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## Platforms as inequality regimes: Researching legal services

**Debra Howcroft**, Work and Equalities Institute, University of Manchester,  
[debra.howcroft@manchester.ac.uk](mailto:debra.howcroft@manchester.ac.uk) (corresponding author)

**Clare Mumford**, Lancaster University Management School, University of Lancaster (at the time of writing; currently at the Institute for Research into Organisations, Work and Employment (iROWE), University of Lancashire), [CMumford@lancashire.ac.uk](mailto:CMumford@lancashire.ac.uk)

**Abstract.** *This article examines how inequalities in traditional labour markets shape experiences and outcomes on platform work. The research applies Acker's framework of inequality regimes, with a focus on gender, to a qualitative case study to analyse freelance platform work, specifically the provision of legal services. Tracking research participants over a period of time, the analysis demonstrates that structural disadvantages within the traditional labour market of the legal profession are not simply echoed but amplified in platform work, challenging claims that platform work can act as a leveller.*

**Keywords:** *platforms, inequalities, gender, legal work, freelancers.*

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## 1. Introduction

The growth of digital labour platforms has led optimists to suggest the emergence of new job opportunities for those weakly attached to the labour market, offering spatio-temporal flexibility, as well as levels of autonomy that are distinct from traditional hierarchical control. Ostensibly, platforms function as a level playing field: there are limited barriers to entry; monetary reward may be self-determined; and feedback and evaluation in the form of reviews are generated from multiple sources as opposed to an individual supervisor. Yet, despite outward appearances of equity, the consequences of power imbalances between platforms and workers have been well documented by scholars (Kellogg, Valentine and Christin 2020; Rahman and Thelen 2019; Rosenblat 2018; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020). Less understood is how inequalities transpire among those working on the same platform.

The last decade has seen the burgeoning of research examining the diversity of platform work (Drahokoupil and Vandaele 2021; Schor 2020), yet within this expansive literature, inequalities are vastly understudied (Morell 2022), and the experiences of women workers remain “empirically and analytically marginalised” (James 2022, 4). A small, emerging body of work has contributed to understanding how reproductive labour and the gendered constraints of care and domestic responsibilities influence platform work (Adams-Prassl et al. 2025; Churchill and Craig 2019; Gerber 2022; James 2022; Milkman et al. 2021). Our aim is to extend this research on gender and platform work by examining how inequalities in traditional labour markets shape experiences of platform work. Given that inequalities are enmeshed within work organizations to varying degrees and in distinct manifestations (Acker 1990; Healy et al. 2019; Rubery 2015), our starting point is that platforms operate in the shadow of the traditional labour market (Purcell and Brook 2022; Schor 2020) and that this shapes experiences of platform work. Many studies opt to examine “new” aspects of working *within* platform boundaries, while neglecting the conventional economy from which platform work is abstracted.

We use Joan Acker’s (2006) seminal work on “inequality regimes” as an analytical construct to enable us to make connections between structural inequalities in the offline labour market and the ways in which they influence the practices and outcomes of platform work. “Inequality regimes” broadly refer to the “loosely interrelated practices, processes, actions, and meanings” that generate inequalities within organizations (Acker 2006, 443). Applying this theorization shifts the focus from the individual level to the wider context of structural processes and dynamics, thereby providing a framework for exploring systemic inequalities. While inequality regimes function in everyday workplaces, they are linked to wider inequalities in economic conditions and society more generally (Acker 2009), thus furnishing an especially powerful concept for exploring the interplay between unequal employment relations in the traditional labour market and on platforms.

Within the extensive literature on platforms, this article will contribute to research on profession-based freelance work. Such work is characterized by greater levels of autonomy (Schor 2020), complexity and duration, thus providing scope within which to unpick the complex terrain of inequalities. To date, research on higher-skilled platform work has tended to compress occupations under the more generic banner of “professional services” (for example, accounting, software development and consultancy), despite the heterogeneity of the professions and corresponding inequalities (Ashley and Empson 2017). To link the specifics of labour market experiences with platform work, we home in on the specialist area of legal services. This enables us to draw on the extensive scholarship that has documented the persistence of inequalities within the legal profession, which is based on a hierarchical pyramid structure (Pringle et al. 2017; Sommerlad et al. 2013; Tomlinson et al. 2019). Although the sector is experiencing increasing diversity in recruitment, it remains highly stratified in terms of gender and ethnicity (Tomlinson et al. 2013). Our focus will facilitate an exploration of how inequalities within the legal profession shape experiences and outcomes on platforms, and thus demonstrate connections between the macro-social context of the legal profession and the micro-social experiences of platform work.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The second section analyses the extant research on platforms and inequalities. An explication of the methodological approach and research site follows in the third section. The fourth section presents our findings, structured to reflect Acker's framework of inequality regimes in order to identify connections and disconnections. The fifth section details the contribution of our research and draws some conclusions.

## 2. Platform work and inequalities

With respect to work organization, platforms serve as a digitalized point of production within which the relations of production are transformed (Gandini 2019). Much of the work activity is transactional, jobs and roles being replaced by short-term tasks and activities (De Stefano 2016). Platforms operate according to different logics, and so there is variation in whether tasks are digitally assigned or open to competitive bidding, the immediacy of work execution, whether a spatial presence is required and remuneration levels. Crucially, the digital coordination of demand is orchestrated by the platform, which coordinates workers and service requesters, utilizing the digital infrastructure to contain the critical elements of the transaction (such as communication, payment and reviews) and deducting a fee.

