JEP

Firenze University Press
https://oaj.fupress.net/index.php/jep

OPEN ACCESS

Citation: Ciarini, A. (2025) The era of platform work in the care Italian care system. *Journal of Emerging Perspectives* 2: 73-81. doi: 10.36253/jep-20883

Received: April 30, 2025

Revised: September 30, 2025

Published: December 20, 2025

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Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

The era of platform work in the care Italian care system

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Abstract. This article examines the relationship between welfare regimes, labour-market regulation, and the rise of digital platforms in the care sector. It argues that the diffusion of digital platforms reflects and reproduces national institutional configurations rather than transforming them uniformly. Starting from the characteristics of the Italian welfare system and its regulatory mechanisms, this paper aims to shed light on the role of new work platforms in the sector and to examine the implications for regulatory mechanisms. The question we ask is whether and to what extent a system strongly oriented towards informal family care is modified by the entry of actors such as platforms, which hypothetically tend to formalise the relationships between families and providers. Second, drawing on the Italian familistic model, we assess whether and how platforms and digital technologies contribute to new segmentation mechanisms in the care market, including by channelling unmet demand to present themselves as innovative providers.

Keywords: welfare, digital platforms, care.

1. INTRODUCTION

Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digital platforms have emerged as two of the most transformative forces of our era. Their development is reshaping a wide range of sectors, including local care services. Platforms have been proposed as a response to the uncertainty of navigating informal markets and as a viable solution to the "care crisis" (Ticona et al., 2018). The diffusion of platforms in the care sector signals an upward trend in the regulation – albeit uneven – of labour relations in care. Digital transformation brings new opportunities but also new risks. On the one hand, there is a risk of disintermediating tangible relations and fuelling new forms of exclusion; on the other, platforms can help identify emerging needs and client segments, and sometimes even constitute new markets. According to van Dijck et al. (2018), platforms represent a silent transformation that began before the "platform era" itself. In this sense, they are the latest phase in a broader trend toward flexibilisation, in which processes and decision-making resources are increasingly distributed and structured beyond the formal boundaries that define a sector or industry. A platform is not merely a technological infrastructure; it is a socio-technical system that uses technology to connect people, organisations, and resources in an interactive ecosystem that structures relationships. In this respect, platforms constitute a new organisational paradigm that takes on an instituting role, consolidating cultures, representations, and organisational routines over time (Bratton, 2015). As Kornberger et al. (2017) note, one salient dimension concerns platforms as evaluative infrastructures that decentralise control while centralising power over stakeholders – notably workers.

The implications for workers are highly ambivalent. In the care industry, platforms deploy rating and review systems, together with profiles and background checks, to ensure a degree of formalisation and to increase transparency by displaying workers' qualities and skills in a standardised, comparable way. The aim is to provide clients with a large pool of flexible, readily available workers – often exacerbating the deeply unequal power relations that have long characterised domestic work (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018; Hunt & Machingura, 2016). Many authors have criticised the rise of digital labour platforms because of asymmetric power relations and negative consequences for working conditions and social protection. Moreover, most platforms define themselves as labour-market intermediaries matching supply and demand, rather than as employers or employment agencies. Thus, although they offer tools to record hours, process payments, and handle other bureaucratic functions – and present the formalisation of a largely informal sector as a key value proposition for clients and policymakers – they frequently dissolve the employment relationship into a nexus of private contracts and user agreements (Tomassetti, 2016).

Against this backdrop, the term "uberisation" of care has been used to describe a phenomenon in which new digital jobs and digital dumping crowd out formal employment (Kyoung-Hee & Rhodes, 2019). As Flanagan (2019) observes, by establishing opaque and largely unchallengeable "rules," platform algorithms become primary mechanisms for disciplining workers, producing a "paradigm shift" in worker control "from one of dyadic to structural domination" (p. 65). Historically, domestic workers laboured under informal conditions of dyadic domination (individual employers/families). Today's domestic-labour platforms enforce a semi-formalised regime of structural domination: workers may leave the household at will while remaining captive to the platform's mechanisms to remain employable. Conversely, platform work can improve conditions in sectors where informality and illegality are the rule (Ticona & Mateescu, 2018). These platforms may also open opportunities for vulnerable groups – such as minorities and women – to enter the labour market (Thieme, 2018). However, these effects vary not only by platform but also by socio-economic context, national regulation, and employment status (e.g., employee vs. self-employed).

