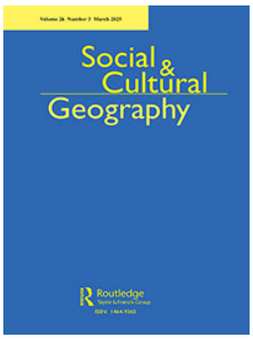

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Precarious mobilities on the axis of changing labour and mobility dynamics: the case of female domestic workers in Istanbul during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we examine the overlapping challenges that arose from domestic work, gender, and class in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, with implications that extend beyond this timeframe. We explore how these factors intersect with reproductive labour and contribute to the precarious lifestyles and livelihoods of female domestic workers (FDWs) and their related mobility spheres. Our analysis draws insights from feminist, labour, and transport geographies to illustrate the complex challenges FDWs faced during this time. We investigate an emergent mobility strategy (i.e. the *servis* minibus-shuttle) initiated and organized by FDWs who live in a low-income peripheral community and commute to high-income gated communities in Istanbul. To do this, we employed various ethnographic methods, including participative observations, informal discussions with FDWs and the drivers of the *servis*, and in-depth mobile interviews with three of its users. We discuss that *servis* helps FDWs overcome precarity in their daily mobilities to some extent by making them agents of this mobility sphere. However, it also emerges as an instrument of further entrapment, deepening their 'precarious mobilities'. Our analysis of the interplay between multi-faceted spheres of domestic work deepens our understanding of labour reproduction and the precarity of FDWs in everyday mobilities.

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MOTS CLÉS
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PALABRAS CLAVE
reproducción social; precariedad laboral; movilidades precarias; trabajadoras domésticas; solidaridad; pandemia de COVID-19

Mobilités précaires mises sur l'axe de la dynamique de travail et de mobilité : l'exemple de travailleuses domestiques à Istanbul pendant la pandémie COVID-19

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, nous examinons les défis concomitants qui proviennent du travail domestique, du genre et des classes sociales dans le contexte de la pandémie COVID-19 avec des implications qui vont au-delà de cette période-là. Quant aux travailleuses

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domestiques (*female domestic workers)*, nous explorons comment ces facteurs interagissent avec le travail reproductif et contribuent à la précarité de leurs moyens d'existence et modes de vie ainsi que l'idée connexe de leurs sphères de mobilité. Dans notre analyse, nous tirons des enseignements de la géographie féministe, la géographie du travail et la géographie des transports pour illustrer les défis complexes auxquels les travailleuses domestiques ont dû faire face à l'époque. Nous interrogeons une stratégie émergente de mobilité à Istanbul, la navette *servis*, qui a été initiée et organisée par des travailleuses domestiques domiciliées dans une communauté périphérique à faible revenu dont le travail s'effectue au sein des communautés fermées à haut revenu. Pour cela, nous avons employé plusieurs méthodes ethnographiques, notamment l'observation participante, las discussions informelles avec des travailleuses domestiques et des conducteurs de la *servis* ainsi que les interviews téléphoniques détaillés avec trois bénéficiaires de la navette. Nous nous intéressons à quel point la *servis* aide les travailleuses domestiques à surmonter la précarité de leurs mobilités quotidiennes en leur transformant en actrices de cette sphère de mobilité. Cependant, elle s'avère également un instrument d'enfermement encore plus profond, ce qui empire leurs « mobilités précaires ». Notre analyse de l'interaction entre les sphères multiformes du travail domestique améliore notre compréhension de la reproduction de travail et la précarité des mobilités quotidiennes pour les travailleuses domestiques.

Movilidades precarias en el eje de las dinámicas cambiantes del trabajo y la movilidad: el caso de las trabajadoras domésticas en Estambul durante la pandemia de COVID-19

RESUMEN

En este artículo, examinamos los desafíos superpuestos que surgieron del trabajo doméstico, el género y la clase en el contexto de la pandemia de COVID-19, con implicaciones que se extienden más allá de este marco temporal. Exploramos cómo estos factores se cruzan con el trabajo reproductivo y contribuyen a los estilos de vida y los medios de vida precarios de las trabajadoras domésticas (FDWs- por sus siglas en inglés) y sus esferas de movilidad relacionadas. Nuestro análisis extrae información de las geografías feministas, laborales y de transporte para ilustrar los complejos desafíos que enfrentaron las FDW durante este tiempo. Investigamos una estrategia de movilidad emergente (es decir, el minibús *servis*) iniciada y organizada por FDW que viven en una comunidad periférica de bajos ingresos y viajan a comunidades cerradas de altos ingresos en Estambul. Para ello, empleamos diversos métodos etnográficos, entre ellos observaciones participativas, debates informales con trabajadoras domésticas y los conductores de minibús, y entrevistas móviles en profundidad con tres de sus usuarios. Analizamos que el uso de los minibuses *servis* ayudan a las trabajadoras domésticas a superar la precariedad en sus movilidades cotidianas hasta cierto punto al convertirlas en agentes de esta esfera de movilidad. Sin embargo, también surge como un instrumento para atraparlas aún más, profundizando sus

'movilidades precarias'. Nuestro análisis de la interacción entre las esferas multifacéticas del trabajo doméstico profundiza nuestra comprensión de la reproducción laboral y la precariedad de las trabajadoras domésticas en las movilidades cotidianas.

Introduction

> You know the woman who does housework. You know her hands. Her hands are worn out like mine. You know her clothes, her bag, the dress she carries in her bag. The bag of a woman who goes to do housework is big and bulging. Her clothes are there. Where else will she go? [. . .] she definitely goes to housework *(Gülse,[1] 52, female domestic worker, interview, March 2022)*

Among millions of commuters whose travel patterns are monitored by the local authorities through official transport data collection, the everyday mobility needs of female domestic worker (FDW) commuters remain invisible and largely unrecognized. This had significant implications for their livelihoods and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is the core focus of this paper.