There are low barriers to entry and workers can participate regardless of domestic or other work commitments, resulting in a more situationally diverse workforce (Schor 2020). It is often maintained that platform workers experience considerable discretion over the timing, location and quantity of work (Schor 2020; Wood et al. 2019). This apparent "free choice" has been interpreted by some as empowering and inclusive, since workers are able to determine their working hours and how intensively they wish to work. The flexibility appeals to women workers, who are more likely than men to work part-time from home owing to domestic responsibilities (Berg and Rani 2021; Gerber 2022; ILO 2021). A US study reported that platform work enables women workers to prioritize care obligations (Milkman et al. 2021), and a survey of workers in Australia showed that a key factor is that work "fitted with their schedule" (Churchill and Craig 2019, 741). This research implies that women self-select platform work because of its perceived flexibility, yet some argue that such self-selection is illusory (Berg and Rani 2021) because the need of workers to maximize their income limits their control. Platform workers report that they would like to work more hours, but an oversupply of labour means that competition is inherent (ILO 2021; Woodcock and Graham 2020). This is compounded by the fact that around a third of their time is spent on unpaid work (such as searching for tasks or building a profile) (ILO 2021). This activity is similar for men and women, but because women perform fewer hours of paid work on average (Rani and Furrer 2021), unpaid activities take up a greater proportion of their time.

According to Schor (2020, 72), a "platform hierarchy" exists in practice – a vertical structure whereby jobs are differentiated by earnings and by levels of autonomy and satisfaction, with Airbnb and Etsy at the higher end and labour-intensive ride-hailing and delivery apps at the lower end. Categorical distinctions are evident on platforms in relation to occupational segregation, with men clustered around location-based driving tasks, while online work is most common among women, alongside cleaning and caring (Churchill and Craig 2019). Gender differentiation also features in online work, with women being more likely to work in sales, marketing, and professional and business services, and men more likely to dominate technology and data analytics (ILO 2021).

Platforms operate as an open labour market and the effort that workers invest in platform work varies according to their own needs and circumstances (Vallas 2019), which usually reflect their economic dependency. This has wider implications: those who are financially dependent on the platform are less satisfied, have less autonomy, earn less and have worse general working conditions (Schor et al. 2020). Research shows that income dependency is gendered, with women being more financially dependent on platform work than men, who are more inclined to use it to provide supplementary income. Among those

who need to work from home to accommodate care responsibilities, platform dependency is amplified (EIGE 2020; ILO 2021). According to Churchill and Craig (2019), women are no less inclined than men to seek an income from platform work, but they have more difficulty in leveraging platform work to adequate earning levels. The absence of an employer has led some to suggest that platform work represents a “retreat from control” (see Schor 2020), but greater levels of autonomy are largely associated with higher-skilled work, which tends to be male-dominated (EIGE 2020).

Research shows that there is a persistent gender pay gap across different types of platforms (Adams-Prassl et al. 2025; Churchill and Craig 2019; Rodríguez-Modroño, Pesole and López-Igual 2022). On some platforms, payment is determined in advance by the client, and workers bid for the task; less common are workers self-determining their pay for services or products. Fragmented work tasks combined with the absence of wage-setting by job category creates inequitable variation. When one factors out evidence that men are more likely than women to undertake higher-skilled tasks and have higher work intensity (Rodríguez-Modroño, Pesole and López-Igual 2022; Wood et al. 2019), gender pay differentials remain, regardless of feedback scores, experience, occupational category, working hours and educational attainment (Barzilay and Ben-David 2017). On average, female online workers earn 20 per cent less because their more fragmented work patterns affect the speed of task completion, especially among those with young children. There is also geographical variation, since workers from lower-cost regions are paid local wages (Demirel, Nemkova and Taylor 2021; Woodcock and Graham 2020); freelancers in developing countries earn 60 per cent less than those in developed countries (ILO 2021).

Platform work lacks the features of standard employment relations that provide social protection for workers and are essential to achieving equality (EIGE 2020; Rubery 2015). Atypical employment on platforms increases the risks of economic precarity (Gerber 2022), which matters more to women because they experience greater levels of economic dependency. Platform work draws on the narrative of “being your own boss” (Purcell and Brook 2022), since self-employment classification mobilizes commitment to quality work, thereby neutralizing the indeterminacy of labour, as workers bear full economic risk (Berg 2016). Reliance on voluntary initiative and willing cooperation is usually advantageous to capital (Burawoy 1979), since poor performance will limit access to further work.

Recruitment often involves filtering worker profiles, which are linked to reviews and ratings; this equates to a metrification of past performance. Research demonstrates that there are biases associated with race and gender discrimination (Rosenblat et al. 2017; Van Doorn 2017) and that, particularly on online platforms, personal profiles and visual images can lead to low pay or exclusion from work opportunities (ILO 2021). Such metrics, which influence judgements about worker competencies and suitability, figure in a burgeoning literature on algorithmic management (Kellogg, Valentine and Christin 2020; Wood et al. 2019), which appears to play a crucial role in workers’ sense of agency, since power remains centralized (Rahman 2021).

Platform work is associated with isolation and increased alienation from others. In online work, assignments are completed remotely and social relations are largely fleeting and “heavily transactionalized” (Gandini 2019, 1052). One area of literature maintains that the fragmented nature of tasks structurally separates workers (Drahokoupil and Vandaele 2021; Gandini 2019; Irani 2015); the limited opportunities to interact with a stable group of colleagues or clients create seclusion and undermine the building of shared identities (Schor 2020). In contrast, research on creative workers argues that their work is embedded in relational infrastructures as they endeavour to construct meaningful ties with clients (Alacovska, Bucher and Fieseler 2024) and make connections with their occupational community. As platform work continues to become more deeply entrenched, emerging literature shows that workers are seeking new ways to coordinate, exchange information and challenge platform power. In practice, experiences vary, since forms of control differ across platforms, but there are increasing indicators of resistance (Drahokoupil and Vandaele 2021; Kellogg, Valentine and Christin 2020). Collective solidarity is especially prominent among

location-based workers, such as couriers and drivers (Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020), but is less evident among online freelancers.

