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RESEARCH ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

“Playing Tetris”: Domestic Infrastructures of Labor Participation in Spain’s Transport Sector

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how women drivers in Malaga’s private passenger transport sector sustain paid work while holding primary responsibility for domestic labor and care. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2020 and 2021 with women taxi and platform-based drivers (Uber and Cabify), it explores the everyday arrangements that make employment possible in a male-dominated industry characterized by long and unsociable working hours. I show that women’s participation in paid work depends on what I call domestic infrastructures of labor participation: informal household arrangements that organize and sustain labor participation through the coordination of care, time, and support. Through three ethnographic cases, the article shows how these arrangements operate unevenly: sometimes enabling employment, sometimes intensifying strain, and sometimes failing altogether. By shifting attention from platforms and workplaces to the domestic infrastructures through which labor participation is assembled, the analysis highlights how labor markets rely on largely invisible forms of coordination. The findings also point to the growing fragility of family-based care arrangements in Spain, as successive generations of women remain in paid employment and are less available to provide intergenerational support, raising questions about the conditions under which women can continue to participate in work.

1 | Introduction

I met Celia¹ in April 2021, during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, while conducting ethnographic fieldwork with *taxistas*² (women taxi drivers) and *conductoras* (platform-based drivers) in Malaga, Spain. We arranged to meet on the terrace of a small café near the port, one of the few places where people could still sit and talk as indoor gatherings remained restricted. April in Malaga had already softened the edges of these constraints. The afternoon was warm, and the terrace was busy with people lingering over coffee, the city’s rhythms spilling outward toward the sea.

Waiting had become a familiar part of fieldwork with drivers. Meetings were often rearranged, delayed, or canceled at short notice as work, care responsibilities, and everyday contingencies

spilled over into evenings and weekends. I waited, half expecting a message saying she would not make it.

A few minutes later, I saw Celia quickly cross the terrace, scanning the tables. She apologized as she sat down. “Traffic near the port is always chaotic,” she said, her face flushed, her breathing still uneven. She had come straight from a driving lesson. Driving, she explained, had always been part of her life. Raised in a family of mechanics, she grew up around engines and workshops and learned to drive before she was legally allowed a license. Her work history followed the same trajectory: delivering pizzas by motorcycle, distributing newspapers by car, operating a refrigerated lorry. Once, she told me, she attended a group interview for a frozen-food delivery firm and realized she was the only woman in the room. “They said driving wasn’t necessary for me,” she recalled. “They

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only needed me to knock on doors.” She looked at me as she said it, half-smiling in disbelief, and explained that she stood up and left.

As we talked, Celia traced her more recent working history. She had spent three years driving for Cabify, employed by an intermediary fleet company that assigned vehicles and scheduled shifts. When the company ceased operating, she was offered a move to Uber but refused, describing Uber as “the slavery of the twenty-first century.” She contrasted Uber with her experience at Cabify, which she described as a more professional company with stricter standards and better working conditions. Drivers followed detailed conduct protocols, wore uniforms, and were expected to provide a highly regulated customer service experience. Her reluctance to continue in the sector was also shaped by the intense tensions between taxi drivers and on-demand transport platforms that characterized this period (Cid 2018), a conflict that many participants referred to as *la guerra* [the war]. Looking for something more stable, she retrained as a bus driver, hoping to work in tourist transport. However, when the pandemic brought travel to a halt and emptied the city of visitors, recruitment collapsed, and the opportunity never materialized. At the time of the interview, she remained unemployed and was training to qualify as a driving instructor. Driving, she explained, was not just a job but a vocation. It was where she felt she belonged. “I want to stay on the road,” she told me.

Celia was 37 and the mother of a 10-year-old boy. Like many *conductoras* I interviewed, she had worked shifts of up to 12 h a day, six days a week. When I asked how she managed working for Cabify alongside caring for her son, she paused and smiled. “It’s like playing Tetris,” she said. Everything had to fit: school schedules, four a.m. starts, her parents’ working hours, meals, sleep.

She lived with her parents, who were both employed. “I can work because I have two wonderful parents,” she said. Together, they coordinated childcare so her son was never left alone. When she started work before dawn, one of her parents took her son to the early-morning school program. In the afternoons, they rotated pick-ups. Meals, homework, and bedtime were worked into a constantly shifting routine of overlapping schedules, hurried phone calls, and shared preparation.

Despite this careful organization, Celia told me, her arrangements were frequently scrutinized. Members of her former husband’s family criticized her for being “out on the street” rather than at home. “There’s this idea,” she said, “that a woman should be at home. Not working, not socialising. Just at home.” She felt compelled to demonstrate continuously that her son was being cared for. “*La conciliación no existe* [work-life balance doesn’t exist],” she said. “The only way to manage is to sleep four hours a day.”