In our study, we aimed to investigate how FDWs became even more marginalized and vulnerable to income and job precarity during the pandemic due to inadequate transport provision. In this paper, we discuss how a group of FDWs in Esenyurt, a peripheral area of Istanbul, collectively developed and utilized a new minibus shuttle service, *servis*, to commute to and from work during the pandemic. We argue that the *servis* was a materialized expression of gendered and class-based mobility practices (Sheller, 2018), which intersects the domestic and work spheres of FDWs, producing 'precarious mobilities'. We assert that precarious mobility is not an isolated phenomenon, it emerges as an extension of precarious work that is socially reproduced and predominantly gendered, but also classed and racialized. It is also affected by the daily negotiations women make in the domestic sphere, which are often shaped by patriarchal structures and women's reproductive labour. As such, it is only possible to fully understand mobility precarity via an intersectional analysis of these other precarities that affect FDWs' daily lives.

The COVID-19 pandemic put an additional economic burden on people working in low-income and insecure service sectors, most of which were young people, women, ethnic minority populations and low-skilled workers (Maestripieri, 2021). Despite the travel risks and stringent policy measures aimed at decreasing mobility, such as cuts to many public transport services, lower-income individuals remained more mobile than those with higher incomes and education levels, as they lacked opportunities to work remotely (Brough et al., 2021). Research conducted during the onset of the pandemic revealed that regions with lower socioeconomic status, as well as those populated by working-class individuals, remained notably more mobile (Lee et al., 2021). Women in low-income countries (LMICs) were also documented as subject to more significant mobility impacts (Porter et al., 2021). Women living in poorer communities within LMICS were especially vulnerable, fulfilling their home-based social reproductive roles while also continuing to commute under dangerous conditions, worsened by their limited access to private vehicles and remote work options (ibid).

In this paper, we explore how these emergent 'pandemic (im)mobilities' (Adey et al., 2021) influenced and redefined 'essential' work trip commuting patterns (Plyushteva, 2022). Before the pandemic, all work trips were considered essential, but with the pandemic, only the trips taken by essential workers were deemed vital. At the beginning of the pandemic, local and national authorities made provisions to secure the mobility of essential workers in health, food and public services. Yet, as the pandemic progressed, the burden of restricted mobility on employees in non-essential sectors was exacerbated (Adey et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2021). Domestic workers were 'among the worst-hit' economically (ILO, 2022b).

According to the International Labour Office (ILO, 2022a), domestic workers perform various duties in private households, such as cleaning, cooking, gardening, taking care of children, elderly or sick family members, and caring for pets. They may work full-time or part-time, be employed by a household or service provider, and live in or out of the employer's residence. In the early days of the pandemic, almost 50–75% of domestic workers were negatively affected by job losses due to employers' fear of contagion and restricted mobility in the absence of public transport services (ILO, 2020). This affected both the live-in care workers, looking after children or older family members and doing routine chores in more affluent countries (Schilliger et al., 2022), and live-out care workers in both the global North (Pandey et al., 2021) and the global South (Sumalatha et al., 2021). These conditions worsened as other household members were also made redundant, resulting in over-crowding of houses, increased household workload, food scarcity and insecurity, higher risks of contagion, and cases of domestic violence (Adey et al., 2021; Singh & Kaur, 2022). Furthermore, many FDWs could not afford to be economically inactive or to stop travelling to work, even though they knew the risks. The question of 'who has the capacity to be more mobile' under the lockdown is asked, as is 'who has the privilege to be less mobile' (Lee et al., 2021, p. 14; Porter et al., 2021).

Our research into the travel experiences of FDWs during the COVID-19 pandemic lies in the intersection of feminist, labour, and transport geographies based on sociological understandings of mobilities (Cresswell, 2011; Sheller, 2014; Sheller & Urry, 2006; Urry, 2007). Through this intersectional lens on the pandemic (Ho & Maddrell, 2021), we discuss how the precarious labour patterns of FDWs in Istanbul, rooted in gender, ethnicity, class, and migration stories, amalgamate into 'precarious mobilities' and further their social inequalities. More specifically, we are interested in how social reproduction, which increasingly capitalizes on precarious forms of living and working globally, makes precarity more widespread in the mobility sphere in a kind of continuous feedback loop.

We describe the mobility experiences of FDWs as 'precarious mobilities', referring to the power negotiations they engage in with their spouses, families, communities, and employers and how they navigate these in the mobility sphere. To do that, we investigate the mobility experiences of the live-out FDWs who commute on the *servis*, live in Esenyurt, and work in nearby high-income gated communities.

We employed various ethnographic methods in our study, including participative observations, supported by semi-structured interviews, which partly took place 'on the move' (Bissell, 2010; Kokkola et al., 2022; Vannini & Scott, 2020; Warren, 2017, 2021) and partly at the workplace of the domestic workers. The reason for this mobile ethnographic approach was the nature of the domestic work itself, which is highly mobile and spatially dispersed.

Three visits were made to Esenyurt, and the *servis* was taken with the domestic workers (March, April and September 2022). Three in-depth interviews were conducted with Gülse, İlknur and Seda, who we introduce in the coming sections. All women are natives of the country, though some have histories of internal migration. We also met Ferda, who sparked the idea of *servis*, and six other women, such as Zeynep, joined in as we discussed their mobility experiences openly. Therefore, as the means of movement, the mobility space itself was a place of conversation (Urry, 2007). After all the women had disembarked, we spoke with the *servis* drivers, Mehmet and his father Hasan, on two different days during the return trip to their resting place until the next pickup.

The central focus of the paper is on the ways in which FDWs utilized *servis* during the pandemic to fill the gaps in the city's public transport system network. Through the fieldwork, we address our key research questions: To what extent have the FDWs been able to adapt to the reduced public transport services while striving to keep their jobs and support their families? What mobility strategies did they employ, if any, and which socio-economic and spatial dimensions influenced their coping mechanisms?

In the next section of the paper, we summarize some of the theoretical literature that we drew upon to frame our empirical research.