To summarize, there is a growing literature on platforms and inequalities that contests the claims that platform work offers a level playing field. Platform work presents a highly competitive arena, which often requires periods of unpaid work searching for tasks, and workers face algorithmic control structures, an absence of social protection and limited opportunities to build workplace relationships. Research shows varied experiences, which often reflect the required skill levels. There is a consensus that men are more likely than women to work in higher-skilled areas, where experiences are generally more positive. This consensus requires empirical interrogation, as we shall undertake in our examination of platform work inequalities within a single occupational category on the same platform.

### 3. Research design and site

Workplace inequalities are often compared at the aggregate level using quantitative methods, but, as Acker (2006) notes, the organizational level is where these patterns are created and reproduced. For this study, a qualitative case study approach was adopted, which was informed by Acker's critical feminist theory. We focus on gender as the pivotal intersectional dimension of inequality, recognizing that experiences are shaped by race, age, social class and other social categories. Our aim was to examine participants' lived experience of online and offline work by prompting participants to reflect on their changing interactions with platform work, its place in their working lives and their attachment to platform work over time.

The case study focused on PeoplePerHour (PPH). Several alternatives were considered, but this platform was selected because it is the longest-running freelance service in the United Kingdom (established in 2007), also operating internationally; it provides legal services as part of a broader portfolio of professional services to small and medium-sized enterprises; and it operates in an active market with a significant database of freelancers. People who register on PPH are either seekers of work ("freelancers") or requesters of work ("buyers"). The platform connects freelancers with buyers and then has little input into the organization of the work. Freelancers create a profile, which includes a photo and their hourly rate, alongside accumulated metrics such as ratings and reviews, number of projects and response time. PPH deducts a "service fee" on each transaction, which is usually 20 per cent.

#### 3.1. The research phases

Platform work is renowned for high levels of churn (ILO 2021). Most studies of platform workers reflect a snapshot of experiences, given the challenges of tracking people in the long term. This research incorporates a longitudinal element to enable us to explore variations in people's experiences and perceptions over time (Read 2018), with a view to advancing understanding of the shifting levels of attachment to and success on platforms over an extended timescale. Data collection took place during two phases separated by an interval of 6 to 12 months. For the first phase, the search filtered for "legal services" and "UK" in recognition of legal jurisdiction specificities. PPH was accessed over a six-month period and a total of 55 potential participants (34 women and 21 men) were returned and subsequently contacted; they constituted the entirety of UK legal service providers on PPH. Of these, 22 agreed to an interview, 7 declined, often citing a lack of time, and 26 did not respond. Although women constitute around 40 per cent of online platform work, they are more likely than men to perform professional services (ILO 2021), as is reflected in our sample (13 women and 9 men). Online freelance work is increasingly feminized, yet men experience longer periods of tenure (Shevchuk and Strebkov 2023). To sample across the full range of experiences, we recontacted non-responding women with a high number of projects and high hourly rate and men with a relatively low number of projects and low hourly rate. For second interviews, each of the 22 original participants were contacted and 7 women and 5 men responded positively (34 interviews in total).



Before the first interview, an online survey was used to collect demographic information (table 1), which fed into the semi-structured interview questions. The interview guidelines first covered the participant's career in the offline legal profession (including access and experience) and then focused on three main areas: how platform work fitted into their career and personal plans; what attracted them to platforms; and their experiences of platform work. The follow-up interview allowed us to explore changing perceptions and addressed how the participant's work and life had altered since we last spoke. Our delving into developments over time deepened the data (Read 2018) and allowed participants to reflect further upon the interplay between the conventional legal profession and platform work.

Interviews took place via videoconferencing or phone (according to preference), and, with the participants' informed consent, were all recorded and transcribed. Data were anonymized and transcripts were encoded using qualitative analysis software with cross-checking between the researchers. An abductive approach (Blaikie 2000) was adopted, rather than planned phases, moving back and forth between empirical observations and theory. A careful reading of the transcripts identified issues relating to the processes and practices of working on PPH, situated in the context of experiences in the wider legal profession. The thematic coding was shaped primarily by Acker's five a priori categories, while remaining alert to uncovering other elements; subcategories were inductively added as the data analysis progressed. To remain sensitive to the holistic experience of participants, excessive categorization was avoided (Holloway and Jefferson 2000). The thematic coding was then analysed to seek comparisons and contrasts between male and female participants (note the M and F participant identity prefixes in table 1), from which we developed our secondary gendered analysis of offline-online interactions and inequalities.

### 3.2. Research participants

More than a third of the participants had been active on PPH for over two years, four participants having more than five years' experience. A similar number had joined PPH in the previous three months. All respondents had undergraduate law degrees and 18 had postgraduate or professional legal qualifications. Some were "fully insured solicitors", as stipulated by the Solicitors Regulation Authority. Men were generally older (male average age of 47; female average age of 34); some were semi-retired, and one lived overseas; they were more likely to be self-employed (seven out of nine); and most had exited the legal profession following a successful career. Women were more likely to work full-time in the legal profession, in either the public or private sector as in-house counsel. Only two men were fully dependent upon the platform for income. Five women and one man used the platform for supplemental income. The remaining eight women and six men were partially dependent on the platform (they acquired work on other platforms, had other jobs or received income from retirement funds or other businesses).

## 4. Analysing platform work and inequalities

In this section, we use Acker's (2006) theorization of "inequality regimes" as an analytical construct to explore the nexus between structural inequalities in the offline labour market and the ways in which they influence the practices and outcomes of platform work. Acker's exposition of higher-level processes and practices identified five categories that highlight the reproduction of inequalities in conventional organizations. This section will employ these five categories in our framing of the data analysis, illuminating the connections between experiences of the traditional legal profession and the provision of legal services on PPH.