Starting from the features of the Italian welfare system and its regulatory mechanisms, this paper examines the role of new work platforms in the care sector and their implications for regulation. We ask whether and to what extent a system strongly oriented towards informal family care is transformed by the entry of platforms that, in principle, tend to formalise relationships between families and providers. First, we probe the role of care platforms as new intermediaries: can digital platforms facilitate the emergence from irregular work, and do they create spaces of negotiation and agency for workers? Second, drawing on the Italian familistic model, we assess whether and how platforms and digital technologies contribute to new segmentation mechanisms in the care market, including by channelling unmet demand to present themselves as innovative providers.

The article adopts a political economy approach to the comparative analysis of platformisation of care sector. Rather than relying on primary data collection, the study is based on the systematic analysis of secondary sources, including policy documents, legislative and regulatory materials, existing mappings of welfare and care platforms, and recent empirical studies on digital labour platforms in Italy. In particular, the analysis draws on national and European policy reports, academic literature, and published qualitative research on care platforms and domestic work. This methodological choice reflects the exploratory and theory-building aim of the article, which seeks to situate the emergence of care platforms within the long-term institutional configuration of the Italian welfare regime, rather than to provide an exhaustive or representative mapping of platforms or workers. As a consequence, potential selection bias must be acknowledged: available data tend to over-represent more visible, formally registered, and digitally structured platforms, while smaller, informal, or hybrid intermediaries may remain underrepresented. However, this limitation does not undermine the analytical focus of the article, which is to interpret how platform-based intermediation is shaped by, and in turn reproduces, existing patterns of familism, informality, and weak labour regulation. The comparative references to France and Germany serve a heuristic and analytical function, providing a contrasting institutional backdrop against which Italian specificities can be more clearly identified. Overall, the methodology is designed to capture structural and institutional dynamics, rather than individual-level outcomes, in line with the article's theoretical orientation. Against this background, the analysis introduces the concept of "digital familism", as a concept suited to capture the specific configuration of care platforms in a familistic welfare regime. Rather than representing an epistemological or institutional rupture, platforms adapt to pre-existing arrangements in which families remain the primary coordinators, financiers, and risk-bearers of care. Analytically, digital familism can be operationalised along three interrelated dimensions. First, the persistence of family responsibility for organising and financing care, with platforms acting as auxiliary intermediaries rather than as substitutes for public provision or employers. Second, the partial and selective formalisation of labour relations, confined mainly to administrative and bureaucratic functions, without a corresponding extension of employment rights, social protection, or collective representation. Third, the reproduction and, in some cases, intensification of market segmentation and worker dependency, reflecting the structural constraints of a care system characterised by low public investment and a strong reliance on informal arrangements. From this perspective, platformisation does not resolve the contradictions of the Italian care regime but reconfigures them in digital form, embedding familistic logics into technological infrastructures and contributing to what can be described as a digitalised variant of welfare familism.

2. THE ITALIAN FAMILISTIC WELFARE SYSTEM IN THE EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Care services occupy a central place on the European social agenda, particularly within social-investment strategies designed to equip individuals to confront "new social risks" (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Taylor-Gooby, 2004; Bonoli, 2005; Morel, Palier, & Palme, 2012; Hemerijck, 2017). These risks include reconciling paid work with family responsibilities and ensuring the availability of in-kind services for frail and dependent persons. Across Europe, care is delivered through diverse arrangements – private market solutions, direct public provision, and mixed public-private and formal-informal models. Some countries, notably the Scandinavian cluster, have long prioritised extensive public provision via well-developed in-kind services. By contrast, in the United Kingdom public provision is more limited and relies more heavily on formal for-profit providers. Southern European countries such as Italy and Spain have lower levels of formal public and private provision and rely heavily on informal family care (Naldini, 2006; Saraceno & Keck, 2011). France represents a hybrid model in which the growth of in-kind services has been driven by a mix of formal home-based employment and cash-for-care instruments (Farvaque, 2013).