Social reproduction of labour and its intersection with everyday mobility of female domestic workers

We frame our research in the context of feminist theories of social reproduction, patriarchy, subordination and women's labour with a specific focus on the domestic sector (Katz, 2001; McDowell, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2004; Walby, 1990). Specifically, we posit that there is a mutually constitutive and destructive relationship between labour production and social reproduction, which impacts and is affected by the precarious mobilities of FDWs. Social reproduction encompasses daily and lifelong reproduction that ensures the continuation of production and labour, becoming 'a life's work' (Mitchell et al., 2004). It is not uncommon for women to care for their grandchildren and allow their daughters to work while caring for their elderly mothers (Hall, 2019). In this sense, social reproduction and the production of labour become inseparable, as the former is crucial for the survival of the latter.

However, the reduction of the 'gender gap' in many Western societies (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016) and the growth in middle-class female prosperity have made many of the traditional tasks attributed to women tradable commodities (depending on household incomes and other social conditions). Hereby, the commodification of women's labour and commoditization of care work (Meehan & Strauss, 2015) have created time for some women to be 'liberated' to enter the paid labour force (Katz, 2001). This created a 'gendered loop' in which women with paid employment hire other women to supply the labour of social reproduction they would otherwise provide for 'free' (Pratt, 2004, p. 167). Therefore, the gender-based division of labour and the social relations of production and reproduction did not change (McDowell et al., 2006).

In the case of FDWs, social reproduction is also a continuum, whereby: 'the domain of work and the domains of home and leisure are indistinguishable from each other' (Mitchell et al., 2004, p. 3). The vague and ambiguous job descriptions for FDWs assign them various

tasks based on each employer's expectations. They are forced to finish the tasks in a given space and time and maintain the standards continuously (Yeoh & Huang, 2010).

Social reproduction takes place not only in domestic settings but also in environments where domestic tasks extend beyond the home. For instance, Clark (2015) explains how communal laundry areas were set up as a development programme in the poor migrant neighbourhoods of Southeast Turkey, where the Kurdish population resided in the majority, representing spaces and practices of social reproduction. Where women's out-of-home activities are not seen as appropriate by men (e.g. Iqbal et al., 2020; Porter, 2011), doing laundry was an excuse to leave the house, socialize and even attend educational programmes (Clark, 2015). Understanding how overlapping work and personal activities shape FDWs' practices outside the home is key to grasping the effects of changing labour dynamics on 'the location of new forms of care and for travel patterns between home and care' (McDowell et al., 2006, p. 154).

Pandemic impacts on the domestic and work spheres of FDWs

In our study, we demonstrate how the COVID-19 pandemic added another dimension to these complex and interactive relationships. On the one hand, live-out workers had to choose between becoming live-in workers or staying as live-out workers (Ju et al., 2023). On the other hand, as the pandemic initiated remote work opportunities, live-out domestic workers started sharing more time with their employers, which created new tensions. For instance, in 2022, an X user[2] from Turkey shared how his domestic worker mother was denied food by her employer, who ordered expensive dishes and threw the leftovers away. As Archer (2011) has identified previously in the case of South Africa, invisible boundaries around what is 'allowed' to be consumed 'produce race, gender and class distinction in domestic service' (p.67). The pandemic brought new intimacies shared in the workplace due to employers spending more time at home. This has led to the convergence of previously isolated work environments, forming multi-faceted work spheres.

The overcrowding of houses during the COVID-19 pandemic brought another challenge for women, this time in their own homes. The reported cases of domestic violence during the pandemic significantly increased (Al-Ali, 2020). Furthermore, women took up a larger share of caregiving responsibilities than men (Kabeer et al., 2021), which intensified the patriarchal relationships in women's private domestic spheres (Brysk, 2022).

Discrimination against domestic workers in the workplace, coupled with intensified control in the domestic sphere during the pandemic, contributed to the increased subordination of women. The patriarchal structure keeps women's labour power, reproduction, sexuality, mobility, property and other resources under control (Walby, 1990).

Social reproduction, mobility sphere and the unequal mobilities of FDWs

The mobility sphere differs from other spaces of social reproduction; it serves as a connection between production and reproduction while also being a space where social reproduction persists. As such, 'mobility is vital to social reproduction' (Doherty, 2021, p. 760).

Research indicates that women's travel patterns reflect the interplay of their marital status, parenthood, and ethnic, racial, economic, and educational backgrounds (e.g. Cresswell & Uteng, 2008). Recently, coined with the term 'mobilities of care' (Sánchez de Madariaga, 2016), research on gender and mobility has shown that women, as the primary caregivers, undertake care-related trips alongside other errands. Although childcare and caring for elderly household members are often perceived as static, they are dynamic tasks performed while travelling (Greed, 2008). In addition to care-related trips, women may need or want to bring their children to the workplace (Riad, 2007). Consequently, reproductive labour reaches beyond the private domain to workplaces and the places in between, enacted within urban spaces and mobility infrastructures (Doherty, 2021).

Most previous studies examining the mobility of FDWs have concentrated on migrant care workers (Caillol, 2018; Hin-Yan Chan & Latham, 2021) and how their movement is regulated by governments and employers (Bélanger & Silvey, 2020; Yeoh et al., 2017). Comparative studies from the global South comprise most of the reported cases regarding the daily mobility of live-out domestic workers, many of whom are also natives of the country, as seen in our study (Erman & Kara, 2018; Montoya-Robledo & Escovar-Álvarez, 2020; Wilks, 2021, 2022).

FDWs exhibit different mobility trends to other low-income women, characterized by longer commuting distances and travel times (Erman & Kara, 2018; Montoya-Robledo & Escovar-Álvarez, 2020). This is unlike the predominant empirical evidence, which finds that women often feel compelled to work close to home due to household obligations heightened by having school-age and dependent children, leading to their spatial entrapment (Wheatley, 2013). The long commute is a consequence of FDWs travelling from the outskirts of cities to wealthier central neighbourhoods or peripheral gated communities where their employer resides but where public transport is scarce.