### 4.1. Organizing the general requirements of work

Acker's (2006) first theme of *organizing the general requirements of work* encapsulates how the everyday functioning of work is organized, including the construction of inequalities throughout the working day. Gendered expectations inform the structures, policies and

**Table 1. Interviewee characteristics**

ID	Age	Ethnicity	Employment status at first interview	Duration of PPH use	Financial reliance on PPH	Hourly rate (£)	Second interview
F01PPH	20–29	White (other)	Self-employed	6–12 months	Partial	20–30	Yes
F02PPH	30–39	White British	Self-employed (legal and non-legal services)	1–2 years	Supplemental	120–130	Yes
F03PPH	40–49	White British	Full-time employed	<6 months	Supplemental	60–70	No
F04PPH	30–39	White (other)	Self-employed	<6 months	Partial	30–40	No
F05PPH	30–39	White British	Full-time employed	<6 months	Supplemental	30–40	No
F06PPH	20–29	Asian/Asian British	Unemployed/student	<6 months	Supplemental	10–20	No
F07PPH	40–49	White British	Self-employed	>5 years	Partial	10–20	Yes
F08PPH	20–29	White (other)	Part-time employed (non-legal)	<6 months	Partial	20–30	Yes
F09PPH	20–29	White British	Full-time employed	<6 months	Supplemental	0–10	Yes
F10PPH	30–39	White (other)	Full-time contractor	1–2 years	Partial	100–110	Yes
F11PPH	40–49	Black African/British/Caribbean	Self-employed	2–5 years	Partial	40–50	Yes
F12PPH	40–49	White British	Full-time employed	2–5 years	Partial	100–110	No
F13PPH	40–49	White (other)	Self-employed	2–5 years	Partial	80–90	No
M01PPH	50–59	White British	Self-employed	>5 years	Partial	250–260	No
M02PPH	30–39	Asian/Asian British	Self-employed	2–5 years	Partial	70–80	Yes
M03PPH	30–39	Asian/Asian British	Full-time employed	<6 months	Supplemental	40–50	Yes
M04PPH	50–59	White British	Self-employed	>5 years	Full	120–130	Yes
M05PPH	60+	White British	Self-employed	>5 years	Full	150–160	Yes
M06PPH	40–49	Asian/Asian British	Self-employed	6–12 months	Partial	20–30	No
M07PPH	30–39	Black African/British/Caribbean	Full-time employed (non-legal)	1–2 years	Partial	60–70	No
M08PPH	60+	White British	Self-employed (legal and non-legal services)	>5 years	Partial	40–50	Yes
M09PPH	20–29	White British	Self-employed (legal and non-legal services)	<6 months	Partial	120–130	No

Note: F = female participant; M = male participant.  
Source: Our own compilation from online survey.

practices of most work organizations. The legal profession is characterized by intensive training and accreditation, excessive working hours, office-based presenteeism and a high-tempo career (Pringle et al. 2017; Tomlinson et al. 2013). Applying Acker's categorization to the day-to-day practices of platform working revealed gender differences. Men had benefited professionally and financially from their career in law, but their experiences were largely negative; one described law firms as "very akin to how a Mafia family is organized" (M01PPH).<sup>1</sup> They sought alternatives that enabled them to capitalize on their career experience, presenting their activity on PPH as a "positive choice" (James 2022) and worthwhile business opportunity: "I wish I'd known that there was this market [PPH] beforehand because I don't think I'd have ever gone and worked for a firm. ... it feels like I'm giving two fingers to the normal legal profession" (M02PPH).

In contrast, women were more likely to participate on PPH while working full-time in the legal profession. In conventional law practices, career progression requires the prioritization of work over family, and part-time work can be negatively perceived as a lack of commitment to the profession (Pringle et al. 2017; Tomlinson et al. 2013). However, only two female participants had exited a successful position because of the culture of long hours. One woman described how she had left her job in a law firm when her child was born because "working to somebody else's timetable didn't really work for me anymore" (F02PPH). At the second interview, it transpired that her PPH income was insufficient, and she had secured a part-time lawyer's contract.

Much of the general requirements of PPH work involved unpaid competitive tendering, which is time-critical. When starting out, it is vital to accumulate projects in order to generate the much-coveted client ratings, since the lack of an online reputation increases the likelihood of receiving lower pay (Wood et al. 2019). The second interviews revealed that women were less inclined to commit long-term to PPH, which meant that more of them had not yet acquired a sufficient number of ratings. Consequently, they pitched low to generate work: "Because I'm a fairly new profile and don't have a rating, it's unlikely that people want to select you unless you've put in probably the cheapest bid, so I started to put in as low a bid as I could possibly accept" (F09PPH).

Given their day-to-day work commitments in the traditional legal profession, women participants were more likely to operate in a transient capacity, checking for new proposals on their phone during a lunch break or in the evenings. Because they were intermittent bidders, lower-priced tasks constituted a greater proportion of their activity. This reflects the gendered distinction between those who are loosely and those who are tightly bound to the platform. Women with full-time jobs were disadvantaged by their inability to offer speedy bidding: "If I see 15 or 18 other people have bid for a job already, I won't bid for it, even if it looks like a great job" (F02PPH). Furthermore, they had limited capacity to work on large projects or to tight deadlines and so were inclined to offer standardized packages at a fixed price (for example, draft an intellectual property protection agreement for £60). These temporal constraints led to a "treadmill of low-paid gigs" (Demirel, Nemkova and Taylor 2021, 923), some of which were repeated, but they rarely translated into follow-on projects with clients. Lack of regular activity meant that women tended to carry out the less interesting and lower-priced work, and this increased the likelihood of exit.

For male participants, timely bidding formed an integral part of their daily scheduling: "I'm bidding for jobs all day ... once you build up a profile and, if you can do it regularly and bid on jobs very quickly, you tend to get the work" (M02PPH). The combination of law firm and PPH experience provided the requisite skills to quickly identify worthwhile projects and utilize "cut and paste templates of standard blurb" (M08PPH), thus optimizing the time-effort bargain. To reduce unpaid bidding time, male participants were judicious in their approach: "I will only bid on jobs which (a) I think I've got a chance of getting and (b) which look as though they're going to pay me the fee that I want" (M05PPH).

<sup>1</sup> For this notation, see the note to table 1.