The financial crisis and subsequent austerity policies placed significant strain on welfare services across Europe, leading to retrenchment and deteriorating working conditions for care workers (Johnson & Pulignano, 2021). In Italy- typical of Southern European welfare systems – marketisation and privatisation pressures associated with structural reforms have compelled local institutions and regions to cut social spending (Ciarini & Neri, 2021). This context has spurred debate about the transformation of social policy, with many highlighting the increasing subordination of welfare provision to market logics (Azemati et al., 2013; Hazenberg & Hall, 2016; Dowling, 2017).

Marketisation and privatisation have blurred boundaries between public and private care, fostering hybrid welfare models that combine paid and unpaid, formal and informal elements (Johnson & Pulignano, 2021). In Italy, these dynamics intersect with a persistent emphasis on cash transfers to families and a lack of effective care regulation. Over time, this has constrained the development of formal private provision, leaving the informal market to dominate family care, particularly in long-term care. The main care allowance (Indennità di accompagnamento) perpetuates informality by failing to incentivise the regularisation of informal work or the purchase of formal services. This benefit adheres to the Mediterranean welfare pattern of direct cash transfers to households without mechanisms to channel resources towards formalising care arrangements or creating formal employment (Da Roit & Weicht, 2013; Leon & Pavolini, 2015).

Recent policy efforts have attempted to address informality. These include periodic regularisations for undocumented immigrants – who constitute a substantial share of the home-care workforce – and cash-for-care schemes introduced at national, regional, and company levels to expand families' choices between formal and informal care (Da Roit & Le Bihan, 2010; Leon & Pavolini, 2015). Yet national regulation remains underdeveloped, regional initiatives are limited, and cash transfers still dominate. Unlike France and Germany – where cash-for-care has diversified provision while recognising and formalising family care – Italian families, especially older individuals, continue to rely on relatives and low-cost migrant labour (Ciarini, 2016).

3. SOCIAL POLICIES AND THE CARE LABOUR MARKET: FRANCE, GERMANY, AND ITALY COMPARED

Transformations in welfare systems affect not only the nature and scope of provision but also the structure of the care labour market, formal and informal alike. This link is particularly significant in Italy. Unlike Italy – where informal care remains predominant – France and Germany have stimulated the creation of new regular employment within the care labour market. Since the mid-2000s, in both countries a series of labour-market and social-policy reforms has eroded earlier familistic models with a dual aim: to promote new (albeit low-wage) jobs by outsourcing activities formerly performed within families and to keep social spending under tighter fiscal control. Important differences persist between the two strategies. Following Simonazzi's classification (2009; see also Da Roit & Weicht, 2013), Germany combines formal and family-based informal care (the latter supported by social policy), whereas France is more explicitly oriented toward expanding formal employment in care.

3.1. France

French reforms favoured the development of a regulated social services market based on largely publicly financed vouchers. The Chèque Emploi Service Universel (CESU), established in 2005, reorganised the care system around a single policy tool, allowing households to access a wide range of services – from minor home repairs and childcare to complex socio-health care for dependent persons.

Until the early 2000s, the sector was highly fragmented: with few firms operating, most employment relations were direct agreements between clients and individual workers, often in the informal ("black") economy – much as in today's Italy. Through coordinated reforms – combining tax and contribution incentives for regularisation with programme restructuring (notably the Allocation Personnalisée d'Autonomie, APA, in 2002, and the CESU in 2005) – France created conditions for rapid growth in regular employment and in the number of for-profit and non-profit providers, while improving fiscal revenues.

These reforms shifted large shares of household-based informal care into the formal economy and served as labour-market insertion tools for the long-term unemployed and welfare recipients (from the Revenu Minimum d'Insertion to the Revenu de Solidarité Active in 2009).

