficié des commentaires utiles reçus des participants du 15^e Congreso Nacional de Estudios del Trabajo (ASET, Buenos Aires) ainsi que des participants à la 17^e Conférence sur le marché du travail et l'équité (UNGS, Argentine). Tous résultats, interprétations et conclusions exprimés dans cet article n'engagent que l'auteur et ne reflètent pas nécessairement les points de vue de l'AFD, de l'OIT, de l'UNGS ou d'autres institutions affiliées.

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Foreword

Cecilia Poggi (AFD – Economic Assessment and Public Policy Department)

This article is part of a **research partnership** between the **AFD Economic Assessment and Public Policy Department** and the **Area de Economía at the Instituto de Ciencias of the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento (UNGS)** for the **period 2020–2021**, seeking to produce and analyse some primary qualitative and quantitative data on digital labour platforms in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area. The collaboration aims to explore some characteristics of workers using app-based platforms for the personal service sector, such as those for domestic work, office repair services, food delivery and ride-hailing services. It does so by producing **five complementary articles that together give an initial picture of how workers engage in this new work modality**.

In Argentina, the participation to the platform economy is a recent but rapidly expanding phenomenon. The severe recent economic crisis and its reinforcement with the Covid-19 crisis have been destabilizing to standard work relations, in an environment where informality is widespread and where gender inequalities are experienced across occupations. The high rate of internet connectivity as well as the unstable economic conditions experienced in the labour market provide a particularly favourable environment for the expansion of the platform modality. The project develops five articles inspecting various aspects of the platform economy, and it is considered an initial exploratory inquiry on the topic of on-the-platform work.

The articles presented address each a specific aspect of on-the-platform work, they do not cover wider analyses for the overall Argentinian labour force or for off-platform occupations, nor do they question the demand for platform work. Their value-added is the contribution to a growing and dynamic body of literature shading light on who are the workers that engage in a platform, on their labour conditions, as well as their perceptions about this type of insertion, by proposing a series of gender-sensitive analyses. The project

produced its primary qualitative and quantitative data. In-depth interviews and focus groups were conducted with workers of each occupation and an *ad-hoc* survey was designed to collect quantitative data about workers and their experience. The survey is based on a non-probabilistic sample with gender quotas per platform, seeking to ensure comparability among occupations and demographic groups. The timing of the data collections over 2020–2021 make this one of the few projects across the globe having investigated the platform use variations at the onset of the pandemic. Moreover, thanks to a research agreement with the ILO Country Office for Argentina, some articles have benefited in their analysis of an additional dataset shared by the ILO.

The project articles are available on the AFD website (www.afd.fr/en/carte-des-projets/platform-economy-buenos-aires-metropolitan-area-work-conditions-gender-inequality) exploring the following topics:

The first article investigates whether **working through a digital platform increases labour registration in high-informality occupations**. It analyses how labour entry occurs in three selected platform-based occupations in Argentina. Considering the peculiarities of each occupation, it identifies which elements may contribute to a “formalization effect” and how this is experienced by workers.

The second article explores **the role of labour regulations in the classification of platform workers** based on the case of Argentinean riders. The article analyses the treatment of three dimensions that tend to be at the centre of workers’ own concerns when it comes to the regulation of their occupation: the preservation of flexible schedules, the continuity of income self-regulation and the need to gain effective access to social protection.

The third article explores **how the digitalization of the work relation affects domestic workers** in Argentina at the onset of the Covid-19 crisis. It analyses the use workers do of *Zolvers*, the only digital platform for domestic work in the

country, and it compares what are the differences between jobs that have been taken on the platform and those outside.

The fourth article investigates **gender inequalities among platform riders and drivers**. It identifies whether there exist gender gaps in terms of hours and income and what is their magnitude. Moreover, it analyses some possible determinants, including features specific to these occupations, like the work schedule, perceptions of safety on the job or access to productive assets.

The last article delves deeper into **female platform drivers' labour market trajectories**.

The article inspects the profile of female drivers joining the platform in exploring which previous job experiences may have helped them to dare into a male-dominated occupation. Additionally, the article reviews how, once in the platform, female drivers juggle between this activity and their socially assigned care responsibilities.

Introduction

In this article, we analyse some aspects of female drivers' work in the passenger transport service provided by the digital platform *Uber*. We focus on the labour market trajectories of a group of female drivers in order to understand how the decision to incursion into a male-dominated activity is shaped. In particular we will explore the way in which their previous job experiences may have contributed to the entry into the occupation. According to the data collected, since the arrival of *Uber*, there has been a growing incorporation of female workers. It could be considered that work through digital platforms has created a more "permeable" labour context, in which gender-based segregation processes have become less rigid. We consider that women's incorporation in *Uber* represents an interesting case to analyse, especially when it comes to the weakening of gender-based barriers (Hirata and Kergoat, 2007).