A common theme among the more economically dependent participants concerned building a client base that they could then move off the platform, thus avoiding fee deductions. Although fewer women participants than men were pursuing a self-employed portfolio, gender differences were evident. Women charged lower rates and so, once their clientele was established, they disconnected from PPH and its 20 per cent deductions, “because it benefits both sides; they’re not paying a fee and nor am I” (F07PPH). By contrast, male participants who charged higher rates mined the benefits of PPH work even after several years of platform participation, self-identifying as “veteran PPHers”. The advantage of their accumulated experience is reflected in this comment: “I look at it as a bonus; anything that comes in from PeoplePerHour is a bonus. And, you know, I’ve got to turn round and say generally the [service] fees are probably worth it for the amount of work it generates, without trying too hard” (M08PPH).

## 4.2. Organizing class hierarchies

Acker’s (2006) second theme represents systems of ordering whereby job categories and tasks are ranked and assigned to wage categories. The steepest hierarchies are associated with traditional bureaucracies (Acker 2009), whereas platforms function as flatter organizations, which implies reduced hierarchical categorization. In the legal sector, class hierarchies are characterized by horizontal segmentation, consisting of variable rewards, career opportunities and working conditions, with women and minorities being more likely to be employed in the less lucrative segments (Tomlinson et al. 2019). On PPH, the primary form of hierarchical differentiation was income dependency. In contrast with extant research (see EIGE 2020; ILO 2021), a distinction emerged in that men, who were predominantly solo self-employed, were more financially dependent on PPH compared to most women on the platform. The group of female participants employed as full-time legal professionals used PPH to supplement their regular income. This signifies inequalities in the conventional labour market, where women experience both income gaps and status gaps (Bolton and Muzio 2008), which make it more difficult for them to manage financially. One respondent described how she felt compelled to participate on PPH because of her low income when she was undergoing legal qualification: “When you think that we studied equalities and discrimination and all the human rights, when it comes to the practice, it is the jungle and you need to survive” (F01PPH).

The other group of female participants were using PPH as a stepping stone to a self-employed career. Many had experienced difficulties accessing a conventional career in a law firm, but, having acquired the necessary qualifications, they were determined to succeed. Some combined PPH activity with low-paid service jobs in order to generate an income. For others, PPH provided access to an otherwise closed job market and a foothold in a profession beset with inequalities. One participant from Eastern Europe remarked that her job applications were rejected because, although she had the right qualifications, she had the “wrong name” (F08PPH). A similar point was made by another woman commenting on the immigration challenges she faced:

I first worked in the law firm as work experience for six months, without pay, and it’s quite difficult in London when you’re not being paid. And then they offered me a job, and I worked with them as an employee for four months, but because of my visa, I had to change. I had to convert my visa to a self-employed businessperson visa. That’s why I’m working as a self-employed person and for PPH, too. (F04PPH)

In the solicitors’ profession in England and Wales, women and minorities are more likely to be clustered in small high street firms that specialize in areas such as family, immigration and housing law (Bolton and Muzio 2008; Tomlinson et al. 2019). On PPH, although participants offer specific areas of expertise, the hierarchical distinctions among differentially rewarded areas of law that may be seen in the conventional labour market are far less evident. However, hierarchies were identifiable in terms of experience and expertise, which is reflected in people’s hourly rates. These rates, coupled with the number of projects

undertaken, serve as a symbolic indicator of knowledge and expertise: “I get selected ahead of others based on certain factors, industry experience being the principal one, I believe, but others, like how advanced my profile is” (M09PPH). Charging higher rates attracts particular types of clients, who are then nurtured in order to encourage follow-on work and build up a broader portfolio of contract work. Men’s greater financial dependence on the platform was linked to their success in securing higher levels of financial reward. This allowed them to build a future around PPH, hence their continuing attachment over an extended period of time. Men were able to leverage their successful experience in a way that enabled PPH work to provide a viable income stream, whereas women largely used it as a salary top-up or as a stopgap.

### 4.3. Recruitment and hiring

Acker’s third theme, “Recruitment and hiring”, refers to the process of sourcing a worker and matching them to a particular position, ideally securing an “unencumbered worker”: a full-time dedicated employee who is free of the demands of domestic responsibilities while displaying appropriate levels of competence (Acker 2006). Recruitment to the legal profession in England and Wales is characterized by numerical feminization; women make up the majority at entry level (SRA 2021). However, there are structural barriers to progression (Bolton and Muzio 2008), levels of attrition remain problematic and there has been evidence of an exodus of women (Kay, Alarie and Adjei 2016). On PPH, several respondents perceived the option of “being your own boss” as preferable to a hostile or unpleasant workplace. This sentiment was strongest among those who had exited conventional firms and registered as self-employed workers, thereby experiencing the contentious nature of platform employment status as less relevant to them. For salaried employees earning supplementary income, the downside of self-employment was deemed largely immaterial because their traditional jobs provided social protection. This illustrates the parasitic nature of platform work; it depends on support from conventional employment.

Ratings and reviews of workers are essentially a signifier of reputation and imply trustworthiness and proficiency. Overall, participants had been awarded positive reviews with no evident gender differences, their ratings ranging between 4.5 and 5.0. We recognize that this could reflect selection bias, since those with low ratings are more likely to drop off the platform. A greater challenge to participants was the need to establish a “track record” in terms of numbers of projects, which both enhances online visibility and demonstrates professional expertise, providing “a level of reassurance ... the consistency of that feedback” (M05PPH). This contributed to the gendered distinction between those who were loosely and those who were tightly connected to PPH, since women averaged 16 projects compared with 143 for men. In contrast to the ratings, these figures highlight a crucial distinction that affects the successful sourcing of work. The numbers of projects (and the hourly rates) reproduce hierarchies because they represent expertise accumulated over time from the combined success of a traditional legal career and PPH work.