Today the CESU operates in two main modalities: CESU déclaratif and CESU préfinancé. The former is used directly by households to purchase home-based services (domestic work, childcare, tutoring, light elder care, etc.). A formal contract is required, with wages not below the SMIC; generous contribution exemptions and tax relief make undeclared work economically unattractive. The CESU préfinancé is funded ex ante by employers (as fringe benefits) or by public/social institutions to provide access to care, including APA-linked long-term care. Voucher allocation follows needs assessments by multidisciplinary teams at département level, which classify users by four dependency levels. Depending on assessed needs, beneficiaries may purchase residential or home services from individual caregivers (including some relatives but excluding spouses) or from accredited third-sector/private providers (Colombo et al., 2011; Angermann & Eichhorst, 2012).

Employment relations under this solvency-based model take three forms: (i) direct gré à gré employment; (ii) mandataire arrangements mediated by accredited agencies; and (iii) prestataire services provided by accredited organisations (often private or non-profit). These coexist and can be combined. A notable advantage of the French model is stronger coordination across service types – from basic domestic help to integrated socio-health care (Simonazzi & Picchi, 2013).

3.2. Germany

Germany historically relied on a different balance between formal and family-based informal care, shaped by the 1994 introduction of long-term care insurance (Pflegeversicherung). German legislation has been more accommodating of family caregiving than France (Ciarini, 2016). For example, family caregivers receive pension contributions (Jacobzone & Jenson, 2001; Rothgang, 2011) – a provision absent in France, where only partial transfers to family caregivers (excluding spouses/cohabitants) are allowed. Less stringent monitoring of benefit use also encouraged continued reliance on family and informal (often migrant) labour (Simonazzi, 2009; Bettio & Mazzotta, 2011; Colombo et al., 2011; Bode & Chartrand, 2011).

In recent decades, however, Germany has shifted away from cash transfers toward greater use of formal home and residential services (Rothgang, 2011), reflected in more users/workers and a higher share of private providers (for- and non-profit) (Bode & Chartrand, 2011; Ciarini, 2016). For-profits now account for roughly half of residential long-term care and over 60% of home care; public provision is marginal.

Formal employment expansion was also influenced by the Hartz reforms (2003–2005), notably via minijobs: low-paid jobs (up to €450/month) with reduced employer taxes and contributions. Originally intended to formalise irregular domestic labour, minijobs were liberalised and extended across low-productivity services (retail, hospitality, care) (Schmidt, 2018; Baccaro & Benassi, 2014). While reducing inactivity and welfare dependence, they contributed to dualisation and low-wage expansion (Rizza & Gualmini, 2011; Eichhorst & Marx, 2012; Ciarini, 2018).

Unlike France – where comparable instruments were targeted to care and domestic services – Germany's minijobs applied broadly. A notable feature is the significant number of minijob workers also receiving minimum-income benefits, revealing a "working poor" segment in care and household services. Sectoral characteristics (relational work, low measured productivity) explain part of this, but deliberate wage-containment policies also mattered. Upon introduction of long-term care insurance, wages were set roughly 10% below public-sector levels (Ciarini, 2020). A sectoral minimum wage for care was introduced only in 2010 (€8.50 West/Berlin; €7.50 East). With the exception of a limited group of professionalised workers in integrated settings, most care workers have experienced wage stagnation, reduced hours, and growing precarity (Eichhorst, Marx, & Tobsch, 2013).

The interdependence between low wages and income support is central to the trade-off between service expansion and wage compression. In France and Germany, a substantial share of minimum-income recipients work in personal services – about one quarter in France (DREES, 2019). This dual-income structure underpins employment stability in the sector. Whether via minijobs or tax-subsidised domestic work, the hybrid combination of low wages and income support offers an alternative path to service expansion – distinct from fully public or purely private models – providing affordable services while promoting labour-market participation among marginalised groups.

3.3. *Italy*

Italy differs markedly from France and Germany – not only due to the lack of a systematic intersection between social-service policy and employment creation within the sector, but also because informal labour continues to cover a large share of care work, particularly for non-self-sufficient older people. Despite reforms – most notably Law 328/2000 – the system remains anchored in traditional patterns: low public social expenditure and persistent reliance on family care. This constrains women's labour-market participation. Informal employment is widespread, often indirectly supported by institutional arrangements.