Celia’s comparison of her life to Tetris illustrates the daily coordination required for paid work. Driving is not just about having a job or using an app; it depends on the ongoing organization of care within her household, including schedule alignment, mobilizing kin, and managing disruptions from long, irregular hours. Her story reveals a broader tension between paid work and care that affects women’s labor participation in Spain.

Public discourse in Spain often frames this tension through *conciliación*, or the reconciliation of paid work and family care. Feminist scholars have questioned whether these frameworks create more equitable care, or simply shift its management to the private sphere, leaving households—especially women—to absorb its demands (Campillo Poza 2022; Daly and Lewis 2000; Hochschild 2003). Building on this critique, I argue that conciliatory policies individualize care responsibility instead of transforming the gendered structures through which care is assigned and performed.

These dynamics are especially visible in Spain’s familiaristic welfare regime. Here, families remain the main providers of care (Fernández Cordón and Tobío Soler 2019). Feminist scholarship on care and employment in Spain has emphasized the importance—and the growing fragility—of intergenerational support. This includes the heavy reliance on women’s unpaid labor to sustain both households and employment (Martín-Palomo and Tobío Soler 2018; Tobío Soler 2002). Women’s participation in the labor market has increased, but domestic responsibilities still fall unevenly. Many women manage work by doing more of both paid and unpaid labor. This “double shift” is well documented (Hochschild 1989). Instead of being structurally transformed, care is usually reorganized within informal networks of women—mothers, grandmothers, and other relatives—who handle these demands privately (Hochschild 2003).

Building on these concerns with care and social reproduction, recent scholarship has begun to explore how platform labor is embedded in broader reproductive processes. Zampoukos et al. (2024), for example, examine how migrant gig workers become an embodied infrastructure of social reproduction within the city while simultaneously struggling to secure the time and resources required for their own reproduction. Similarly, Maury (2024) shows how platformized labor and migration regimes become entangled in ways that shape workers’ everyday lives and capacities for social reproduction. Building on these insights, I shift attention from workers as infrastructures of social reproduction to the domestic infrastructures through which labor market participation itself is organized and sustained. More specifically, I examine how care, time, and kin support are coordinated within households to enable women’s participation in transport work, and how these arrangements may sustain employment, intensify strain, or fail altogether. This focus directs attention to the infrastructures of care that underpin participation in transport work and to the conditions under which access to paid work becomes possible, fragile, or unsustainable. By contrast, research on transport and platform labor has often focused on algorithmic control, flexibilisation, and worker organization (Frey 2020; Möhlmann and Zalmanson 2017; Rosenblat and Stark 2016). Yet, participation in such work depends not only on workplace conditions but also on care, time, and support within households.

This article addresses this gap by shifting focus from platforms and workplaces to households. I argue that women’s labor participation depends on what I call domestic infrastructures of labor participation: informal systems of care, time coordination, and kin support through which households organize the reproduction of workers. Like roads, transport networks, and other infrastructure that enable movement, these arrangements provide

the underlying conditions that enable access to paid work. They coordinate and channel labor participation by organizing care, time, and support, even though they remain largely invisible in conventional analyses of labor markets. Their significance often becomes most visible when they are strained, contested, or fail altogether. These infrastructures make employment possible, but they also privatize its costs and reinforce gender inequalities. Moreover, they are often fragile and unevenly distributed, with their limits becoming clear when domestic support is absent or removed.

At the same time, these family-based infrastructures are becoming more fragile. Spain's model has long depended on intergenerational support—especially from grandmothers and other female relatives. However, as more women participate in paid employment, their ability and willingness to provide ongoing care is declining. In this context, women continue—often unevenly and sometimes reluctantly—to uphold a system that offers few alternatives.

This viewpoint also changes how we see labor agency. Research on transport and platform work has started to examine workers' everyday forms of agency beyond formal collective mobilization. Drawing on Katz's (2004) framework, scholars have explored how workers navigate platform control through practices of resilience, reworking, and resistance (Anwar and Graham 2020). Other studies have highlighted tactics such as multi-apping and similar forms of adaptation through which workers seek to cope with precarious working conditions, often with ambivalent outcomes (Popan 2024). While this literature provides important insights into how workers negotiate platform labor, it focuses primarily on practices emerging within the labor process itself. By contrast, I examine forms of agency that operate through the organization of care, kinship relations, and household time, shaping the conditions under which labor market participation becomes possible. Following Katz's (2004) categories of resilience, reworking, and resistance, I draw attention to how agency operates under constraint through low-key, relational, and often individual strategies.

To develop this argument, I draw on three ethnographic accounts. Celia's story shows that employment is sustained through dense intergenerational support, but this comes with exhaustion and moral scrutiny. Chelo's experience shows how flexible self-employment reshapes domestic responsibilities, often deepening gendered burdens rather than easing them. Alicia's case reveals what happens when these support systems fail, making continued employment impossible. Together, these cases illustrate that labor participation in male-dominated transport work relies not just on labor market structures, but also on the daily organization of care in households.