The findings show that hiring and recruitment are not unidirectional on PPH. Several workers were discerning about the type of activity they were willing to accept, filtering out “a lot of irrelevant requests” (F02PPH) that they received directly. Many were critical of buyers’ lack of understanding of the costs involved in legal services; some of them had high expectations but were only prepared to pay a low rate. For the more experienced, a sifting process took place in the early stages: “if their proposal is poorly worded and if they’re not clear about what they want ... I’m, like, I don’t even know what you’re asking, I don’t know what the question is” (F05PPH). The ability to quickly identify and avoid clients proposing uneconomical work is critical to successful income generation: “clients generally speaking don’t understand quality in the context of legal services. Those that do, I tend always to win the jobs” (M05PPH).

Work did not only transpire directly from clients. Networking is critical to employment progression and the prosperity of professional workers, and contributes to the maintenance

of gender inequalities (Mickey 2022). For freelancers, networks are vital to generating income and clients (Demirel, Nemkova and Taylor 2021). On PPH, work was circulated among a small number of male participants whose career experience included participating in a professional occupational community. Several commented how their awareness of other regular bidders had gradually led to the creation of a small, informal network that was used to recommend the services of trusted colleagues:

The one thing that PPH has done over the years is it's created a network of like-minded individuals. We tend to use it as a referral network because we know who we trust on there in certain areas. And there are probably three or four other people in there that I would describe as worth having in my network, from the legal perspective, because we've all got certain specialities ... and so we've traded stuff. And I'm happy to refer people, not within PPH, outside of PPH, because I know them. (M08PPH)

Social networks usually consist of people with similar characteristics and exclude others (Acker 2009). This homosocial network enabled the exchange of projects among self-employed men and was described as "a nice little support network for me; it's also a nice support network for them" (M05PPH). If a client's request exceeded a worker's own specialist knowledge, the job was distributed via a network of reciprocity, disadvantaging women who did not belong to it. Men's experience in the conventional legal sector had made them confident with informal networking and able to form relationships that connected them to job referrals and work opportunities.

#### 4.4. Wage-setting and supervisory practices

The fourth theme concerns *wage-setting*, which signifies the division of surplus between labour and capital, and *supervisory practices*, which represent processes of control (Acker 2006). These elements vary widely and often reflect hierarchies (Acker 2009). The legal profession is typified by vertical stratification, which results in unequal rewards for women and people of colour (Tomlinson et al. 2019). Although PPH may appear to be more meritocratic because freelancers determine their own pay rates, this process occurs in a context of occupational norms and gendered assumptions of value. As evidenced in table 1, the hourly rate ranged between £6 and £120 for women, averaging £48; the figure for men ranged from £25 to £250, averaging £99. The median hourly rate for a woman (£30) was only slightly higher than the lowest hourly rate for a man (£25); almost half of the women had a lower pay rate than the lowest-paid man. Women's total earnings on PPH ranged from zero to £10,000 (81 projects), averaging £1,860, whereas men's total earnings ranged from zero to £130,000 (635 projects), averaging £33,000. These differentials reflect the number of projects undertaken, but also mirror stratification within the offline legal profession, which enables people with certain characteristics to develop their expertise for longer and thus command a higher fee. Prior experience from the traditional labour market provides a vital source of capabilities, producing an online hierarchy structured by the price charged for work.

Gender pay gaps are significant. What are the conditions that create them? The nature of platform work implies that women workers are no longer held back by employers and discriminatory evaluations of comparable worth. Yet, women generally fare poorer than men when pay is based on individual negotiations, setting rates at lower levels and accepting lower-paid tasks (Piasna and Drahokoupil 2017). It may be argued that this arises from low self-evaluation, which many female participants were aware of: one woman commented, "in comparison with using a law firm, I am such good value for money" (F13PPH). Yet, accounting for lower pay in terms of individual behaviour denies structural bias. Lower self-evaluation reproduces traditional workplace norms and expectations about value. Since male participants had greater experience of the practices of conventional law firms, they were more inclined to charge the market rate. One long-serving participant described how this influenced his preference for working according to his hourly rate as opposed to a fixed fee: "I always try to limit what they

include, naturally. Because otherwise you're writing a blank cheque and you're saying, for this amount of money, you can have me for as long as you want me. So that can't work, because my time is valued at a certain amount" (M09PPH).

Second interviews revealed the persistence of gender pay gaps over time and the implications for attachment. Five of the six women who no longer used PPH cited low pay and unreliable income as their reasons for exiting. Only one female participant (F11PPH) reported no significant change; PPH clients continued to constitute around 10 per cent of her work portfolio. In contrast, four of the five male participants reported increased demand, improvements in the quality of projects, rising hourly rates and an expansion of hours worked.

When it comes to supervisory practices, the self-employed status and specialist nature of legal services mean that employment relations cannot be adequately captured in a simple binary of control versus autonomy. Platforms operate according to different logics and the more complex the workers' knowledge, the more difficult it is to monitor and control their performance. Nevertheless, PPH applied various penalties intended to enhance service quality, such as downgrading ratings for late delivery and slow responses. These "soft" forms of time-sensitive control are less forgiving of loosely connected workers and are especially disadvantageous to those juggling platform work with full-time employment, who are predominantly female. Such policies contribute to the reproduction of gendered workplaces.

#### 4.5. Informal interactions while "doing the work"

The final theme of *informal interactions while "doing the work"* concerns how everyday workplace interactions are characterized by the often subtle practices that reproduce inequalities (Acker 2006), many of which contradict formalized policies (Healy et al. 2019). Biased assumptions are applied in routine work interactions, generating alliances and exclusions. Gendered norms and discriminatory practices pervade the culture of the legal profession (Sommerlad et al. 2013). Although most law firms visibly commit to equality and diversity processes, these are often opaque and based on homosocial reproduction (Tomlinson et al. 2013). On PPH, identifiable interactions that engender structural inequities are difficult to pinpoint. This could be explained by the fragmented and fleeting nature of the work. Female participants reported an absence of social interaction, with several highlighting their isolation: "There's not really much to engage with. You know other people have bid but you don't know who they are or what they said or anything" (F09PPH).