The mobility patterns of FDWs are akin to those observed for highly educated working women from non-minority groups across different socio-spatial contexts (England, 1993). However, FDWs' mobility patterns are shaped by factors other than career aspirations, existing high-quality living conditions, social connections, or the prioritization of their children's needs. For FDWs, a long commute is a trade-off between working for a trusted but far away employer and a closer but unfamiliar one. Building mutual trust and reciprocal relationships between domestic workers and their employers takes years and provides feelings of dignity, respect, and stability, which are as essential as a regular wage (Wilks, 2022). Trust is like a work contract in such precarious jobs.

Spending longer commuting time, and therefore, being a part of the public sphere for longer durations, seems to bring more visibility to FDWs by enhancing their knowledge about their rights as workers, and thus, increases their negotiating power with their employers (Erman & Kara, 2018; Montoya-Robledo & Escovar-Álvarez, 2020). Moreover, commuting longer distances increases their bargaining power as they 'reject the pressure from employers to work continuously, demanding time off on moral and humanitarian grounds' (Wilks, 2022, p. 12). Nevertheless, domestic workers experience social inequalities in the mobility sphere.

In this intersectional theoretical framing between domestic, work and mobility spheres, FDWs can be positioned as commoditized, precarious and marginalized. Understanding

how overlapping work and personal activities shape domestic workers' practices outside the home is key to grasping the effects of changing labour dynamics on 'the location of new forms of care and for travel patterns between home and care' (McDowell et al., 2006, p. 154).

Setting the wider context and origins of female domestic workers in Turkey

The origins of FDWs in Turkey can be examined in three phases, closely linked to shifts in urban and socio-economic structures, along with women's involvement in the workforce, which have transformed the daily mobility patterns of FDWs. The first phase can be traced back to migration waves from rural areas to larger cities from the 1950s onwards, despite low-income women working as cleaners on an ad-hoc basis being a historical phenomenon (Özbay, 2019). This first wave was prompted by the mechanization of agriculture in the central and eastern parts of the country. As their spouses secured employment, women relocated to urban areas to provide reproductive care. Rapid urbanization transformed two-to-three-storey family homes into five-to-six-storey apartment buildings, generating new job opportunities for migrant men as janitors who often lived rent-free on the ground floors of these newly constructed buildings in poorly lit and ventilated rooms. Meanwhile, their wives helped them clean the common areas in the buildings, ultimately leading them to take on jobs as cleaners in the flats (Özyeğin, 2004). This resulted in limited mobility for migrant women working within the same building or adjacent ones.

These arrangements established the basis for live-out domestic workers in the second phase, triggered by the forced migration caused by regional conflicts in the eastern regions of the country during the 1980s. Inadequate housing to meet the demands of new migrants in Western cities led to high levels of squatter housing in peripheral areas. The female workforce accumulating in these squatter neighbourhoods became a resource of reproductive labour for middle-income women. This increased the daily mobility of migrant women, requiring them to travel between their neighbourhoods and wealthier urban centres. However, venturing out to work in the homes of others posed a 'negative impact on their reputations as honourable women and those of their husbands, who were seen to be inadequate wage earners' (White, 1994, p. 151). These traditional patriarchal relationships were also highlighted by women in our interviews in how they negotiated with their husbands before becoming domestic workers. These social structures confine citizens to work as live-out domestic workers. While international migrant FDWs, particularly from ex-Soviet countries, are usually employed as live-in employees to care for children and older family members in Turkey (Akalin, 2015), native workers who carry 'signs of peasantry' do the more physically demanding tasks and usually work as live-out employees (Akalin, 2007).

The third phase of the shift of mobility patterns of FDWs is strongly linked to the rise of gated communities on the city's outskirts. This shift was also affected by the transformation of squatter neighbourhoods into low-income, high-density neighbourhoods lacking sufficient public spaces, parks, and other services, which one of our interviewees referred to as slums. This socio-spatial change generated new job opportunities for FDWs, enabling them to work in gated communities near their own

neighbourhoods, but as we'll see in later sections, not easily accessible by means of public transport. Our study focuses on one of these places, Esenyurt, a district on the peripheries of Istanbul.

The focus on Esenyurt as a case study

Esenyurt deserves special attention as a unique district in Istanbul. Once farmland on the outskirts of Istanbul, Esenyurt's population is reaching nearly one million as it maintains its ranking as the most populated district in Turkey. The first settlements started as squatter housing in the early 1980s with forced migration, especially from eastern Turkey's Kars and Ardahan regions. In 1989, Esenyurt became a municipality with a mayor who aimed to modernize the area, eliminate poverty, and help its inhabitants adapt to city life (Robins & Aksoy, 2000). However, this adaptation meant the assimilation of different cultures into the urban culture and the standardization of the structures of daily life, from housing to social relations. As the settlers did not comply, the mayor promoted the development of satellite settlements in green areas for the wealthy (ibid.). This constant sprawl of the city towards its peripheries has been even more evident during the pandemic, with an increased demand for larger houses further from the city centre. In this sense, the residential and work areas of FDWs, Esenyurt and Başakşehir, represent these bifurcated peripheral characteristics (Figure 1).

The district has a multi-racial structure. The Kurdish population constitutes 31.7% of Esenyurt's population, ranking third in Istanbul, while the Alevi population is 12.5%, placing it in the second rank in Istanbul *(personal correspondence with the director of the Republican People's Party electoral office, February 2024*[3]). The district has also been one of the destinations for Syrian refugees in Istanbul.[4] Based on the district's multi-racial background, it is no surprise that the İmece Women's Solidarity Association was established in Esenyurt. İmece and Evid-Sen (Domestic Workers Solidarity Syndicate, Est.2011) are the two organizations focused on the rights of domestic workers. According to Diner and Toktaş (2010), during Turkey's third wave of feminism, more women from the periphery got involved in gender politics. This included Kurdish women from the eastern and south-eastern regions and others who were politicized through Islamism. Through their migrant roots (Ardahan and Kars), the founders of İmece established a women's *kahve*[5] in Esenyurt in 2003, leading to their institutionalization in 2004. We believe that this organizational power and solidarity of domestic workers emerging in Esenyurt is definitive in initiating *servis* to facilitate their daily mobility.