2 | Care, Work, and the Limits of Conciliación in Spain

Public and policy discussions of women's employment in Spain frequently invoke the term *conciliación*. The term circulates widely in political discourse and media debates as a framework for reconciling paid employment with family and caregiving responsibilities. Under this framing, tensions between work and

care are treated as problems of balance, coordination, and individual adjustment. Feminist scholars have criticized this approach for failing to redistribute care collectively and instead locating responsibility within households (Campillo Poza 2022; Daly and Lewis 2000). In this respect, conciliatory policies often reinforce the expectation that women will manage competing temporal, emotional, and moral demands, rather than transforming the organization of social reproduction.

These dynamics are especially visible in Spain's familiaristic welfare regime, where care provision remains heavily dependent on families rather than public infrastructure (Fernández Córdón and Tobío Soler 2019). Despite rising levels of women's labor market participation, care responsibilities continue to be distributed mostly along gendered lines. Concepts such as the "double shift" (Hochschild 1989) or "la jornada interminable" [the endless day] (Durán Heras 1986) highlight women's cumulative burden of paid, domestic, and emotional labor (Duncombe and Marsden 1995; Hochschild 1989). Other studies show that care is frequently redistributed across networks of women: mothers, grandmothers, relatives, or paid carers, arrangements that enable work while simultaneously reproducing gendered inequalities in care provision.

Although this body of literature details the scale and burden of women's work, it pays less attention to the practical organization of care. This organization makes day-to-day employment logistically possible. In familiaristic welfare contexts, paid work requires more than the availability of care. It depends on the active coordination of schedules and support networks. Families must align schedules, mobilize kin, negotiate duties, and manage disruptions from nonstandard, extended, or unsociable hours. Families not only provide care; they assemble and sustain complex arrangements that support labor market participation. As Fine and Glendinning (2005) argue, care is not only a workload or moral duty; it is also a set of negotiated, relational practices that demand constant coordination.

Highlighting these everyday arrangements raises questions about labor agency. In some contexts, paid work is sustained through intensive domestic coordination rather than collective mobilization. Labor scholarship often focuses on visible forms of resistance, such as strikes or union organizing. Feminist and social reproduction perspectives show that much of the work of sustaining daily life is quieter and less recognizable. To capture these forms of action, I use Katz's (2004) distinction between resilience, reworking, and resistance. This framework helps show how people act within conditions they do not control. Agency can involve endurance, adjustment, and small-scale negotiation, not just overt confrontation. In this case, Katz's distinction is especially helpful. It helps explain how women sustain labor through relational and individualized practices that secure continuity, even without changing the unequal division of care.

I conceptualize these arrangements as domestic infrastructures of labor participation. They are the relational and temporal systems households use to organize the reproduction of workers while privatizing the social costs of employment. From this view, the key analytical question shifts. Instead of asking how women balance work and care, I ask how households assemble, coordinate, and sustain the conditions that make paid work possible.

This perspective is especially relevant in sectors with long or nonstandard hours, such as urban transport. Here, women's participation in paid work depends less on workplace flexibility than on the daily organization of care outside the workplace.

3 | Methodology and Fieldwork

I met Celia, Chelo, and Alicia while conducting ethnographic fieldwork among women taxi and Uber/Cabify drivers in Malaga between September 2020 and July 2021, during a period when everyday life and work were shaped by shifting COVID-19 restrictions. The pandemic structured not only the transport sector but also the conditions under which ethnographic relationships could form. Much of my fieldwork therefore took place outdoors—on café terraces, in plazas, and at the edges of transport hubs—where masked conversations and last-minute schedule changes became ordinary features of meeting mobile workers.

Finding women drivers became an early ethnographic lesson in the sector's gendered structure. Although I initially approached taxi ranks hoping to meet participants, women were rarely present, and those I did encounter were often wary. I shifted to a slower, more organic process of social insertion, sharing my project through everyday interactions and online searches on platforms such as LinkedIn and Facebook. Ultimately, the most effective route into the field came through drivers themselves: once trust was established with a small number of women, they introduced me to colleagues, and the participant network expanded through snowball recruitment within this tightly connected occupational world. Sharing gender and a common language with participants often facilitated initial rapport, though differences in age, education, and class shaped interactions in more complex ways over time.