Although female participants did not comment explicitly on the presence of overt bias on PPH, the data showed that hidden bias operates in the form of exclusion from opportunities associated with online social networks that are used to circulate work. Networking is deeply gendered (Mickey 2022) and such behaviour is reminiscent of traditional law firms, where advancement centres on masculine networking practices (Kay, Alarie and Adjei 2016). Female experiences of disconnection from other platform workers are juxtaposed with the strong social ties underpinning the informal male network of "veteran PPHers" that emerged from their tenure as regular participants and their awareness of similar regular bidders. During second interviews, two members of this network said that their online collaboration had recently intensified and they were pursuing a joint business venture to set up a digital labour platform offering professional services:

Having had the same conversations with a number of good people that I deal with on PPH, we've sat together and we've actually got a website being built at the moment. ... And the concept behind it is that it's going to be British-owned, British-based, British customer support, you know, so there is that confidence there. ... basically, it's a replication of PeoplePerHour except that we know where the flaws in the system are and we're going to put them right. (M04PPH)

This outcome of networking reinforces patterns of advantage and disadvantage that perpetuate male dominance at work (Mickey 2022).

Relational ties with potential clients were also gendered, again reflecting the degree of attachment to PPH and the associated (financial) outcomes. When reciting experiences of building client relationships, several women described how they initially interacted with “every single one of my clients on the phone or on Skype” (F08PPH) to ensure clarity over project scope and to manage expectations. The consequences of engaging in such unpaid labour did not go unnoticed: “you end up doing quite a lot of work for nothing really” (F13PPH). By contrast, men were more likely to have developed strategies to minimize unpaid time: “I’ll offer a free five-minute phone call to discuss things if you want to; if you want more than five minutes it’s chargeable” (M02PPH). Regardless of the different approaches to nurturing clients, the benefits accrued from building long-term relationships and repeat business were widely recognized, yet structural constraints meant that few women participated on PPH for long enough to profit from this.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion

This article has examined how occupational inequalities in traditional labour markets shape experiences of platform work. The connections between the legal profession and platform-based legal work enable us to offer an explanation of the gender gap on platforms by recourse to the gendered structural constraints embedded in traditional labour markets, whose inequalities are reproduced on platforms and shape experiences and outcomes there.

The primary contribution of this article is to the platform literature, in which inequalities are comparatively under-researched. We advance existing scholarship by examining how inequalities arise in connection with a particular sector in the conventional economy, where inequalities are well founded, and by assessing whether these are carried over, neutralized or augmented in the platform economy. Extant literature on the legal profession depicts an environment of “hypermasculinity” (Pierce 1995), with the privileging of male patterns of working, which enable men to achieve greater progression (Pringle et al. 2017; Sommerlad et al. 2013; Tomlinson et al. 2019). Our research has shown how those who have benefited from unequal foundations in the legal labour market are able to import the advantages of accumulated knowledge, expertise and resources into platform work. By linking the two spheres of the conventional and platform economies, this research has enhanced existing understanding of inequalities in platform work to go beyond the reporting of gender pay gaps, occupational segregation and overt discriminatory practices.

Research from Schor (2020) presents differential experiences of platform work in terms of a “hierarchy of platforms” characterized by variations in levels of satisfaction, income dependency and working conditions. A study by Caza et al. (2022) confirms that different platforms produce contrasting experiences, which could be described in terms of a categorization of exploitation, wherein particular types of platform work represent an extreme variant of neoliberal capitalism. The findings from both studies (Caza et al. 2022; Schor 2020) signal that the higher-skilled, higher-paid platform work with reasonable autonomy levels fares better overall. By examining a single occupational category on a single platform, our research extends these findings by illuminating the ways in which unequal outcomes arise from systemic inequalities within that occupational labour market. It concurs with Schor’s findings that the highest earners often enjoy autonomy, control and satisfaction, but diverges with respect to economic dependency. In contrast with Schor’s argument, workers who are more financially dependent on PPH are less likely to describe their experiences as precarious. They have high levels of autonomy, high earnings and are selective about the projects they choose, viewing PPH as a useful online marketplace in which work is generated. For those with far less financial dependence on platform work, PPH constitutes an “extra shift” that offers supplementary income to compensate for the effects of unequal treatment in the sector. These workers are constrained by a set of stacked inequalities that are embedded in the profession and consequently limit their ability to access higher-paying tasks and projects on the platform.



One of the lauded benefits of platform work is flexibility, which appeals to those who shoulder domestic responsibilities (Berg 2016; Churchill and Craig 2019; EIGE 2020; ILO 2021; Milkman et al. 2021). This project set out to investigate whether the division of reproductive labour led women to exit the often hostile environment of law and seek work on platforms in order to bypass the inflexible time pressures and better accommodate care demands. The analysis showed that the perceived flexibility of platform work was critical to female participants, not with respect to juggling domestic responsibilities, but in enabling them to squeeze in PPH work beside other work commitments. We do not deny the critical impact of reproductive labour on platform work inequalities (Adams-Prassl et al. 2025; Churchill and Craig 2019; Gerber 2022; James 2022; Milkman et al. 2021), but we complement and extend this research by analysing how gender inequality on platforms reflects traditional labour market inequalities in which platform work is embedded.

The research shows that Acker's (2006) conceptualization of inequality regimes can be extended beyond conventional organizations and applied to platforms. One of the challenges posed by platform work is how to confront the subtle nature of seemingly neutral organizing processes when work is often fleeting. The inequality-producing processes and practices depicted by Acker (2006) in traditional organizations do not manifest as exact equivalents on platforms; they are reformulated and amplified, reproducing inequalities in new ways. These processes and practices differ from – but coalesce with – those that characterize occupations in the offline labour market from which platforms extract labour. Acker's framework allows us to identify and unravel seemingly minor disparities that, when combined, contribute to unequal outcomes, as we have evidenced longitudinally. It is important to look beyond the innovative nature of platforms and consider age-old gendered constraints that are embedded in labour market conditions. Platforms reproduce the gendered organization of work (Acker 1990), which operates at multiple levels (Healy et al. 2019) and perpetuates significant disadvantages for women.