The indennità di accompagnamento (attendance allowance), a universal, non-means-tested cash benefit largely used by older adults (two-thirds of recipients), illustrates the point. The benefit suffers from critical shortcomings: no multi-tiered needs-assessment framework (as in most EU countries), and no mechanisms to regularise informal employment.

There is no institutional link between the allowance and recognition/formalisation of care work – whether by a relative or a private caregiver – nor an option to channel the benefit toward regulated services (Da Roit & Sabatinelli, 2012; Da Roit & Weicht, 2013; Ranci & Arlotti, 2017). In effect, the allowance reproduces the Mediterranean pattern of cash transfers without control mechanisms or fiscal incentives for formalisation. Pasquinelli and Rusmini (2013) estimated roughly 830,000 irregular care jobs (mostly migrant women), financed by public allowances and private household resources. Other authors reach similar conclusions, placing Italy (with Spain and Portugal) among EU countries with the highest shares of undeclared employment in personal services (Farvaque, 2013; Leon & Pavolini, 2015).

Regularisation has occurred more through periodic amnesties for undocumented migrant workers (three between 2002 and 2012) than via explicit job-creation policies – implicitly recognising migrants' central role in home-based care (Leon & Pavolini, 2015). Formal provision by third-sector and private providers has grown in recent years (Deriu, 2019), yet the overall landscape remains fragmented. Fiscal/contribution incentives for home-based services have been episodic. The voucher per il lavoro accessorio (casual-work voucher) is emblematic: unlike France's CESU, Italy's vouchers were not designed for care but applied to many occasional activities (personal services, retail, tourism). Introduced in agriculture and later extended widely (up to €450/month, with no contributions – akin to German minijobs), they reached high usage before abolition in 2017. Only a small share involved domestic services, confirming the lack of sectoral focus; formalisation has depended more on immigration regularisations than on fiscal/voucher tools.

In practice, Italy has followed neither the French nor the German path. Reforms have been piecemeal, without an overarching strategy – ranging from categorical bonuses (bonus bebè, childcare vouchers, birth grants, natality funds) to incentives for corporate welfare. The 2016–2018 Stability Laws allowed productivity bonuses to be converted into welfare vouchers within collective agreements. Employers benefit from

IRPEF exemptions on accredited welfare services negotiated with unions (previously restricted to unilateral company schemes). This has spurred company- and sector-level bargaining, often substituting wage increases with in-kind benefits – reflecting (i) public-welfare retrenchment and difficulties in covering new social risks, which push decentralised bargaining into formerly public domains; and (ii) employers' wage-moderation demands, offset by complementary welfare (Leonardi & Arlotti, 2012; Pavolini, Mirabile, & Ascoli, 2013). As a result, welfare has moved up the agenda of collective bargaining at company, sectoral, and territorial levels, within a decentralised and segmented system- by firm size, sector, territory, and employment status (stable vs. precarious/non-standard) (Maino & Rizza, 2018). Firm size is crucial: medium-large firms can afford broader packages, benefiting from economies of scale, whereas small firms struggle unless federated. The growth of decentralised bargaining has not reversed these disparities. Today, the development of personal and social services – via company welfare or local public provision – remains fragmented and poorly integrated, often dependent on local initiatives rather than a coherent national framework (Maino & Rizza, 2018). Reforms have produced a patchwork of short-term sectoral measures disconnected from long-term investment in social infrastructure. Given low national coverage and marked territorial disparities – especially North–South – policy efforts remain dispersed and less effective. This is evident in early-childhood services: coverage for ages 0-2 remains well below demand and varies sharply; while northern/central regions meet or exceed the Barcelona target of 33% coverage by 2010, southern regions lag significantly.