Reaching women in app-based driving proved even more difficult. Unlike delivery riders, Uber and Cabify drivers were not easily identifiable in Malaga's streetscape, in part because local regulations discouraged them from waiting for rides in visible locations such as hospitals, stations, or airports. This challenge was compounded by the organization of the sector itself. In Spain, many app-based drivers are employed through intermediary fleet companies that provide vehicles, licenses, and allocated shifts rather than working as independent contractors. These companies play a central role in organizing labor but often remain largely absent from public debates, which tend to focus on platforms themselves or conflicts with the taxi sector. To meet women *conductoras*, I used Cabify and Uber apps regularly and spoke with drivers during journeys, often relying on referrals from men who remarked on women's relative absence and occasionally connected me with former colleagues. As a result, some of my participants were no longer actively driving during my fieldwork. However, their accounts remained important for understanding how women entered, experienced, and exited platform-mediated transport work.

Fieldwork was conducted intermittently but intensively over these 10 months, shaped by drivers' irregular schedules and often unfolding through short, repeated encounters rather than prolonged, fixed observations. It included participant-led

narrative interviews conducted in Spanish, informal conversations, workplace observations, and ongoing contact via messaging and follow-up meetings. In total, I spoke with 35 women drivers—20 working as *taxistas* and 15 as *conductoras*—and engaged in informal conversations with male drivers to better understand workplace cultures and regulatory conditions. The analysis presented here focuses on three women—Celia, Chelo, and Alicia—whose accounts illuminate particularly clearly the everyday organization of paid work and care. Given the scope of this article, I do not examine the full range of themes or experiences that emerged during fieldwork.

The changeable and mobile nature of this fieldwork mirrors the conditions under which participants themselves organized work and care. Short, repeated encounters—often interrupted, rearranged, or extended—made visible the forms of coordination, anticipation, and improvisation through which paid employment was sustained. Rather than treating these constraints as methodological limitations, I understand them as integral to the empirical conditions under study.

Interviews were conducted in Spanish, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. All participants provided informed consent; pseudonyms are used throughout, and ethical approval was granted by the University of Sussex Ethics Committee. Interviews were translated into English for publication, with selected Spanish terms retained where analytically significant, such as *conciliación*. Analysis focused on recurring patterns across narratives, with particular attention to moments where work schedules, care responsibilities, and kin relations intersected most visibly in women's accounts.

Entering the field involved navigating positionalities of gender, class, and place that shaped access and relationships with interlocutors. Although sharing gender and language with participants facilitated rapport, other aspects of my position marked me as an outsider. I arrived in Malaga with limited familiarity with the city and was living in a comparatively affluent neighborhood, something participants occasionally remarked upon and which I felt positioned me as socially distant. I became attentive to how classed perceptions shaped interactions, adjusting how I presented myself in order to reduce distance while remaining truthful. Differences in age, education, and regional background further shaped encounters, reminding me that shared gender did not erase asymmetries of experience. Access to women drivers emerged slowly through trust-based referrals, making the composition of my network a product of relations rather than a pre-defined sampling strategy.

Ethical considerations were embedded throughout the research process. Building relationships over time blurred the line between researcher and participant, particularly as friendships developed and participants shared experiences of exhaustion, care pressures and vulnerability. For this reason, informed consent was treated as an ongoing, negotiated process, revisited across repeated encounters rather than secured once at the outset. Given the small size and interconnected nature of women's networks in the transport sector, pseudonymisation was employed to minimize the risk of identification, and decisions about what to include or withhold were guided by participants' comfort and expressed preferences. Some conversations shared in confidence

were not treated as data. Throughout fieldwork and analysis, decisions about where to meet, what to record, and how to represent participants' experiences were guided by careful attention to participants' time constraints, care responsibilities, and potential exposure to economic or social risk.

4 | Domestic Infrastructures in Practice

4.1 | Celia's Story: The Invisible Infrastructure of Support

As outlined in the introduction, Celia's ability to remain in transport work depended on the coordination of care within her household. Like other *conductoras* employed through intermediary fleet companies, she worked fixed 12-hour shifts assigned by her employer rather than choosing her own hours. Living with her parents, she relied on their practical support to ensure that her son was well cared for. Although all three adults maintained their own work schedules, they organized childcare collectively, adjusting shifts, collections, and routines as needed. Celia's participation in paid labor was therefore not an individual accomplishment but a relational one, sustained through shared effort and constant recalibration.

This coordination, however, unfolded within a field of moral judgment. For Celia, the challenge was not only logistical but ideological. Her former mother-in-law believed that a woman should remain at home and be financially supported by a man, casting Celia's long hours in a visibly masculine occupation as incompatible with proper motherhood. As she spoke, Celia returned repeatedly to this point, leaning forward across the café table to emphasize that her son was always cared for. She stressed that he was "never unattended" and that "between the three of us we managed everything." "My son is perfectly fine," she insisted. "He understands that his mum has to work." She shared with me that, on some occasions, she even took him to school in the company car—something she admitted "wasn't allowed, but I didn't care"—collapsing the boundary between paid work and motherhood in a small but telling gesture. Household coordination thus functioned not only as a means of care provision but also as a form of moral defense, pre-empting accusations of maternal failure.

