Driving Gigs in Oman: Women and Techno-Fixes in the Platform Economy

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ABSTRACT

Digital platforms mediating work between customers and service providers have expanded exponentially in the past decade, driving a growing research agenda on the impact of platform capitalism, AI and the gig economy on labour around the world. This paper is interested in understanding the platform economy at the intersection of gender with the political economy of labour. Focusing on the Omani case of a new women's taxi service (OFemale) through the digital platform OTaxi, it asks how ride-hailing platforms are impacting women's employment futures. Using rapid ethnography, elite interviews and a survey, the article examines both the launch and expansion of the business alongside the experiences of Omani women as taxi drivers. The article excavates three gendered discourses of freedom, protection and job creation around platform labour and female labour market participation in the region. It argues that digital platforms such as OTaxi offer techno-fixes to fill gaps in the market and respond to the need to generate job opportunities for female citizens in the country. At the same time, women make use of these opportunities and interpret their experience in diverse ways that problematise the neo-liberal promises of innovative technologies, job flexibility and autonomy embodied in platform capitalism.

KEYWORDS

Platform capitalism, techno-fix, platform labour, gig work, Oman, Gulf, gender, political economy, Feminist IPE

Introduction

"I'm driving a taxi instead of being a jobseeker," my female OTaxi driver informed me. I had ordered a car through the ride-hailing application OTaxi in Muscat, Oman. It was January 2024, and for the past month I had been making use of this local Omani platform to get around town. Like Uber, you can choose among a number of services. One of these is called OFemale, and it provides female drivers for female customers. It was a new service, launched just a little more than a year before. We started to chat about the job-seeking situation in the country. Noting its severity, she commented on the fact that many young people were unemployed for long periods after leaving school. Yet she went on, "there's no reason to be a jobseeker nowadays. If you really want to be busy and make money, there are ways. Like this!" She gestured toward her car and the screen of her phone, where the app was guiding our way to my destination. This digital platform offered an earning opportunity, in her view. She was particularly drawn to the flexibility and the freedom of the form of work.

Her embrace and praise of the opportunity reflect a wider discourse of the self-employment potential such platforms offer. These are framed as responses to the pressure on the labour

market from young people, and especially women who represent a large proportion of the unemployed in the country. Platform companies identify social and economic needs and promote themselves as solutions for workers and potential customers (Van Doorn, 2022). They market their business models in such a way that they are perceived as liberatory technologies which bring freedom and autonomy through flexibility: flexibility for the worker to structure their days and work independently, and flexibility and convenience for the consumer of the service. Such flexibility has costs that manifest divergently and are interpreted in diverse ways by platform workers. In this article, I argue that digital platforms such as OTaxi offer techno-fixes to fill gaps in the market and respond to social and economic needs while simultaneously exacerbating the neo-liberal reality of weakened labour and social security. In this case, such applications generate job opportunities for female citizens in the country and offer a missing service in the market. At the same time, women make use of these opportunities and interpret their experience in diverse ways that problematise the neo-liberal promises of innovative technologies, job flexibility and autonomy embodied in platform capitalism.

Through this article, I ask, how are gig economy platforms impacting women's employment futures in Middle Eastern economies?[1] Taking an intersectional approach, I answer this question by focusing on the company OTaxi, a digital ride-hailing application, and its recently launched women-only taxi service, OFemale, as a case study. I make use of rapid ethnography, and draw on semi-structured elite interviews and a digital survey to study the business and the experiences of Omani women as app-based taxi drivers.[2] This allows me to excavate three discourses – freedom, protection and job creation – around female labour market participation in the Middle East. In the next section, I define and discuss techno-fixes in relation to gender and platform labour debates. Following that, I introduce and examine the case study, OTaxi, and the experiences of women as platform labour drivers. Third, I excavate the gendered discourses on platform labour and gig work for women.[3]

Gender, Platform Labour and Techno-Fixes

The expansion of digital platforms mediating work between customers and service providers has been exponential in the past decade. This transformation of both service and employment is propelling a growing research agenda on the impact of platform capitalism, artificial intelligence and the gig economy on labour around the world. (See, for example, Altenried, 2022; Davis and Sinha, 2021; Gebrial, 2022; Shibata, 2021; Van Doorn and Badger, 2020). Little research, however, examines this trend in the Middle East, where the discussion has largely been left to media, pundits and financial advisors who praise technological advancement and labour market

[1] While I prefer the nomenclature West Asia over Middle East, due to its geographic reference and to break from colonial legacies in naming conventions, I use Middle East for clarity and consistency with the rest of the special issue.