Conditions of Istanbul's pandemic mobility policies

Servis emerged in the context that Turkey sanctioned strict curfews in the first months of the pandemic, which were later repeated in 2021 for extended periods (i.e. 18 days of total lockdown). In addition to international travel restrictions, entertainment, cultural, social, leisure, scientific, and artistic activities were suspended (Demirbilek et al., 2020). Istanbul was described as Turkey's Wuhan by the Health Minister, with 60% of the confirmed cases concentrated in the city (Aykaç & Elbek, 2022). Esenyurt, predominantly inhabited by low-income, blue-collar, and working-class individuals, has emerged as a highly vulnerable region with a substantial number of COVID-19 cases. (ibid.).

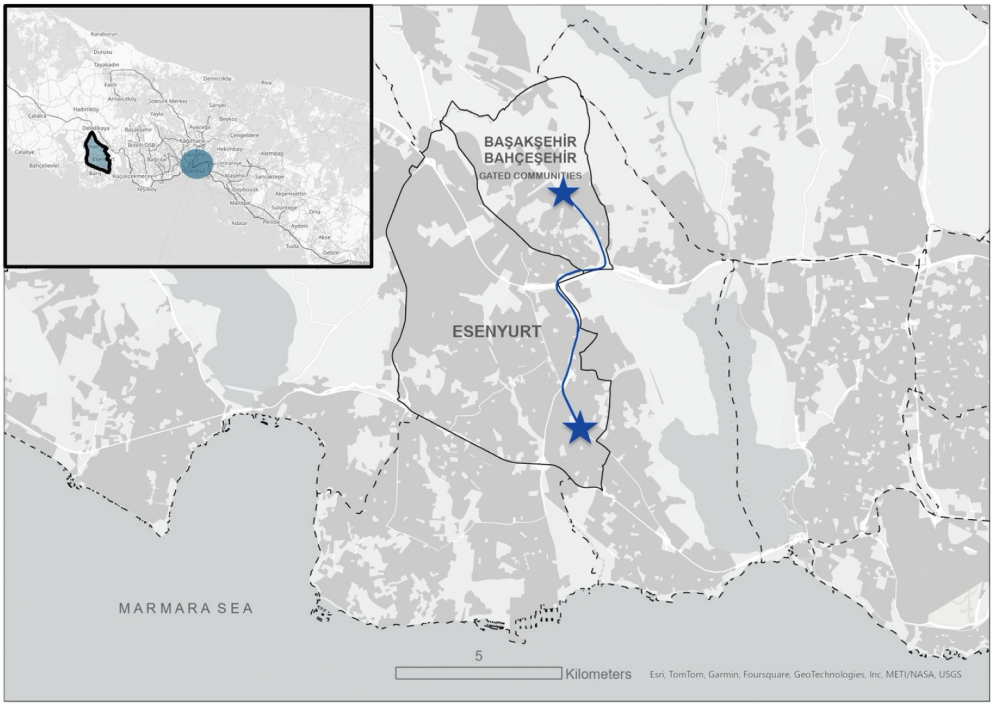

Figure 1. Map of Esenyurt illustrating the service route between FDWs' residential areas and the gated communities where they work. The map in the top left corner shows Esenyurt's location in relation to the centre of Istanbul.

Like other cities worldwide, Istanbul adjusted public transport services from March 2020 onwards. While ridership decreased by 83% due to travel restrictions for various age groups and strict curfews, city officials discontinued or lowered the frequency of buses that were used less frequently to free up capacity for more popular routes, maintaining lower bus occupancy levels (Deveci et al., 2021). People with access to private cars switched to using them (Aydin et al., 2022), while those from low-income groups who mostly did not own private vehicles, had to find other mobility solutions (Akyelken et al., 2023). City officials overlooked the areas of low public transport demand in their provision of essential public transit commuter services, like wealthy gated communities whose residents rely heavily on cars. They overlooked the mobility needs of low-income employees who must also travel to and from these high-income areas to undertake their work, such as security guards, personnel, gardeners, and domestic workers. These workers were left to make their own commuting arrangements but usually did not own cars, so they had to invent alternative mobility solutions to access their daily employment.

Public transport provision in Istanbul's peripheries and informal transport

Despite advancements in Istanbul's mainstream public transport system, significant mobility inequalities remain for some population groups and geographical locations. Fewer bus services in peripheral areas makes using them difficult for women with flexible

jobs. Women in low-income peripheral areas are especially prone to transport-related inequalities as they cannot travel to high-paid city jobs (Akyelken, 2024). Low-income peripheries are often served by minibuses and *dolmuş*,[6] which are not reliable and safe.

Servis is a type of informal transport, much like their counterparts elsewhere (Oviedo Hernandez & Titheridge, 2016). However, it differs from the 'traditional informal' systems in Istanbul, *dolmuş* and minibuses, which were historically established along more profitable routes in the city, where the number of passengers was high and often not in the poorest areas, even though the drivers resided in low-income peripheral neighbourhoods. Yet, as the city grew and absorbed these low-income neighbourhoods, they began to serve relatively poorer areas as well as middle-income neighbourhoods.

Unlike *servis*, *dolmuş* and minibuses are registered with the municipality, run on designated routes and have strong bargaining power in Istanbul (Canitez et al., 2019). Therefore, they are quite competitive, and any new entrant to the system will likely succumb to these operators, which we will discuss in light of our study's findings.