Seen at a broader scale, family operates as an invisible infrastructure: absorbing the practical demands of childcare while simultaneously mediating the legitimacy of women's employment. Spain's familistic welfare regime has long relied on households as primary providers of care and social protection (Fernández Cordon and Tobío Soler 2019). Families organize schedules, redistribute responsibilities, and absorb disruptions generated by illness, nonstandard working hours, and employment instability. This domestic infrastructure enables labor market participation, while also privatizing responsibility for resolving tensions between work and care, locating reconciliation within the household rather than the state.

"La conciliación no existe," Celia told me. "You manage by sleeping four hours a day." What policy discourse frames as "reconciliation" is actually experienced by Celia as gradual exhaustion—a daily erosion of sleep and bodily endurance that

makes employment possible. Feminist scholars have shown that women's increased participation in paid employment has not been matched by a redistribution of domestic labor, producing the well-documented dynamics of the double and triple burden (Federici 2012). What appears as successful coordination often depends on the intensification of reproductive labor, much of it unpaid and unrecognized. In Spain, where advances in women's public participation have outpaced shifts in family organization and social expectations, these tensions remain acute (Tobío Soler 2002).

4.2 | Chelo's Story: The Flexibility Paradox

I first met Chelo through Alicia, who introduced me to a small group of women taxi drivers she worked with. At the time, I had been struggling to meet women in the sector, and Alicia offered to put me in contact with several colleagues. We arranged to meet one Saturday morning in a *plaza* [square] in Malaga. I arrived early. It was a gray December day, the ground still wet from earlier rain, but mild enough to sit outside—an important detail, as pandemic restrictions at the time prohibited indoor gatherings.

Chelo was the first to arrive, messaging to say she had just parked nearby and was on her way. Others followed shortly after, and Alicia arrived last, carrying her three-month-old baby. With takeaway coffees in hand and face masks pulled down, we began to talk. The conversation moved quickly, shifting between accounts of working hours, family routines, and the practical difficulties of remaining in the taxi sector as women. It was within this shared space that I came to know Chelo.

Over the months that followed, I met Chelo several times, during shifts and on days off, and her working life quickly revealed itself to be inseparable from family dynamics. Even during our conversations, her phone rang repeatedly. Often, it was her husband, uneasy about her spending long hours waiting alongside male drivers, particularly at the airport. "If they were all women, he would be fine," she remarked. Such tensions, she suggested, were not unusual among women *taxistas* in a relationship.

Chelo had entered the taxi sector six years earlier, when her children were 19 and 13. Her husband had suggested investing in a taxi license to secure income for the family, and driving gradually became her primary occupation. Unlike Celia, whose employment depended on extended kin support, Chelo relied primarily on the internal redistribution of time within her own household, adjusting her working hours around her husband's schedule and the daily rhythms of domestic life. Taxi work, she explained, offered flexibility: the possibility of organizing hours around domestic life. In practice, however, this flexibility required constant adjustment.

When her children were younger, Chelo described days broken into shifting temporal blocks. She began driving around eight in the morning, returned home at midday to prepare lunch and attend to household tasks, resumed work in the late afternoon once her husband was home, and often continued until nine or 10 at night. Weekends—especially nights—were devoted to longer shifts, sometimes working until six in the morning, when

fares were most profitable. Rather than separating paid work from care, Chelo wove the two together, interrupting and resuming her shift in response to family needs.

Her husband provided childcare when he was not working, enabling her to remain in employment. However, the organization of this arrangement fell largely to Chelo. She adjusted her hours; she structured her day around meals, school timetables, and domestic routines. The flexibility associated with self-employment did not redistribute domestic responsibility in the home; instead, it required her to absorb it through continual temporal calibration. In this sense, Chelo's account exemplifies what Chung (2022) describes as the flexibility paradox: arrangements that promise autonomy while intensifying self-exploitation. Flexible work extended her working day, blurred the boundary between home and employment, and crowded out rest, all while leaving gendered expectations intact.

Rather than resolving tensions between work and care, flexibility became the mechanism through which they were managed. As in the other cases presented here, the gendered division of labor remained largely unquestioned, with women adapting to family needs through continual adjustments to their participation in paid work.

Chelo's experience thus reveals a distinct configuration of domestic infrastructure. Whereas Celia's employment was sustained through extended kin networks, Chelo's was organized through temporal elasticity within the nuclear household. Flexibility enabled her to remain in work, but only by intensifying her own coordination efforts and extending her working day. Paid employment was made possible not through formal support or shared responsibility, but through the continuous rearrangement of time within the household.

4.3 | Alicia's Story: Solo Struggles

I first met Alicia with her mother, Chelo. They immediately stood out to me, as they were the only mother-daughter *taxistas* I encountered during my fieldwork. Following up on Alicia's story, however, proved difficult—something that was unsurprising given that she had recently given birth to her third child. After numerous last-minute changes to dates and times, I was just about to leave my home to meet her at a café when I received a message. An urgent matter had come up, she explained, and she asked whether I would mind traveling instead to her partner's parents' house.