At the same time, we reflect on the processes by which women balance their job and the care activities, given that, for most women, this articulation becomes an essential requirement in order to participate in the labour market (Faur, 2014; Gago, 2019). Historically, this articulation has been controversial and the care duties have fallen disproportionately on women. This has impacted negatively on their participation and performance in paid labour, affecting, among many other aspects, income levels, development and progress in their career paths and, thus, economic autonomy in general. Therefore, in this article we will address how work through a technological application and the independent nature of the activity (as promoted by the company itself) influences female workers daily life portraying how they articulate the complex balance between paid and unpaid work.

As it has happened in other cities of the world, the arrival of *Uber* to the country in 2016 has aroused interest in the academic field. This academic production has mainly focused on the nature of the employment relationship that it entails and on the controversies regarding the company's breach of many local regulation of the private passenger transport sector.

This piece of research began a few months before the Covid-19 pandemic. In the period in which we began to develop our fieldwork, and shortly after conducting the first exploratory interviews with *Uber* drivers, the first measures of social, preventive and compulsory isolation were imposed. The distancing measures did not allow further "face-to-face" interviews. So we had to continue our work and carry out our semi-structured interviews through telephone conversations. The interviews were conducted with male and female drivers, but for this article we have focused on in-depth interviews with fourteen women between 29 and 60 years old, who work in the Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires. Half of them live in the City of Buenos Aires and the rest in different parts of Greater Buenos Aires. If we consider their family situation, we can differentiate two groups among our interviewees. From the first group made up of 8 women, all have young children; 6 of them are heads of households, and the remaining 2 cases live with their children and husbands. The second is made up of 6 women who either live with their partners (without children) or in single-person households.

The activity of private passenger transportation has historically mainly involved men. Also other jobs that require driving competence are "destined" to be occupied by men. The automobile, the bus, the van, the truck, the locomotive are all presented as masculinized objects or work tools in intimate articulation with activities, routines, practices, work spaces, codes, languages and social representations that legitimize the situation. Our analysis is part of the reflection on this cultural conditioning.

The lower representation of women in activities that involve driving and the relationship that they establish with vehicles is based on a set of obstacles that involve budgets, skills and also on social representations that set the limits between what is possible for them, what is convenient and what is accepted (Lagarde, 2014). In a society in which approximately 30% of the driver's licenses are held by women, this occupation represents a challenge with respect to gender-based segregation mechanisms. As Poó (2018) points out, this is a

strong indicator of women's restricted mobility and therefore to lower access to public spaces, work, education, leisure and personal development in general.

Although women's participation in the passenger transport service is low, in recent years and since the arrival of *Uber* to the country, this situation has changed. In the first semester of 2018, the company itself reported that women constituted 11% of the workforce (Madariaga *et al.*, 2019). In the period June 2018 / June 2019, the platform informed that participation of female workers had increased by 110% (Infobae 14/09/2019).

According to the survey on *Uber* drivers carried out within the framework of this project¹, around 56% of this workforce is between 30 and 49 years old, 61% of the drivers' highest level of education is high school and 73% indicated that this driving job is their main source of income. Likewise, the survey data revealed gender gaps in terms of working hours as well as in terms of income. Female drivers work an average of 6 hours less than their male counterparts, and not only their monthly income is 11% below than that of men, but also their hourly income is 8% lower.

We consider that by addressing the experiences of female drivers we contribute to making visible important gender-based challenges, which, although not always made explicit by these female workers, are renewed every time they get in the car, turn on the digital application and start their working day. One aspect that we will develop throughout this text is that these challenges have started before joining *Uber*. The analysis these women's labour market trajectories allows us to observe that their approaches to driving or their participation in masculinized areas are part of previous experiences. Although dispersed, such previous experiences in "male territories" constitute an element that provides further complexity to the analysis regarding the possible gender permeability of the *Uber* platform.

At the same time, we notice that this labour activity is seen as a facilitating mechanism for female drivers to perform their socially assigned care tasks. Women argue that the freedom to turn off the digital application is virtuously adjusted to the balancing of paid and unpaid labour. Something which, of course, can also be seen as a way to maintain traditional gender roles and responsibilities unchallenged.