4. THE ROLE OF CARE PLATFORMS IN REGULATING CARE PROVIDERS

The development of platforms in care systems is not a linear phenomenon, nor does it take the same form across contexts. Institutional arrangements profoundly shape the kinds of technological solutions adopted. Path dependency – legacies of past policy choices – conditions the space available to platforms and the mode of labour regulation. Italy has not adopted a specific strategy to create regular employment in care. Unlike France and Germany, large pockets of irregular and undeclared work persist – often financed, paradoxically, with public resources (as in the case of the Indennità di accompagnamento).

In a context marked by fragmentation and frequent incapacity to meet rising demand, the proliferation of private intermediary agencies – including online platforms – that broker between families and domestic/home-care workers is strongly shaped by these structural features. Given growing needs and limited public services, social care (institutional and home-based) has tended to become a lucrative segment. Recent studies identify different types of platforms in Italy's care sector. Following Pais (2023), we can distinguish:

– Corporate-welfare platforms, which provide welfare services with indirect access both for beneficiaries (employees of a firm) and for providers, who are selected by the platform;
– Territorial-welfare platforms, where providers typically have indirect access (contacted by the platform and often accredited by public authorities), while beneficiaries may access services indirectly (as social-service recipients) or directly for a fee;
– Digital-welfare platforms, which enable direct access for both clients and providers, with providers applying directly through the platform.

According to recent research (Pais & Zandonai, 2023; Agensir, 2023), 137 digital platforms are active in Italy in welfare and care. This mapping is among the first systematic attempts to classify and analyse digital platforms delivering services in domains traditionally covered by public institutions or the third sector, highlighting growing hybridisation between territorial-welfare models and platform logics. The identified platforms are heterogeneously distributed across welfare domains, notably:

– 59 operate in health, 32 of which specialise in psychological services – confirming rapid expansion of e-therapy and tele-counselling, especially post-COVID-19 (Agensir, 2023);
– 10 focus on education and childcare (on-demand babysitting, after-school, tailored educational support);
– 10 are active in socio-health assistance (home care, accompaniment of older/fragile persons, domiciliary nursing);
– 58 are multi-sectoral, operating across health, assistance, and education, and configuring hybrid models that combine public, private, and mutualistic services.

This articulation shows that welfare platformisation is no longer marginal but is consolidating as part of the country's social infrastructure. Digital platforms not only simplify access to timely, personalised services; they also reshape intermediation and delivery, introducing algorithmic coordination and reputation systems. This raises important questions of regulation, transparency, worker protection, and service quality.

Looking ahead, the spread of welfare platforms in Italy can be read as an indicator of the transformation of the Mediterranean welfare model – traditionally characterised by strong family and public roles- toward a mixed model in which private and technological actors assume increasingly salient functions of intermediation and governance. Such an evolution calls for a comprehensive rethinking of public policy to ensure inclusion, equity, and service quality in a rapidly expanding digital ecosystem.

Recent analysis on the Italian case (Ciarini & De Vita 2024), highlight how the formalisation of labour is pretty marginal, due to the institutional legacies of the welfare system and the ability of platform to formalised only few aspects of the labour relations. Against this background the lack of social protection and occupational health and safety, minimal bargaining power, income insecurity, opaque and/or volatile rules are perpetuated and to some extent intensified. Moreover, the Italian case demonstrates the continued existence of a nuanced regulatory framework, in which both formal regulatory mechanisms and significant informal practices coexist. This enables platforms to navigate the complexities of regulatory frameworks, exploiting loopholes to their advantage. To illustrate, the existence of numerous NCLAs for domestic work enables care platforms to circumvent efforts to enhance working conditions by opting for less generous contracts. In this manner, they circumvent the utilisation of salaried labour and thus the potential application of the NCLA. These strategies effectively impede the efforts of unions to regulate the sector and improve working conditions. Furthermore, they paradoxically simplify mainly bureaucratic management, which is preferred by both families and workers.

The working conditions of these workers remain low, and even the flexibility and autonomy promised to them is, constrained and subordinated to compliance with the service times imposed by the platforms (*ivi*). This is partly a consequence of the significant dependency of these workers on the resources of the families that require care services. The limited economic resources available to families and the inadequacy of public care schemes force them to either seek informal work or turn to platforms that offer flexible and personalised services at affordable prices.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The emergence and development of digital platforms in the Italian care sector cannot be understood without reference to the institutional characteristics of its familistic welfare regime. As discussed earlier, Italy's care system remains deeply embedded in a structure where families act as the primary providers of welfare and where public intervention has historically been limited both in scope and in regulatory capacity.