Meeting the domestic workers

Precarity is intertwined with mobility, work, and domestic life in Istanbul. **Gülse** is from an Alevi village in Ardahan, situated on the Georgia border in Northeast Turkey. Upon marrying her cousin when she was 15, she moved to Istanbul. She has four adult children and two grandchildren. Early in her marriage, Gülse worked at a nearby garment factory, but when her first child was born, she switched to domestic work, which she thought would be more flexible. Gülse's husband refused to talk to her for two weeks when she proposed the possibility of domestic work:

> When I asked him 'why', he said, 'something would happen to you, like you might fall out of a window or something'. But no, I mean, he's a Turkish type of man. No one would say that he makes his wife work. So it's not because he doesn't trust me or anything, it's just the pressure of society. *(Gülse, interview, March 2022)*

It is quite rare for men like Gülse's husband in patriarchal societies to 'allow' their wives to work outside the home, particularly in unfamiliar environments. Therefore, patriarchy can pose a threat to the mobility of women (Porter, 2011). However, as Gülse noted, her husband's attitude shifted once she started contributing financially to their household.

Similarly, **İlknur** is a mother of four. She is 41 years old and married when she was 20. She is Kurdish and also moved to Istanbul from Ardahan. Her parents continue to live in Ardahan and work in agriculture. For the last seven years, İlknur has worked as a domestic worker for the same employer. Her husband works as a security guard, and their low family income meant that İlknur had to work even when she was six months pregnant during the pandemic. In her experience with the *servis*, she notes:

> I used to ride the *servis*, always sitting in the front and wearing gloves during the pandemic. Thanks to women, they used to make me sit up front so I wouldn't come into contact with anyone. *(İlknur interview, September 2022)*

While the care of the other women eased the difficulty of travelling to work by *servis* during her pregnancy, she had no choice but to work, and it would have been impossible without the *servis*.

In contrast to Gülse and İlknur, **Seda** faced different mobility challenges and opportunities. Born in Istanbul, Seda is a mother of two and married to a factory worker. She is young and trained in preschool education. Although she did not reveal information on her sectarian or ethnic background, it is worth noting that her family is also from Ardahan, and her mother tongue is Turkish. Unlike other participants, due to her training, Seda found care work looking after a two-year-old while doing minimal housework.

Encouraged by her aunt, she began working as a domestic worker to help pay off her and her husband's debt. Unfortunately, during the pandemic, she lost her job because her employer was hesitant about her working in their home. Although her employer covered two months' pay while she could not work, she was forced to find other work. She then looked after her landlord's grandson for a year but became unemployed again when the grandson's family moved to another city. Such precarious job trajectory is a frequent occurrence for domestic workers. Still, for Seda, she prefers domestic work as it is more flexible despite the risks of not having social security.

In Istanbul, being an ethnic minority deepens the challenges of precariousness. Similar to the way Kurdish men suffer from a lack of access to the formal job market (Bahar, 2017), Alevi women face limited employment opportunities. Despite being the largest 'minority' group in Turkey, their precarious position within the country is continuous (Gökarıksel & Secor, 2022). This leads to women with low education having to take on precarious jobs in factories, engaging in piecework or domestic work for wealthier households to contribute to the household budget.

In the next section, starting with the researcher's reflections from the field, we demonstrate our key findings to demonstrate the emerging mobility spheres in which FDWs operated during the pandemic.

Travelling in the *servis*

I arrived at the meet-up point on one of the major roads in Esenyurt at 8.20am. The vehicle was a minibus with a capacity for 25–30 passengers with a 2×2 seating plan. Some women were sleeping, listening to music, their heads resting on the steamy windows with the cold weather outside, relying on the old bus aircon. Some women were speaking loudly from the middle of the bus to the front, commenting on the driver and each other. I later learned that not everyone was happy about the noisy bus, especially in the mornings. One woman slips and is about to fall, and they comment on her clumsiness as if it's a regular occurrence. Such easy communication is not possible on regular public transport. A woman hands out her business card, having set up her domestic worker agency.

At its peak, I counted 31 women in the service, but their WhatsApp group has 75 members and is growing daily. Mondays, Thursdays, and Fridays are particularly busy days. Women's attraction to *servis* includes the ability to sit. Women get on the *servis* at different locations, and the one-way route is about 16 km until the *servis* drops off all the passengers and the driver returns home for a rest, having already made two trips to a factory in the morning. We stopped several times along the way to pick up women. After leaving the city's bustling traffic, Seda began collecting fares. This process must be kept discreet, as discussed later in this paper, in relation to the informal grounds on which *servis* operates *(fieldnotes, 2022)*.

As I conversed with women, they shared with me their stories of how the *servis* came to be. In the following sections, we will use these stories to illustrate the mobility spheres of FDWs in Esenyurt and explore their interaction with both work and domestic spheres.

Mobility sphere 1: spaces of opportunity and trust

Ferda, a domestic worker, asked her husband to arrange a driver and a car for her and her friends to make commuting to work easier. Before that, she needed to take two buses or *dolmuş* and walk up a steep hill to reach her workplace. The current driver, Mehmet, described the entire process.

> They *(Ferda's husband and the driver)* were friends. He *(the husband)* asked the driver to see if he could go [this route]. This guy is also a young person, he used to be a dolmuş driver. He transferred from driving a dolmuş; he was so rude [to the women on the servis]. At one point, the work shifts changed at the factory. He said, 'I cannot undertake [the *servis*] here'. That's how I started. He said later, 'I will come back. The factory shifts have improved'. [But] None of the women wanted to go [with him]. *(Mehmet, interview, March 2022)*

This quote is more than Mehmet's account of the events. It also explains how important it was for domestic workers to trust the driver and for him to respect the women. Mehmet's description paints a portrait of a dolmuş driver as a rude person, as an outsider. This contrasts with Mehmet, who is deeply cared for and trusted by the domestic workers *(fieldnotes, 2022)*. Trust also facilitates 'recruiting' new passengers for the *servis*. Domestic workers hear about the *servis* by word of mouth or while waiting at the bus stop, and they get on it without knowing anyone or the driver.