¹ It was a survey of 450 cases of *Uber* drivers carried out between January and March 2021. The number includes and intentional quota of 150 female drivers in order to count with enough information on them. A mixed non-probabilistic design was used: in a first stage, a virtual online sampling was carried out through social networks where these workers interact, seeking to represent different socio-demographic characteristics of this population, including its territorial distribution. In a

second stage, a traditional snowball sampling was carried out, using an economic incentive for participation and limiting the number of contacts that each worker could provide in order to guarantee the greatest possible heterogeneity and representativeness to the sample. The surveys were administered through the CATI (Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing) system.

1. Working in the digital platform *Uber*: on dependence and independence

Uber implies a free downloadable mobile application associated with a geolocation system that connects people who request the service with drivers of vehicles that are available nearby. In the same way as other foreign capital platforms like *Rappi* and *Glovo* (in the delivery sector), *Uber* has begun to develop its activities in Argentina during the second half of the last decade. In this short period, it expanded from Metropolitan Area of Buenos Aires to other cities of the country. In April 2018 *Uber* reported there are approximately 55,000 active drivers (Madariaga et al, 2019: 66).

In a labour market with high unemployment and underemployment rates – as well as with high levels of informal low-income jobs– a growing universe of workers have gradually entered this activity. Regarding potential barriers to enter, we can give an account of some important requirements. People who can join are those with a driver's license, a smartphone and their own car – loaned or rented, no more than 10 years old–, basic technological knowledge to handle the digital application and – a requirement recent years –, male and female drivers must be registered as formal independent workers enrolled in the “monotributo” (Simplified Tax Regime for Small Taxpayers)². It is important to note that many interviewees celebrate the absence of age restrictions, as it will be seen further on.

The company competes in the commercial market of passenger transport service, but it is legally registered as a provider of entrepreneurial services (Yansen et al., 2019). In any case, during these first years and similarly to what happens in many countries worldwide, this situation caused serious trouble to drivers, since the service is not legal and they can be fined for traffic authorities. Also, they tend to be rejected – and even harassed – by members of taxi drivers associations.

Uber does not generate a typical employment relationship nor does it pays salaries. As regards this situation, there are many studies indicating that these digital business models are aimed at ensuring that the risks related to the activity are taken by people who are self-employed or independent workers (Abilio, 2018). Following Beccaria and Maurizio (2019), at least at first sight, this is an activity that workers carry out independently: it does not promote a paid working relationship and drivers are owners of the work tools. However, as these same authors warn, the platform is the “job provider” and, through algorithmic management, sets the working conditions, the use of the platform, the organization and management of time and the price of the service (all dimensions in which the scoring assigned to drivers by both clients and the platform plays an important role). Therefore, the design of the work process promotes significant control, discipline and surveillance hidden behind the figure of the independent worker (Salazar Daza, 2020). *Uber* promotes the recruitment and incorporation of people into the activity using the controversial figure of partners–drivers, thus appealing to the entrepreneurial narrative as other digital platform companies do globally. The ideal of “being your own boss” enters in

² The “monotributo” is a Simplified Tax Regime for Small Taxpayers, which unifies through a small monthly fee the payment of tax component – VAT and income tax – and the social security component – pension contribution and health insurance – in a single monthly fee.

people's minds as a romantic notion related to the images of autonomy and personal progress (Salazar Daza, 2020). However, beneath those speeches there are strong indicators of job dependency as it has been pointed above. However, those who provide the service are out of the limits of the traditional system of labour and social protection associated to traditional salaried work (Goldín, 2020). At the same time, in those societies where the opportunities of getting a stable formal job are reduced – as is the current case in Argentina – these companies become many times part of a reduced set of alternatives for labour market insertion

Throughout this paper, we review the multiple implications that emerge from this alleged independent nature of the activity discussing its limits, especially for female workers of the platform. As it can be seen from the testimonies collected, when the independent nature refers to a perception of freedom regarding the use or organization of time, men and women coincide about the facilities that working through the application presents to them. However, while for men independence represents mainly an experience far from the subordinated relationship implied in a typical salaried job, women conceive independence as a tool which eases their daily difficulties to balance paid labour with household chores and childcare. Therefore, the idea of an absolute sovereignty related to the use of time at the moment of “turning on or off the app” has different implication for men and women. Men choose working days in the more profitable working shifts: the periods of highest demand of the service coincide with the time of entry and exit from offices or with social encounters/events at night during weekends. Women, in turn experience obstacles to take advantage of these more profitable shifts. On one hand, the standard time of entry and exit from offices in the city is similar to school schedules, in a context where picking up children is responsibility mainly assumed by women. On the other hand, women tend to avoid driving at night mainly for security reasons. In this sense, the real nature of the independence takes different meanings and has unequal implications for men and women (for further analysis, see Micha et al, 2022).