Unlike in France and Germany, where public authorities have progressively developed structured mechanisms to promote formalisation and regularisation of care work-through voucher systems such as the *Chèque Emploi Service Universel* (CESU) in France or the combination of *Pflegeversicherung* and *minijobs* in Germany – Italy continues to rely on informal arrangements financed through direct cash transfers, notably the *indennità di accompagnamento*.

These institutional legacies have created a fragmented and largely unregulated care market in which informal labour remains the norm rather than the exception. In this context, the entry of digital platforms does not necessarily represent a break with the past but rather an adaptation of informal market logics to a digital environment.

In France, the state's deliberate strategy to integrate solvency-based instruments such as the CESU within the welfare architecture has created a quasi-market for personal services that combines flexibility with legal protection and fiscal accountability. The system's design, which requires formal contracts and enables access to tax credits and contribution exemptions, has facilitated the transition of many workers from the informal to the formal economy, while sustaining a dense ecosystem of accredited providers. Similarly, in Germany, the introduction of long-term care insurance in 1994 and the subsequent liberalisation of low-wage employment through the Hartz reforms have contributed to the creation of an institutionalised care market. Although the German model also relies on family-based care, the coexistence of clear regulatory frameworks and publicly subsidised employment forms has allowed the gradual emergence of a more structured and formalised labour market. Digital platforms entering these contexts operate within preexisting regulatory infrastructures that constrain informality and channel innovation into recognised contractual and fiscal arrangements.

Italy, by contrast, lacks these institutional foundations. The persistent absence of a coherent national policy for care work – coupled with limited public investment and heavy dependence on family provision – means that platforms emerge as private responses to structural gaps in welfare coverage rather than as tools of public regulation. Instead of reinforcing formalisation, they mirror the informal and fragmented characteristics of the Italian care economy. While digital platforms can improve visibility, matching efficiency, and access to services, they do so within an institutional environment that neither supports nor incentivises regularisation. The result is a form of "digital familism," in which technological intermediation reproduces the asymmetries of the informal market rather than resolving them. The notion of digital familism helps to conceptualise platformisation not as a disruptive force, but as a mechanism of institutional adaptation that digitises – rather than dismantles – familistic welfare arrangements. From this point of view, digital familism refers to a specific configuration of platform-mediated care provision in which digital technologies operate within, and reinforce, a familistic welfare regime. In this configuration, digital intermediation tends to formalise only limited and peripheral aspects of labour relations, such as matching, scheduling, and payment management, while leaving the core features of informality, weak social protection, and asymmetric power relations largely intact.

Consequently, the capacity of digital platforms to contribute to decent work and social protection in Italy is structurally constrained by the familistic configuration of its welfare system. In the absence of public regulation and fiscal incentives, platforms risk amplifying the segmentation of the care market, consolidating precariousness rather than fostering the emergence of a regulated and professionalised care economy.

From a policy perspective, these findings underscore the need to view digital platforms not as exogenous agents of change but as institutional actors whose trajectories are shaped by the regulatory and welfare contexts in which they operate. In Italy, any strategy aiming to harness the potential of digital platforms for improving care provision should therefore address the structural weaknesses of the welfare system itself – namely, the lack of a coherent care infrastructure, weak public investment, and insufficient regulation of employment relations in domestic work.

Lastly, from an analytical standpoint, the comparative perspective adopted here highlights the crucial interplay between welfare regimes, labour-market institutions, and technological innovation. The platformisation of care does not occur in a vacuum: it is deeply embedded in national trajectories of welfare reform and labour regulation. Understanding its implications thus requires moving beyond a purely economic or technological interpretation toward a political economy of digital care – one that situates platform work within broader processes of welfare restructuring, social reproduction, and the reconfiguration of labour in contemporary capitalism.

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