Trust can even matter more than price in why women relied on any particular *servis* during the pandemic. For instance, Mehmet increased *servis* fares to ₺8 ($1) after a year. Some women found it expensive. The average daily earnings of women were around $35–45. Unaffordable fares led them to arrange another *servis*. Losing half of his passengers, Mehmet reduced the price by ₺1. In March 2022, he increased the price again, facing resistance, but it was reasonable compared to public transport fares. Seda explained when asked why she did not switch vehicles when fares were increased;

> I didn't think about it. Frankly, I didn't calculate the two liras- it's his right. After all, we got used to it. For example, he waited for me *(as she was late)*. Maybe that service wouldn't wait. It is very important to know a little and to respect each other. Everything is not about money; at least, I don't think it is. *(Seda, interview, March 2022)*

Similarly, when asked why he continues to provide this service even though the profit is negligible, Mehmet answered: 'I can't just leave it; it's like a labour of love. There are some older sisters that I love; I mean, really like family'. *(Mehmet, interview, March 2022)*.

The emergence of *servis* as a response to pandemic immobilities is a unique initiative by FDWs based on their kind attitudes and their search for a decent and humane mobility alternative.

Servis offers women flexibility and communication benefits. They share job opportunities, changing stops, weather conditions, and arrival times through their *servis* WhatsApp group. They also organize tasks like fare collection. Seda volunteers to collect the fares from all *servis* riders and hand the total to the driver, strengthening their trust in each other and drivers.

The pandemic spurred residential mobility in peripheral areas, increasing work opportunities for domestic workers. As Zeynep recalls, 'Before the pandemic, few people lived here. After we arrive at the Migros, we would get on the shuttle to the *site*.[7]' *(Zeynep, personal communication, March 2022)*. Gülse remarks on how these areas attract many domestic workers.

> There are many *sites* around Bahçeşehir*(Başakşehir)* that I cannot even name. Like a factory, a *servis (drops off its passengers)* in front of each *site*, and domestic workers get off. You know, one worker from every household in Esenyurt [. . .]goes to the houses around Bahçeşehir as a worker. *(Gülse, interview, March 2022)*

Domestic workers envisage these *sites* as factories and position themselves as the workforce that keeps these factories running, similar to their counterparts in the global South (Chase, 2008; Zulfiqar, 2019).

However, there is often no transport other than the car between these housing enclaves and the rest of the city. Shuttles are usually provided for residents who are not always happy to share these vehicles with domestic workers. For instance, İlknur commented that she used to walk uphill from the nearest bus stop to the *site* before *servis* existed, and the shuttles would not pick her up.

> I'll never forget it. *(The driver)* said, 'sister, I cannot give you a ride'. I sat down and cried. I was the only woman; it was very bad here, you know? It was deserted; cars were stopping *(because they saw women)*. [. . .]Look, there are dog kennels. Think about it. You go up the slope. There is a pavement, but you walk, and those dogs attack, whether the road is stony or paved. *(İlknur, interview, September 2022)*

In this regard, in car-centric, wealthy peripheral areas where public transport is not prioritized by local authorities, *servis* connects women to job opportunities.

Mobility sphere 2: servis eliminates (and exacerbates) precarious mobilities

Servis also manifests itself as a response to precarious mobilities. Unlike regular transport services, *servis* provide door-to-door transport. For FDWs, 'it's like a taxi'. *(Seda, interview, April 2022)*. It also alleviates safety concerns. For instance, a man who claimed to be a police officer offered Seda a ride. Her employer encouraged her to accept the offer and that the gesture was made with good intentions. But she remained dubious. It is important to note, as part of the *servis* system, women choose their drivers. In this sense, safety is ensured through trust between women and drivers.

Servis drivers and women using it faced challenges. The municipality orders that all public transport and company/factory/school buses be registered. Unregistered *servis* risk seizure. This is often facilitated by *dolmuş* drivers looking to exclude *servis* drivers from the informal transport market. As a result, *servis* drivers developed tactics to avoid having the vehicle seized. As Hasan illustrates, 'When we see the police, we run away if there is a place to escape, it doesn't matter if we burn a little more diesel' *(Hasan, interview, September 2022)*.

Municipal registration for company or factory buses requires an approved list of passenger names provided by employers. However, inconsistent passenger lists make formal registration problematic. Unfortunately, in the case of *servis*, the reciprocal relationships between the employer and the domestic worker failed to formally address this

precarious mobility condition. This underscores that new mobility strategies come with inherent precarity. Nevertheless, women reclaimed their right to mobility through their friendliness and mutual respect, through sharing 'with others and based upon forms of solidarity, reciprocity, caring, trust, generosity, and stewardship' (Sheller, 2018, p. 169).

Mobility sphere 3: servis reconstructs classed mobilities

Before the *servis*, some women would walk through an empty field crossed by a railway line to reach the nearest public transport. As İlknur commented, '[. . .] our feet would be covered in mud. We would wipe it off with grass and water so the minibus driver would pick us up' *(İlknur, interview, September 2022)*. Social class is evident in the daily mobility of FDWs through the act of wiping shoes. This gesture signifies respect and honour in the face of the undignified physical conditions within the mobility sphere FDWs traverse between high-income, car-centric gated communities and the rest of the city. This reflects the broader pursuit of dignified and respectful working conditions by FDWs (Wilks, 2022). By providing a 'clean' passage between these areas, *servis* addresses the mobility needs of women who practise class-based mobilities on a daily basis.

Yet, *servis* is also an exclusionary mobility practice. Each day, the *servis* transports a group of working-class, low-income women from minority ethnic backgrounds to affluent areas. Operating in one of the most multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and impoverished districts of Istanbul, *servis* becomes a mobility space where poverty is evident. İlknur observes that most *servis* users are from Ardahan and Kars (Eastern Turkey), especially of Kurdish origin: 'so they were poorer, that's what I realized. [. . .] without them, the *servis* would be empty'. Contrary to public transport services that often accommodate a mixture of social groups, *servis* creates an isolated experience, contributing to mobility as a gendered, classed and racialized practice (Sheller, 2018).