The sat-nav guided me out of Malaga and onto a bone-rattling dirt track. After a treacherous drive, I reached a lone house set deep in the dry Andalusian countryside. Alicia's partner, José, was working outside. He greeted me briefly before directing me toward the garage. Beside it was a small, immaculate room. In the corner, Alicia sat in front of a tall metal silo, carefully decanting a syrup-thick stream of honey into glass jars. Hundreds of them surrounded her. Without pausing, she explained that she helped run the family's honey business; an urgent order had come in that needed to be filled.

As she kept filling jars, Alicia told me her story. She was 26 years old and the mother of three children: two with her ex-husband

and a newborn with her current partner. Although she loved driving her taxi, she had not worked for several months. There was no one, she explained, who could look after her children. She talked through various possibilities—childcare arrangements, changes to work schedules, support from relatives—but repeatedly reached the same conclusion: there was no viable way for her to continue driving. Even though she hated the idea of becoming a housewife, she could not see any other outcome.

Unlike Celia, whose employment was sustained by extended kin support, and Chelo, who reorganized her paid work around her housework and family duties, Alicia lacked a reliable domestic infrastructure. She directed much of her frustration toward her mother, whom she expected to assume grandmotherly care. Responsibility was framed not in terms of state provision or broader structural conditions, but as a family matter. As Martín-Palomo and Tobío Soler (2018) have shown, women's participation in paid employment in Spain is often contingent on intergenerational support between women, with grandmothers, mothers, and daughters forming care chains that can enable or delay labor market participation. Saraceno's (2016) analysis of familistic welfare regimes further highlights that such arrangements are sustained by strong normative expectations that families will absorb care responsibilities, even in the absence of institutional support. Alicia's anger reflected these expectations: that older women should adjust their own lives in order to secure younger women's employment.

When José later joined our conversation, these gendered assumptions became even more apparent. "She has three kids. Where can these children go if she is working?" he asked. Notably, there was no "we" or "I" in his account—only Alicia's responsibility. When we were alone again, she admitted quietly, "This motherhood business kind of sucks." She spoke with frustration, caught between her desire to work and the absence of support structures that would make employment possible.

A later episode illustrated this asymmetry more sharply. Alicia arranged a Saturday evening out with other *taxistas*, carefully coordinating it so that her two eldest children would be with their father and José could stay home with the baby. When José decided at the last minute to go hunting with friends, Alicia was left with a choice: to cancel the evening altogether or to bring María with her. She chose the latter.

Alicia arrived at the cocktail bar pushing a pram. María was dressed neatly, with a small pink dress with a ribbon tied carefully in her hair. Alicia explained what had happened. Bringing her baby was not an act of convenience but a practical accommodation to the sudden withdrawal of support. Rather than refusing the plan or demanding that José stay, Alicia absorbed the disruption, transforming a night out into an extension of care work. The episode made visible how responsibility was rerouted back to her, not through explicit negotiation, but through last-minute decisions that she alone was expected to manage.

Alicia's story exposes the limits of Spain's familistic welfare model. In contexts where public care provision remains limited (Fernández Cordon and Tobío Soler 2019; Tobío Soler 2002), women often rely on substituting one female caregiver for another—a grandmother, mother-in-law, or paid carer—to sustain

employment. As Saraceno (2016) argues, familiaristic regimes are characterized by reliance on the family and by the assumption that such support will be forthcoming. These arrangements form fragile domestic infrastructures. When intergenerational support is unavailable, withdrawn, or contested, the practical conditions that make paid employment possible quickly unravel.

Unlike Celia and Chelo, Alicia could neither redistribute care across kin networks nor reorganize her own time to absorb it. Care work, particularly with a newborn, cannot be postponed, compressed, or shifted into night hours. The “double shift” (Hochschild 1989) presumes that paid labor can be layered onto ongoing domestic work; Alicia’s case shows what happens when domestic labor becomes totalising. Her withdrawal from paid employment was not a matter of preference, but the consequence of an infrastructure that failed to hold.

5 | Refusal and the Fragility of Familistic Care: Conceptual Reflections

In this section, I step back from the individual cases to examine what moments of refusal reveal about the limits and fragility of familiaristic systems of care. Scholarship on working motherhood in Spain has long emphasized the importance of intergenerational support within a familistic welfare regime. The so-called substitute mother model (Tobío Soler 2002), typically involving grandmothers or other female relatives, has functioned as a cornerstone of women’s labor market participation. Within this framework, reconciliation between paid work and care is achieved through the redistribution of reproductive labor among women, rather than through public provision or institutional support. As a result, women’s participation in paid employment becomes dependent on the continued willingness and availability of other female kin to assume caregiving roles. However, this dependency often remains unexamined, resting on the tacit assumption that such support will endure.