[2] This study used rapid ethnography as one of its methods during my two months in Oman from December 2023 to January 2024 (Vindrola-Padros, 2021). This method is workable for this study as it builds on years of long-term ethnographic research on labour in the country. I am grateful to the OTaxi CEO, Harith Al-Maqbali, for generously sharing his time and knowledge with me, as well as giving me access to his workspace and staff. I was fortunate to be able to conduct interviews with key OTaxi employees managing various portfolios of the business, to attend a team business meeting and presentations, and to distribute a digital survey to OFemale drivers. Independently of this, I also took numerous rides through the app during my stay and spoke to the drivers about their experiences and reasons for driving. All interview translations from Arabic are my own.

[3] Gigs refer to casual, piecemeal work. In this article, I specifically discuss platform work within the gig economy, where "gig" work is mediated via digital platforms such as Uber and JustEat (Woodcock & Graham, 2020. See also the introduction to this special issue).

flexibility as economic salves for rigid economies and employment crises. In this section, I look at this trend and analyse how technological "fixes", or techno-fixes, are proposed as economic solutions while simultaneously intensifying weakened labour and social protections. I engage the literature on techno-fixes with those on gender and work, and platform labour.

Rather than focusing on descriptive definitions embedded in the idea that technology offers salvation, I engage the term critically in the tradition of David Harvey. In his geography-grounded critique of technological fixes, Harvey uses the term spatial fix to denote "capitalism's insatiable drive to resolve its inner crisis tendencies by geographical expansion and geographical restructuring" (Harvey, 2001: 24). In this tradition, spatial and technological fixes both refer to the addiction of capitalism to technological change and geographic expansion in order to constantly expand economic growth. That is, capitalism continuously needs "fixes" in order to survive its problems. We see this on the macro scale with geographic expansion for new markets to extract new material and labour resources and on the micro scale with approaches to resolve economic problems connected to global crises and transformations.

Like other fixes and expressions of capitalism, it is just as much about production as social reproduction. Feminist political economy is therefore instructive, showing us how the accumulation of capital is intricately linked to the exploitation of labour and its reproduction, as well as how differentiation shapes social and economic realities (Bair, 2010; Bakker, 2007; Rai, 2002). While social reproduction is largely divorced from production in mainstream economic approaches, feminist political economy has long demonstrated not only the intrinsic value of social reproduction but also its centrality to production processes through, among others, replenishing the workforce (Federici, 2004; Baglioni and Mezzadri, 2020; Elias, 2011). Reproductive realms are just one of the spaces where differentiation and capitalist logics are embedded into workers lives, a space where the "social relations and material bases of capitalism are renewed" (Katz, 2001: 709). By offering new, digitally-mediated ways of entering the labour market, gig platforms facilitate women's entry into new forms of casual, insecure employment. Yet because social reproduction is both invisible and unappreciated in economic accounts, it makes it easier for neo-liberal feminist narratives to celebrate women's inclusion in the market through insecure, low-wage jobs as an empowering win. This framing is embedded in a neo-liberal form of feminism where women's liberation is individualised and contingent on their labour market participation. This so-called neo-liberalisation of feminism is discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

Digital platforms such as ride-hailing applications offer a fix to Middle Eastern economies not just to fulfil consumer needs, but also to respond to economic woes such as the protracted unemployment crises and women's limited integration into the formal labour market (Forstenlechner and Rutledge, 2010; Hanieh, 2013; WEF, 2014). The political economy of platform capitalism then both emerges within and responds to economic crises, and is itself embedded within an economic system with an unequal distribution of wealth, power, access and ownership. The entry of an Omani ride-hailing application with a specifically female offering is an illustrative case to understand these trends and how such fixes manifest.