2. Past work experiences that lead to *Uber*: Challenging the gender division of labour

Undoubtedly, labour becomes an organizer of daily life in a scenario where people build their identities, see themselves as workers and are perceived by others as such. Asking ourselves about female drivers' previous labour market trajectories implies moving away for a moment from their current situation and reviewing – like pictures in an album – the different steps they took in order to arrive to the platform. We aim to explain how, in what conditions and with what tools and expectations women develop an activity in a masculinized scenario. Studying these female drivers' past work experiences help us to understand what previous job insertions favoured the entry to the occupation – paying attention to the skills and knowledge acquired-. Finally, analysing labour market trajectories implies taking into account the social and cultural environment in which labour experiences occur, something which contributes to give meaning to women's insertion in this job.

The previous jobs held by interviewed women's show that their labour engagement has been predominantly informal and in different working fields. However, we notice that, among those multiple jobs, many were closely connected to the activity they carry in *Uber*. For several interviewees, their old tasks had required the use of an automobile, and therefore of driving skills and a driving license. The clearest cases are those in which women have driven a "remis" (a private passenger transport service which is requested by phone and states in advance how much the ride will cost). But these are not the only activities that interviewees have developed in masculinized working fields, as we will observe in the following lines.

Mariela worked for fifteen years in a laboratory as a pharmaceutical sales representative until she was laid off because the company was about to be restructured: *"I have driven since I was 14 and also, let me tell you, that in that job I was driving all the time. Eight hours on the street but not only driving... you go from one doctor's office to another or from a clinic to a hospital, depending on the distance...or to a medical congress in another city... (...) being a pharmaceutical sales rep has a lot of public relations. I was 100% on the street, that is, I was not within the company. I obviously had a weekly meeting in the office to discuss requests from doctors, congresses and so on, but practically my work took place on the street"* (Mariela, 55, lives with her teenage daughter, is a speech therapist and *Uber* represents an activity with which she complements her main income).

Mariela - who has learned to drive a car as a teenager, who has worked on the street moving from one place to another in a car and has used the art of public relations because her job demanded it-, considers that these skills constitute an important asset for her current job with *Uber*. Driving and providing passenger transport service implies for many of these women doing public relations. This means serving the customers well, making them feel comfortable, respecting their privacy, listening to them if they need to speak and even offering them a piece of candy. Definitions that we could understand as linked to the logic of care, in which these women are immersed - within and beyond the labour sphere-.

Graciela defines herself as a lifelong fighter. She has participated in many working activities, from an electronics shop in the South of the country to a packed-lunch personal undertaking that included delivery: *"Two years ago our sales in the lunch business decreased a lot, so my son told me "Why don't you work for Uber?" Me? not a chance! And it was the time in which Uber cars were harassed, taxi drivers vandalised the cars, it was a witch hunt. Well, I was scared. It came out like that, I don't know, it seemed strange to me, but it happens that I am, how could I put it? A lifelong fighter (...) so I overcame the fear...it turned out that I was really tired of doing the shopping, coming back home, cooking, standing for a lot of hours, running to deliver the food [she refers again to her previous packed lunch undertaking]. So, I found in Uber that the one who got tired was the car, not me"* (Graciela, 63, lives alone, receives a retirement pension and *Uber* represents an activity that contributes to her income).

In Graciela's words we can spot a complicated crossroad of skills and responsibilities that she highlights when she explains why she got tired of her previous working activity. Preparing pack-lunches for diabetics and for people that follow a strict diet, doing the shopping to buy the supplies and

delivering the products was on her. According to her point of view, *Uber* “made her life easier” and although she can’t leave the driving aside, as she says, she is less tired than her car.

Before starting in *Uber*, Magalí has worked in different occupations. Even when a wide variety of activities can be detected in her previous experiences, the link to the streets and the displacements throughout the public space appears once again, as it happens with many of her female colleagues at *Uber*: *“In the finance company I was an administrative worker. (...) the company went bankrupt but I left on good terms (...) Before the finance company, I worked in the gastronomic field, I have also worked in everything connected with administrative tasks, accountancy...specially that, I have experience in that area. I can even say that it has been very useful, for example I have also worked in a courier service company where I was in charge of logistics and getting to know the different streets and all the knowledge that I acquired in that job I use it in Uber today.”* (Magalí, 30, lives with her partner, *Uber* is her only source of income and she owns a car to carry out this activity).