The cases presented here complicate that assumption. Domestic infrastructures of labor participation depend on women’s continued compliance with gendered expectations of care provision. When that compliance is withheld, the infrastructure falters.

Refusal can take different forms. In Celia’s case, her mother-in-law does not provide childcare but instead reinforces a normative ideal of full-time motherhood. By insisting that a woman should remain at home and be financially supported by a man, she contributes to the policing of gendered responsibility (Johnston and Swanson 2006). Here, refusal operates ideologically: she reinforces the moral framework that renders such employment suspect, rather than stepping in to sustain employment.

In Alicia’s case, refusal is material and consequential. Alicia expected her mother, Chelo, to assume regular care so that she could return to taxi driving, but Chelo declined. Although she had occasionally helped with other grandchildren in the past, she is now a working *taxista*, managing long shifts and irregular hours. Her withdrawal from intensive caregiving reflects broader generational shifts. As Tobío Soler (2002, 2005) anticipated, intergenerational care arrangements become increasingly strained as successive generations of women remain in

formal employment and are less available for sustained childcare. The availability of kin care is historically produced rather than culturally fixed.

Refusal may also signal a quieter resistance. Pérez Ortiz (2006) suggests that women who have spent their lives navigating both professional and domestic demands may be less inclined to resume secondary caregiving roles in later life. To decline grandmotherly care is not merely to withdraw support; it is to disrupt a welfare arrangement that has long depended on women’s unpaid labor across generations.

These cases point to the fragility of arrangements that rely on women’s availability. Spain’s familiaristic regime functions only insofar as reproductive labor can be continuously reallocated within female kin networks. When women refuse, whether by policing norms rather than providing care, or by declining to resume intensive caregiving, labor market participation becomes unstable. The infrastructure that sustains employment proves contingent, negotiated, and politically charged. I read these refusals as points at which a familiaristic system encounters its own limits, rather than as individual moral failings or acts of defiance.

6 | Discussion: Domestic Infrastructures and the Conditions of Labor Participation

The accounts of Celia, Chelo, and Alicia compel a rethinking of how women’s labor participation in Malaga’s private transport sector is understood. Rather than emerging solely from individual choice, motivation, or labor-market access, participation is actively produced through the organization of care within households. In this article, I have proposed the concept of domestic infrastructures of labor participation to capture the practical, relational, and temporal systems through which social reproductive labor is organized and availability for paid work is made possible.

What I hope this conceptual move allows us to see is that domestic arrangements are not simply background conditions to employment. They are the infrastructural means through which labor participation is assembled and sustained. Importantly, these infrastructures are neither stable nor guaranteed. They require continuous maintenance and negotiation, and often become most visible in moments of strain and breakdown. Across the cases, household care arrangements shape both access to paid work and the conditions under which participation becomes sustainable.

Reading the cases comparatively reveals patterns of variation in how domestic infrastructures operate. Celia’s employment is sustained by dense, redundant intergenerational support. Extended kin networks absorb long hours, unpredictable schedules, and moments of crisis, enabling her to continue participating in paid work despite persistent moral scrutiny surrounding motherhood and presence. Chelo’s participation relies on a less redundant, more fragile arrangement within the nuclear household. Here, participation depends on continuous temporal coordination between partners, with care redistributed daily in response to shifting work demands. Alicia’s

case exposes the limits of these arrangements. In the absence of reliable kin support and with limited partner involvement, the household lacks the capacity to absorb the volatility of private transport work, rendering labor market participation effectively unviable. Together, these cases show that care does not run alongside employment as a parallel domain, but it conditions its possibility.

This perspective complicates dominant accounts of Spain's familiaristic welfare regime that emphasize the availability of intergenerational care in sustaining women's employment (Fernández Cordon and Tobio Soler 2019; Tobio Soler 2002). While such arrangements remain crucial, the analysis here shows that they cannot be taken for granted. Domestic infrastructures depend on the continued availability of others—most often women—to absorb the labor of care and cannot be taken for granted. When such support is contested or withdrawn, as in Alicia's case, the infrastructure itself becomes unstable, exposing the limits of familiaristic assumptions.

Foregrounding domestic infrastructures also reshapes our understanding of platform labor and flexible work. Rather than treating care as an external concern, the cases show how flexibility is socially subsidized through households. The capacity to absorb unpredictable schedules, long hours, and income volatility is displaced into domestic relations, making labor participation dependent on systems of social reproduction that precede and exceed the labor process itself.