A Platform Fix for Omani Female Employment?

Oman has been navigating a series of economic crises over the past several decades that have intensified pressure on the labour market to generate employment for Omanis: 74 per cent of Oman's registered jobseekers are under the age of 30, and with nearly 65 per cent of the population under the age of 30, this remains a significant policy concern (NCSI, 2018: 16, 2021b).

During the 2011 uprisings, jobs featured among the key concerns of protestors, and the jobseeker protests that have re-emerged over the decade and a half since have kept the situation in the limelight. Everyone, rich and poor, is affected by the shortage of work for Omani citizens. The last national census revealed that 90 per cent of Omani families have at least one jobseeker (Taʿadād 2020, 2021).

The severity of this economic reality ebbs and flows with the strength of the economy and the ability of the government to respond to economic pressure. The state's reliance on oil and gas means the highs and lows trail oil's performance on commodity markets. Thus, despite being a relatively rich country, sitting within one of the wealthier subregions of the Middle East, Oman struggles like much of the region with youth unemployment. At the same time, the Omani labour market relies heavily on international labour recruitment to fill positions in the most labour-intensive sectors such as construction and service. While Omani citizens span the breadth of social classes and are present in all levels and forms of work, their presence is marginal in these larger sectors. The dependence on a steady supply of flexible, inexpensive labour from across the Global South not only keeps the private sector moving but also creates intractable structural disincentives for employers to recruit Omani citizens. A major segmentation in the labour market is between public and private sector, where migrant workers are concentrated in the latter. Omani citizens only hold about 12.7 per cent of private sector jobs in the country (NCSI, 2019). With a higher minimum wage and better enactment of labour law protection for citizens, temporary foreign workers become more competitive and cost effective. They are also more flexible and easier to fire. When the economy contracts, temporary workers are deported rather than adding to the queues of jobseekers.

This economic reality is a key expression of how capital seeks to extract the most surplus value from labour. Business interests are not only drawn to the low labour costs but also to the flexibility and inherent controllability of the migrant labour force. Differentiation in the workforce creates the conditions for the disparate exploitation of workers, inherently tied to the global political economy of capitalism. The size of a company's workforce can be adapted to the health of the business environment with an easily deportable workforce that lacks the labour protection which discourages companies from letting go of Omani employees except in the most severe situations. It also places less pressure on the state's need to pay unemployment insurance and other social benefits. This reality pressures the state to regulate in favour of business interests, while at the same time Omani jobseekers pressure the state to create employment.

Gig work thus fits within this pendulum of economic need – offering employers the flexibility of not being actual employers and workers the chance to earn money in a way that depends on their availability and desire to work rather than the availability of a secure position. While many gig platforms regularly make use of migrant labour around the world (Altenried, 2021; Van Doorn and Vijay, 2021), taxi driving is one of the occupations that is reserved for citizens only in Oman. When gig platforms entered this space, they had to do so in a way that would contribute to Omani employment. This form of occupational protection facilitated the entry of women into the driving space after local ride-hailing applications took off and driving became both more flexible (in terms of earning potential and time spent driving) and safer (with ride routes monitored through the app).

Through platform work, women's inclusion in the global capitalist economy is premised on a particular form of integration based on their gendered social location and self-understanding as women who either need or want to work flexibly. The OFemale car class on the OTaxi platform situates itself here. Women's work as drivers for such platforms is both marketed and perceived in diverse ways: first, as a fun side job that can be balanced with family life; second, as an

opportunity for women in need; and third, branded as an opportunity to be independent and self-employed. The latter is celebrated as akin to being an entrepreneur, which is another card in the envelope of solutions for the job-seeking epidemic (Ennis, 2019). Such gig work, here, is praised for its independence as a self-employment option which doubles as extremely flexible. In such discourses, flexibility is interpreted as a benefit uniquely suitable to women's needs and is disconnected from the precarity embedded in such forms of flexibility. The drivers themselves, as I will discuss later, also interpret their work along these lines – some viewing such flexibility as liberating while others experience it as an oppressive necessity.