Clearly, for this young driver designing the logistics of the deliveries in the company where she had worked previously is a skill that she was able to incorporate in her current job as a woman driver in the transport service.

Alejandra worked for a long time as a retail manager in renowned clothing stores. Towards the year 2017, she was left without a job when the company went bankrupt. Then, she decided to try *Uber* *“It was the only option I had. At that time I had no choice (...) I left a job interview that had gone very badly for me because of my age. Have you seen that at 40 you are out of the market? So I asked for an Uber, I got on the car and asked the driver if he thought it was something I could do. And the driver laughed. He laughed and I was like, okay, let’s leave it like that. I came straight home to call Uber to start working there (...) I did not have a car, so rented one. That was also an obstacle because I am a woman...Who rents a car to a woman? Now they do, because there are more women at Uber, but at that time no one was renting a car to a woman. I put an ad saying I wanted to rent a car, that I had the license up-to-date, I had no fines, and so on. 50 people answered, 48 making fun of me and 2 offering their cars. One was a very old man who was very kind, but it was super far away. And another, from the north area of the city that was what I was looking for, you see... And well, that’s how I started.”* (Alejandra, 44, lives with her four children and her partner).

In Alejandra’s story we can observe that, as a driver, she had to overcome real and symbolic barriers. On one hand, she faced the initial scornful reaction of a male driver in front of her enquiry about the possibility of joining *Uber*. It was a reaction that, although individual, reflected social prejudices around female involvement in the activity. On the other hand, she did not have the fundamental tool: a car. In her story, we observe how her willingness to inquire about renting a car generated responses that discredited her, pointing out again that this job is not for women.

When we asked Andrea about her labour market trajectory prior to joining *Uber*, we noticed that in many cases she worked in areas and tasks that required driving, transportation, and automobiles. Her longest occupation was in a textile factory where she worked as an industrial machine embroiderer for 25 years. Between jobs, she worked “in many things”. Among these many things, driving and dealing

with cars come up once again as very specific experiences of female *Uber* drivers “(...) as a bread distributor in a pickup truck. I wanted to change the field and a job ad appeared in the newspaper; that was the time when you used to look for a job through the newspaper. And it said that they wanted a female driver for a truck in a bakery because the owner of the bakery had a son who would take the truck and go anywhere and he didn't want male drivers working for him. I didn't know how to drive that truck. So I went to the house of a worker that my father had, because my father owned trucks. I asked him to explain to me how to use a lever, the steering wheel (...) it was a Ford station wagon and the next day I went to work without ever having driven one of those trucks. And I started, I went at 4 in the morning and left at 2 in the afternoon, I worked there for quite a long time (...) I also worked at Sevel [a car dealer company] when they sold Fiat-Peugeot (laughs). I was in a pre-delivery service, they used to send the cars to the authorized dealer and the company did the pre-delivery service. What is the pre-delivery service? I used to clean the car, check fluids, check the paint...everything, right? So we checked all the cars to put them on the truck that was going to do the final delivery” (Andrea, 43, lives alone and *Uber* is her only source of income).

In the labour market trajectory that Andrea is tracing, there is a mixture of typically “female” and “male” working fields: the textile activity, the distribution of bread in a truck and doing the last technical check of the cars in an authorized dealer company. We stop specifically at a part of her story, the one that shows us her reaction of surprise when she came across the job ad in which a female driver was requested. The message challenged her in such a way that she quickly learned to drive an old truck with which she would move around delivering bakery products in the early hours of the morning. These paths and explorations help her to develop skills that later helped her to understand that joining *Uber* could not face her with significant challenges.

Just as Alejandra had perceived that her 40 years represented a barrier in her job-search, Rocío, who has begun working in *Uber* in 2017, asked herself the same question many times: How come I can't get a job at 31? After 10 years of working as a salesperson and manager in clothing stores of big brands and in important commercial shopping centers in the City of Buenos Aires, in 2016 she found herself unemployed. “There are a lot of brands that discriminate because of your age and even in their job ads they put an age range that goes from 21 to 28 years old. Moreover, the situation in the country hasn't been very good and there are not many job offers. I did not have an opportunity, do you understand? And that was also making me fall into depression so to speak because I said ‘how could it be that at 31 I don't fit the age range that they look for?’ While looking for a job and going to job interviews she worked in a car dealer company for 8 months “I sold credit plans to buy new cars...on the phone (...) and as I was burnt out after being on the phone all day long, making phone calls, insisting people, you see, I was looking for a new job and *Uber* appeared everywhere saying ‘generate income with your vehicle in your free time’ and so on. So, as I was going into despair because I was covered in debt, one day my mother-in-law told me ‘Why don't you start working in *Uber*?’ and, well, that's when I downloaded the app.”