The remainder of the findings narrate how these mobility spheres interact with work and domestic spheres in the daily lives of FDWs.

Mobility interactions with domestic and work spheres: negotiations with patriarchy and building economic solidarity

Servis brings flexibility to FDWs, allowing them to spend more time with their children. They can avoid an extra hour of the morning commute and do not need to negotiate with their employers to leave work before 5pm to catch the *servis*. Negotiating her working hours with her husband, Seda noted that he was reluctant for her to work more than part-time, indicating that she would become too tired to provide care for the family: 'because a tired person would be in a bad mood at home too, he doesn't want that. He is used to my smiling face'. *(Seda, interview, April 2022)*. In this sense, although *servis* serves as a means for negotiating early departures from work, it also returns FDWs to their homes to perform 'emotional labour' (Hall, 2019). Seda's experience highlights this dual nature of *servis*, where time liberated from productive work is subsequently allocated to reproductive responsibilities.

Servis acts as a place for women to meet and learn from one another about strategies for surviving patriarchy in the city and securing their rights as domestic workers, including their demands for social security and health insurance. In this way, the *servis* strengthens

solidarity between FDWs. For instance, Seda was employed in a childcare position referred to her by her aunt. The job paid poorly. Despite caring for her employer's baby, she earned less than other domestic workers commuting by *servis*. As feminist geographers note, childcare workers are often paid less by families and are preferred as a cheaper alternative to institutionalized childcare justified by presumed meanings associated with femininity and traditional gender roles (McDowell et al., 2006). Eventually, after many *servis* rides where she shared her ordeal with the other domestic workers, she was able to secure a better paying job through her *servis* network.

Servis could have a more critical role in maintaining these links as an example of the solidarity economy (Hossein, 2023). The solidarity economy is not alien to women in Turkey; primarily associated with class, migration, and ethnicity (Bilecen, 2019). However, changing social practices in the aftermath of the pandemic and spatial development in cities leading to living further away from each other leave less time for socializing and being aware of each other's challenges, which is essential for a solidarity economy. In this sense, *servis* becomes a much-needed space where solidarity can be worked upon (Mollett & Faria, 2018).

Conclusions

In this paper, we have explored how labour precarity prevails through multiple domains for FDWs living on a metropolitan city's outskirts and belonging to diverse migration, ethnic, and religious backgrounds. We have investigated these links through a collectively produced mobility strategy, *servis*, by FDWs in Esenyurt, Istanbul, as a response to deteriorated public transport services in peripheral areas of the city during the pandemic. The self-organized *servis* during the pandemic accommodates and enhances dialogue between domestic workers while enabling feelings of trust and solidarity. In addition to creating a safe, flexible, comfortable travel experience, *servis* helps women share their experiences as domestic workers and support each other for better-paying jobs. In this sense, *servis* is a new practice of solidarity economy embedded in social, cultural and spatial roots, particularly as these forms of solidarity have been strained by distance throughout the pandemic.

Our intersectional analysis has illuminated the interaction between work and domestic spheres and how the two amalgamate into domestic work. While domestic work is already different from most work due to the social reproduction of domestic labour at home and workplace, the pandemic blurred these borders even further. As the COVID-19 pandemic pushed women further to stay as subordinates in all the spheres of work and home, *servis* created an opportunity for them to take control of their daily mobility.

At the same time, this bottom-up approach to transport service provision, rooted in informal structures and organizational negotiations, has several negative consequences and brings further mobility precarity for women. The *servis* clashes with the more traditional *dolmuş*, which has gained legal ground over the years. Increasing initiatives such as *servis* could lead to greater tensions and insecurity. While devising a tailored solution to their daily mobility problems, domestic workers are pushed towards another informal arena.

Servis functions as a bridge connecting poor and wealthy neighbourhoods. As women step into the *servis*, they find themselves among other working-class, poor, ethnic minority women originating from rural areas of the country. They commute to high-income, car-

oriented neighbourhoods enclosed by gated communities where walking outside them or even waiting for the pick-up might feel insecure. While public transport may accommodate a wider range of social classes, *servis* caters to low-income working-class women from minority ethnic backgrounds. Therefore, it is a materialized form of class-based and racialized mobility. Moreover, while *servis* offers a safe and reliable commute, it simultaneously creates an enclave, a tunnel between home and work. This situation distances women from the public realm, especially when *servis* is their only transport option. Furthermore, *servis* may mask the immobilities these groups face in the eyes of local authorities. As FDWs craft solutions to address shortcomings in public transport, their mobility needs might be overlooked. Therefore, *servis* emerges as an instrument of further entrapment of FDWs in precarious mobilities as a result of the lack of gender-responsive transport policies.

In conclusion, thinking through the specific spheres of mobility offered by *servis* providers and FDWs themselves, namely, work, domestic, and mobility spheres, offers a more 'messy', intersectional and complex understanding of precarity in gendered mobilities. Future research on mobilities may entangle these areas further by deepening intersectional analysis and strengthening its engagement with migration, labour, and feminist geographies.

Notes

1. Pseudonyms used throughout the paper.
2. https://twitter.com/BirBartleby/status/1531544625781022720
3. These estimates are based on the results compiled from 200,000 surveys conducted by CHP for the 2024 local elections in March.
4. In 2022, the Turkish Migration Department has announced that foreigners are no longer allowed to settle in Esenyurt since the foreign population exceeds 10% of the native population. Press statement on Foreigners in Istanbul https://istanbul.goc.gov.tr/istanbul-ilinde-bulunan-yabancilar-hakkinda-basin-aciklamasi
5. Traditional coffee houses in Turkish, predominantly used by men.
6. Dolmuş is a paratransit mode, formerly informal. They run on specific routes and have been legalized.
7. *Site* refers to gated community in Turkish.

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