While the cases presented here span both taxi and app-based transport work, flexibility was experienced differently across the two sectors. Most *taxistas* owned their licenses and exercised greater control over working schedules, although this did not necessarily ease work-care tensions. By contrast, many app-based drivers in Spain worked through intermediary fleet companies that allocated vehicles and shifts, limiting the flexibility commonly associated with platform labor. Yet participation in both sectors depended on domestic infrastructures of care, time coordination, and kin support.

The findings also have implications for platform companies themselves. Platform labor is often presented as a flexible form of work that can help workers reconcile employment and care responsibilities. However, the cases discussed here suggest that flexibility alone is insufficient when access to paid work depends on domestic infrastructures of care. More gender-sensitive approaches would require platforms to recognize care responsibilities and offer greater predictability and control over working time. While platforms cannot resolve the broader inequalities that underpin familiaristic care regimes, they nevertheless help shape the conditions under which workers coordinate paid labor and care.

Women's strategies are directed toward sustaining participation through existing arrangements. Mobilizing kin support, reorganizing schedules, or limiting working hours enable continuity, but they leave the broader gendered organization of care intact. Following Katz's framework (2004), I understand these practices as forms of resilience and reworking that allow women to endure and adapt under constraint rather than challenge the structures that generate those constraints.

That agency takes this form is not incidental. Where the costs of care are largely privatized, responsibility for managing the tensions between paid work and social reproduction is displaced onto individuals and households, and most often onto women. Under these conditions, agency is channeled into maintaining domestic infrastructure rather than toward collective or transformative action. This helps explain the absence of collective labor mobilization among participants. Despite dissatisfaction with working conditions, none of the women joined unions or engaged in collective organizing.

Beyond the transport sector, I suggest that domestic infrastructures of labor participation offer a way of understanding how labor markets are organized across a range of forms of work characterized by irregular hours and limited public provision. For example, logistics, healthcare, and platform-mediated labor more broadly rely on the same infrastructural displacement of reproductive labor into households. Access to paid work is thus structured not only through wages, contracts, or algorithms but also through uneven access to relational systems that remain largely invisible in conventional labor-market analyses.

These cases show how domestic infrastructures of labor participation bring into focus the reproductive conditions that make labor markets possible. As intergenerational care becomes increasingly fragile (Pérez Ortiz 2006), the infrastructures that have historically sustained women's employment are under strain. Without broader transformations in the organization of care, access to paid work is likely to become increasingly uneven and exclusionary.

7 | Conclusion

This article has examined how women's participation in transport work in Malaga is made possible—or rendered impossible—through the everyday organization of care. By following three women drivers across different familial arrangements, it has been shown that labor market participation depends not only on formal employment conditions or platform design but also on the domestic infrastructures that sustain social reproduction. These infrastructures take distinct forms: extended kin support that enables continuity, temporal flexibility within the nuclear household, and the breakdown of participation when support is unavailable.

By introducing the concept of domestic infrastructures of labor participation, this article contributes to debates on platform labor, flexibility, and regulation by highlighting the reproductive arrangements that sustain labor market participation. Rather than assuming that platform or flexible work offers women a viable solution to balancing employment and care, the analysis shows how such arrangements frequently shift responsibility onto households. In the Spanish context, where familiaristic welfare arrangements prevail, women's access to paid work remains deeply contingent on intergenerational support and gendered expectations around caregiving. The cases presented here challenge assumptions that platform or transport work enables reconciliation, instead revealing how the presence of children can restrict women's participation unless substantial domestic support is in place.

The article also complicates policy and scholarly debates that focus primarily on employment status, formalization, or algorithmic control. The Spanish “patchwork labour system”—as I refer to the arrangement whereby platform drivers are formally employed through intermediary companies—demonstrates that regulation and employment status alone do not resolve gendered inequalities in labor participation. Even under formal contracts, women’s ability to remain in work depends on care arrangements that lie outside both the platform and the workplace. Improving labor protections without addressing the reproduction of labor risks leaving these dynamics intact.

This analysis has limitations. It draws on a small number of ethnographic cases within a specific sector and regional context. The article does not seek to generalize across all forms of platform labor or welfare regimes, nor does it address in depth how migration, class, or regional inequalities intersect with care arrangements in other contexts.

Future research could extend this approach comparatively, examining how domestic infrastructures of labor participation operate across different platform sectors, care regimes, and welfare systems, as well as how they shift over the life course or during moments of crisis. Taking social reproduction as an integral dimension of labor analysis helps to explain why flexibilisation alone cannot resolve work–care tensions and why labor markets continue to depend on forms of reproductive labor that remain largely invisible and unequally distributed. If anthropological analyses of work are to grasp how labor relations are produced and reproduced under conditions of flexibility and precarity, they must attend to the domestic infrastructures through which workers’ lives are sustained.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Endnotes

¹ All the names that appear in this thesis are pseudonyms.

² To simplify terminology in this paper, I use the term *taxista* to refer to a female taxi driver and *conductora* to refer to a female Uber and Cabify driver.

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