When we carefully observe the labour path of Myriam, who is 58 years old and lives with her husband, we find again two elements that are present in all the cases that we have explored: on one hand, an endless list of occupations, tasks, jobs, fields in which they have participated. On the other hand, some

of these journeys are closely connected with skills that society assigns primarily to men. Miryam spent most of her working life in companies doing administrative work. However, in her case, the activity within armored transportation – and the use of physical strength in this job – surprises us when we look into her story. *“In my life what I did was counting money, for others, from others. And a good part of my administrative tasks were those because I have worked many years in the armored transportation field, for example (...) In 2004 I left that job, I mean they laid me off (...) I had a shoulder problem. I have chronic trapezius stiffness from lifting bags of money, coins...and putting them on a desk to open them. This sometimes hurts.”* In the years before joining *Uber*, she took care of sick people until she realised that the conditions in which she carried out that work were degrading in terms of how she was treated and the income she earned. *“So it was when I had to start looking for a job. Many people told me about Uber, but I was reluctant to enter an app and sharing my data. And well, at a point I didn’t have any other choice and I said ‘come on, let’s move forward and see what happens’, well that’s how I signed up (...) I got online and went for my first trip and I was very happy. I love driving a car. People always tell me ‘look, you’re driving because it really is what you know how to do’, you know. People are aware of the kills you have in life”* (Miryam, 58, lives with her husband and provides the main income for the household).

Throughout this section, we insistently point out the constant movements or flows over time that show how this group of drivers tirelessly moves “trying their luck”. Following the assumption that this digitally-mediated working activity – mainly through the offer of flexible schedules – would weaken the gender segregation in certain occupations, in this section we started by asking ourselves about where the female drivers come from, in which working activities they have been involved so far and how they have joined *Uber*. A first approach indicates that time flexibility – which as will be seen further on is very important – is not the only factor that helps to explain female involvement in the activity. In many cases, these women’s labour paths have a peculiarity: they imply previous involvement in tasks and work fields that are closely related to masculinity. These experiences allowed them to develop certain “manly” skills which later on encouraged them to develop their current job. Therefore, for many of these women accessing to the passenger transport activity implies a line of continuity in terms of challenging cultural mandates related to what constitutes an appropriate female occupation.

3. The conciliation of paid labour and care responsibilities among female drivers: on advantages and costs

A first approach to the term “balance” evokes a negotiation event from which care duties and paid labour should adapt to each other, understanding that both essential activities for people’s lives. However, in the facts, that balance expresses the effects of the sexual division of labour, a process which burdens women with most of care duties. When we analyse the characteristics of the articulation between paid labour and family life among *Uber* female drivers, as might be expected, a scenario full of obstacles emerges. The experiences considered in this section belong to female drivers in charge of children and/or the elderly (in some cases, the latter tasks includes their own spouses).

Miryam's words confront us with a univocal identification of women with the socially assigned role of caregivers. She states that the duty of taking care of household tasks "is really ours". *"I know girls working at Uber who have kids, so during the day they perform their domestic tasks and once their children are asleep, they go to work with Uber (...) men work more hours and they do not have to stop like we do to go home and prepare a meal or go shopping groceries: they leave, work and when they come home, everything is ready. It's not the same for us; women have to think 'Oh, we have to go to the supermarket to buy some pet food' or 'we have to buy something else for dinner or for tomorrow' or 'there is a bill to pay'. Well, that work is really ours"*. (Miryam, 58, lives with her husband).

Miryam describes the way in which a female driver takes care of her children during the day and how, when they are asleep at night, she goes to work with the app. When her voice connects with those of other women drivers we understand that this indeed a possible form of performing the job.

According to Vanesa, *Uber* is a perfect opportunity for a mother. Her point of view as regards finding a life-work balance shows that the independence offered by the app represents mainly what "ordinary" work excludes: raising children in an atmosphere which implies closeness and contact (in a context where this kind of care is mainly considered as a female responsibility): *"That's the good thing of Uber...I mean, you start and you can come back from wherever you are...if you are needed at home (...) What I have always done is to leave in the morning, earn some money, bring some food and prepare lunch for the family and after that, at 5 in the afternoon I leave again (...) I think it is really flexible for women; you know what it means that suddenly you can go to a school celebration of your children, you can take them to the dentist, to the doctor, you can go and come back, you can prepare the meals. It's something you haven't got in many jobs (...) I have never had this in my life, this opportunity of being independent and also having an income which gives me some money every day; on the one hand it is good because I have some daily money and the flexi-time to raise my children (...) I love the flexibility you have with Uber, for me, for a mother, it's perfect (...) Because the kids also have Zoom lessons [she refers to the lockdown period] and the youngest needs me for the Zoom. For example, today in the morning he had a Zoom so I did not go to work : I will go around 5 in the afternoon (...) I'm becoming into debt with the school, for sure it must be almost 100,000 pesos...I will have to work like crazy when everything reactivates"* (Vanesa, 43, lives with her husband and three children).