Research on gender-based inequalities shows that women are more likely to rely on platforms for primary income (Churchill and Craig 2019; EIGE 2020) and that economic dependency negatively affects experiences and outcome (Schor 2020). This article confirms gender differences regarding income dependability, but the data diverge. Variances are explained by considering how unequal access and uneven pathways of sponsorship and promotion (Pierce 1995) within the conventional legal profession have led lower-paid women to seek supplementary income and thus the cycle of disadvantage is continued. Those with regular jobs participate to top up their salary, but the management of career demands alongside intermittent platform work hinders their effective participation in the latter's time-critical and competitive environment (James 2022). By comparison, men are more financially reliant on PPH, since it provides them with a lucrative income stream, and so they prioritize regular engagement and timely responses. They have profited from an established career that has enabled them to accumulate financial security; this minimizes the potential fallout from the precarity typically associated with platform work. These varied experiences on the platform reflect distinct structural positions stemming from occupational inequalities in the labour market.

This article also extends research on platform-based gender pay gaps (Adams-Prassl et al. 2025; Barzilay and Ben-David 2017; EIGE 2020) by explaining the varied perceptions of comparative worth stemming from traditional labour market experiences. Institutional norms and practices in law firms have contributed to the formation of gendered assumptions about self-worth (Pierce 1995), since financially disadvantaged women end up having to work for less. This has resulted in stark contrasts in the setting of hourly rates and in accrued earnings on PPH. Women with a traditional employment contract were often unable to take on sizeable tasks, nurture long-term client relationships or pursue the more profitable follow-on work that can arise from platform work. Once a portfolio of clients had been established, self-employed women who were excluded from traditional law firms were inclined to disconnect from the platform. A comparative lack of experience and credentials from the legal profession meant that the financial rewards from platform



work were low, especially when service fee deductions were factored in. Thus, PPH and other freelance platforms may serve as a labour market entry point for women seeking to access an occupation with systemic inequalities. The longitudinal aspect of the study provides additional insight into pay disparities. In contrast to female participants, most self-employed men continued to participate on the platform because it remained financially worthwhile vis-à-vis their expended effort. They profited from time-served benefits because accumulated reviews and projects enhanced their reputation, thereby reproducing the pre-existing inequities.

Algorithmic management is shaped by broader logics of control, and direct forms of control may not serve the best interests of PPH given the composition of its workforce. However, “soft” sanctions that penalize workers with more tardy responses disadvantage those who struggle to respond promptly to buyers and prioritize platform work, adding grist to Acker’s (2006) concept of the unencumbered worker. Our study has shown that inequalities are produced in less overt ways than those evident in the control-autonomy tensions that dominate the debate about platforms. In contrast with the research by Demirel, Nemkova and Taylor (2021), which argued that platform structures mitigate against social connections in work allocation, gendered relational ties surfaced on PPH as an informal network of support and work exchange. Although the workers in question are not operating as colleagues in the traditional sense and may compete for projects, it remains in their interest to collaborate. In anticipation of reciprocity, some willingly referred clients to their network peers with different specialisms, knowing that the favour was likely to be returned. These subtle alliances evolved over a period of time and cemented the circulation of the more lucrative clients and projects within a select group, thus excluding others. This led to the reproduction of an “old boys” network – reminiscent of the traditional legal profession – numerically dominated by men and utilized to their advantage (Pierce 1995).

Gendered experiences of inequality within the legal profession shape the distinct approaches of PPH participants. Existing inequalities are amplified by platform-specific processes: the regularity of participation, bidding techniques for tasks and projects, self-determination of pay levels, the construction of a portfolio of higher-value work, pursuit of follow-on work and symbolic online representations of expertise. These inequalities arise among platform workers who offer similar types of services and are drawn from the same occupational group. Although platform-based practices and processes are distinct from the characterization within Acker’s (2006) original framework, they nevertheless support her contention that all organizations comprise inequality regimes, which are linked to inequalities in economic conditions and society more generally (Acker 2009). Particularly problematic on platforms is the employment status, which gives legitimacy to inequitable practices that are perceived to arise from “free choice” and self-evaluation of worth, which are clearly gendered. Success continues to be defined by masculinized work patterns because practising law in a profession that is beset with systemic inequalities gives advantage to those engaging in platform work.

A secondary contribution is to research on inequalities in the legal profession, which has largely focused on the corporate sector (Tomlinson et al. 2019). This article has illustrated how gendered sectoral inequalities bolster the gender order of the legal profession and perpetuate labour market disadvantages for women. Research on the online legal market in China showed that it is unlikely to disrupt the traditional legal market (Yao 2020), but that it provides an alternative for those who have been excluded, face ongoing barriers to progression or seek an alternative pathway. For some, platform work is a temporary stopgap; for others, it is a more lucrative long-term preference. These varied experiences are largely reflective of the ways in which online environments reflect inequalities evident in offline lives.

We recognize that this research has limitations that should be noted. First, inequality regimes vary between organizations (Acker 2006); future research could extend to the wider literature on local, geographically tethered platform work, such as transportation

network services. This work is predominantly masculine; many women do wish to participate in location-based platform work but feel unable to do so because of gender-based discrimination, harassment and abuse (Fairwork 2023). Second, this study is limited to a gendered analysis given the characteristics of the sample, but we recognize that gender intersects with a range of other social categories. Examination of less specialized freelance platforms could broaden the analysis beyond gender inequalities. The framework of inequality regimes values an intersectional approach to understanding inequality at work (Healy et al. 2019); future research could examine how multiple intersectional identities generate different platform worker outcomes and experiences.

## Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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