The super flexibility highlighted by Vanesa implies a heavy price for balancing labour and care responsibilities. At the same time, when she says that she never had this way of working before, she points to the fact that *Uber's* flexibility is appreciated mainly in connection with other experiences she had throughout her labour market trajectory. These implied fixed or long schedules that made that balance even harder. However, adjusting her schedule to care responsibilities – clearly intensified during the lockdown – evinces an impact on her personal economy. She owes money to the school and in her words she will have to "work like crazy" after this period in order to catch up on debts.

Evelyn's situation is also difficult because her condition of being a recent immigrant becomes a disadvantage which intertwines with being a 46 year-old woman in charge of two young sons. When she came to the country from Venezuela with her two children she met her older daughter who had already been living in Argentina. Together they gathered the money to buy a car which Evelyn uses to

work: *"It's good, I organize my schedule, I can be with my sons in case of a problem (...) In a typical job I couldn't say 'I am going now, I have to pick up my son'. That is why working with Uber was really great, wonderful. I organize my schedule and if I want to work 15 hours, I do it; if I want to work 5, I do it; if I do not want to work, I don't do it. Some days I have had to close the app and run to see one of my sons. That is something you can't do in another job. Once my youngest son fell down and bumped his head, so I ran to meet him from where I was".* As she says, before the pandemic *"I got to work 16 daily hours. Then I said... I am killing myself, I would like to keep on earning this money, but...you can't imagine...sometimes I get off the car with a terrible backache, it's like I can't stand up after such a long time sitting in the car."*

Gradually, women's words start to show how this form of labour – combined with care duties – affects their health. Some concrete expressions such as "I am killing myself" or "working like crazy" illustrate the physical and psychological tensions these female drivers are exposed to – especially considering their efforts to articulate paid and unpaid labour–.

María del Carmen lives alone with her little son and she describes her everyday organization this way: *"You see, the schedule I had, as I told you, was to leave my son at kindergarten at 9 and start from there until half past four, 5 or 6 it depends. I'm able to pick my child from the kinder and sometimes take him to his dad's house. I know that at night you earn much better, you make better rides with a more expensive fare. That is also the case very early in the morning. But I can't do those slots, I've got that obstacle – in fact I don't know if I should call him an obstacle –, which is a little son. So, I arrange my schedule when he is not with me. Because as you can imagine in order to work at night I should have to change all my life in order to make some extra cash"* (María del Carmen, 39, lives with her 6 year-old son).

The multiple constraints which are disadvantageous for these women have structural basis. On one side, the cultural frameworks that determine and perpetuate the sexual division of labour within households and families. And, on the other side, social class limitations imply that these women cannot access the market of privatised care services because, as it expressed by other women drivers who are mothers of little children, they do not wish to work "just to exchange money" (meaning to work only in order to pay for care).

After ten months of being unemployed, Alejandra started to work as a driver in *Uber* and according to her: *"it was the only choice I had (...)* For me, it's a completely male area, but you see, there are more and more women driving (...) I mean, we are growing everywhere (...) Men simply work. Women go in the car, thinking about children, school, chores they had to do, home tasks, do you get it? So, it's as if women always cover a wider spectrum of duties in their life. In general, women don't live alone. They have children, chores to do. Men simply come and go to work, you see? (...) If you work 12 hours non-stop I guess you earn the same as any man who works 12 hours non-stop. But women can't do that. There is no equality in that. What I mean is that it's too hard for a woman to work 12 hours non-stop, right? (...) The oldest are all grown-up [she talks about her children], that's why there's no problem. However, as I have a four year-old daughter, sometimes I have to stop and take her to school or feed her, you see?

It's difficult to work non-stop in the street. So, it is like you have to divide yourself. You get in the car, but you have to stop; at some point, you stop" (Alejandra, 40, lives with her husband and four children).

In Alejandra's testimony we can identify clearly two important issues. On the hand, in order to make this job "work" in terms of income, drivers who can do it, stay in the street "non-stop". References to over-extended work journeys – which range from 12 to 16 hours– as an ideal in order to make ends meet, abound. On the other hand, women seem to be excluded even from the possibility of over-exploiting themselves on paid basis. However, such over-exploitation clearly occurs in the combination of paid and unpaid labour. Therefore, the combination of the activity with an intense care burden can ultimately affects these women's body and mental health.

Melisa found in *Uber* a job which allows her to earn income and organise her little son's care: *"And this was the way I found to organise my schedule, now I'm able to stay with my son as much as I need while earning an income. So, that's it. I really can't complain. I mean, it's a job. You spend many hours in the car. But I arrange my schedule and I can do everything I need to (...) What I am trying to say is that it's hard for us female drivers to find another job. There are many mothers like me who can't look for a fixed 10 or 12 hour job because they have a child. I start work at 4 in the morning. My son stays sleeping at home with my grandmother. Then, I come back at 8, wake him up and take him to school. Then I leave him at school, work until 4, 5 in the afternoon when he leaves school (...) but I'm aware that if you work in the street for 5 years, your body, your sight, your hips and your waist get messed up"* (Melisa, 29, lives with her 5 year-old son and her grandmother).

As Melisa states "she really can't complain", however, she outlines in a few words a routine that draws attention to the demanding nature of an organisation where there are two women involved; she and her grandmother. The balance is possible because it is based on a dynamic that implies to start the working day at the time her son sleeps. The juggling continues throughout the day always alternating paid work and care duties. After a bit more than a year as a woman driver, she expresses that if she works in the streets for 5 more years, her body, her sight, her hips and her waist will get "messed up". Thus, the experiences and perceptions of workers suggest that the slogan that each man and woman worker can become his or her own boss is only a possibility at the expense of self-exploitation. An over-exploitation which, as has been stated previously, acquires distinctive characteristics for men and women. While for men this seems to imply driving around the clock women would not even have the possibility of overworking on fully paid basis: their self-exploitation implies the typical double working day that combines remunerated and unremunerated labour.

4. Conclusions

In this study, some aspects of the irruption of work through digital platforms have been approached from a qualitative perspective. We have concentrated on recovering, from a gender-based point of view, women's labour paths that led the way to *Uber*. We have also analysed their current experience as *Uber* drivers, especially when it comes to the way in which they balance paid work with care responsibilities.

As we have already pointed out in the introduction to this article, for societies experiencing employment crises and with high rates of informal labour, *Uber* usually represents an opportunity for many people in economic distress. Something that in general is valued by drivers is the independent nature of the activity. However, after the first experiences, many of them have mentioned setbacks, adversities, limits and contradictions inherent to such independence.

When analysing these women's labour market trajectories we were able to understand that although time-flexibility is of utmost importance for their participation in the occupation there seems to be an additional element enabling/encouraging entry. In this sense, in these female drivers' previous jobs we notice that – even when they have moved through multiple positions – in many cases they had already ventured into work fields and tasks associated with masculinity. These involve activities such as driving passenegers, delivering merchandise in the streets, car's maintenance and logistics of transportation, among others. Thus, for them, those experiences and learnings represent important assets which allow developing their current work.

When addressing the meaning that women assign to their experience with *Uber*, testimonies highlight the importance of the independence/flexibility promoted by the company which facilitates the conciliation of paid work and domestic responsibilities. In these women's experiences, the independent nature of this job is based on ideas that we repeatedly find in their accounts. All of them refer to the feeling of tranquility caused by the opportunity of being close to their children and assisting them in most aspects of their daily care. This is possible, according to female drivers, because the application can be turned off and on as they please. Interestingly, when comparing their situation with that of male drivers, many women long for the opportunity to “drive around the clock” (which seems to be the main way to make enough money in the occupation). However, women are also overworking by combining platform and care work, only that they this extra effort is not even recognised in economic terms. While overwork is a situation that negatively affects drivers' emotional and physical health, women experience the additional disadvantage that these excessive efforts do not even allow them to reach the level of income of their male counterparts.

To conclude, we can affirm that female drivers joining *Uber* certainly imply a challenge to the sexual division of labour – especially since women's entry in this territory defies the idea that occupations which involve driving and circulating in the public space are inappropriate for them-. However, this is a challenge that finds strong limits. In particular, the day-to-day experiences of female drivers, especially in terms of the efforts made to conciliate paid work and domestic care activities, expose the pervasive nature of a current gendered order that still needs to keep being systematically questioned and confronted.

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