Digital platforms promise race and gender-blind empowerment through gig work. However this techno-fix ignores the realities and legacies of gendered and racialised labour market segmentations (Kluzik, 2022; Schneider, 2022; Tubaro et al., 2022). In Oman, these de facto segregate citizens and migrants as explained above. Oman's labour market, like the wider Gulf region, features multiple segmentations between public and private sectors, men and women, class and types of occupation (Ennis, 2024: 34–44). The "uberisation of work" fits within the neo-liberal trend of responsibilising workers for their economic health while ignoring the structures that challenge workers to begin with. As the findings discussed next reveal, Omani women who join the platform economy through applications such as OTaxi are effectively "adapting to neo-liberal conditions to sustain themselves" (Mendes, 2022: 694). The way the company, the nation and the women themselves explain their inclusion in the workforce in this manner is embedded within neo-liberal and gendered discourses, as I discuss in the final section.

The Case of Omani Ride-Hailing Application OTaxi's Female Taxi Service

The introduction of an app-based female taxi service in Oman is not only a story of transformation introduced by the expansion of platform work. It is also a regulatory story of being caught between policies to make the labour market more flexible and local content rules that nationalise positions in response to unemployment. In a national and regional context of high dependence on foreign labour recruitment, Oman has long implemented quotas to reserve jobs for citizens. Known as "Omanisation", this form of labour nationalisation or affirmative action policy is much resisted by the private sector and international financial institutions, but is viewed as a necessary intervention to ensure Omani access to employment. Driving services, including taxis and buses, were among the earliest occupations to be completely reserved for citizens (Ennis and Al-Jamali, 2014: 8). When ride-hailing applications became popular globally, Oman closed its market to international companies such as Uber and Kareem to protect the local taxi market. As a result, the country has been a slow adopter of ride-hailing applications. At the same time, this move created an opportunity for local capital to launch start-ups in this space.

One such company is OTaxi, short for Oman Taxi. OTaxi is a digital platform that functions as a ride-hailing application similar to Uber. It is Omani-owned and operated and was launched in 2018. It was not the only entrant into the ride-hailing market, but it appears to be among the most successful. By 2020, Harith Al-Maqbali, the CEO, and his team put forward the proposal to start a female service – women drivers for women passengers. A 2018 suite of road regulation changes paved the way for women to acquire taxi permits and for such services to start (Cuthbert, 2018). It still took OTaxi two years of navigating discussions and bureaucratic procedures between the ministries of Labour and of Transportation, among others, before they received their permission to launch OFemale (Interview, 15 January 2024).

Negotiating with regulators is always a time-consuming exercise anywhere in the world, Harith explained. Moreover, the bureaucrats he encountered seemed surprised by the proposal

for a female taxi service and did not think it would have wings in the Omani context. They told him that, if Omani women needed to independently get anywhere, they would have a car and drive themselves. "This is not like Saudi Arabia (at that time), they said. Women drive and have their own cars. And if their car wasn't available, they could ask their brothers, father, cousins, their whatever, for a ride" (Interview, 15 January 2024). The bureaucrats did not believe Omani women would have a need or interest in hiring a taxi. They also did not seem to consider that some female expatriates or tourists might also prefer female drivers.

There was, however, already demand among Omani women for female drivers, but it was the informal economy filling a little of the gap. There was no law prohibiting women from driving taxis before the 2018 changes that enabled women to acquire a taxi license, as women, just like men, could obtain licenses to drive. However, an opaque collection of bureaucratic barriers and cultural norms meant that formal female taxi drivers were virtually unheard of. Informally, however, women in a variety of regions ran their own private taxi services in the shadow economy. Two of my interviewees and several survey respondents indicated that they unofficially ran a taxi service for women before joining OTaxi. One woman started a service within her family and friend circle in Sohar in 2016 to drive women around town. She encountered so much demand, she eventually organised a team of four drivers, coordinating via WhatsApp. Her customers told her they felt safer and more comfortable riding with a woman, and it was better than waiting for their husband or other family members to bring them places. Ultimately it was the Covid-19 pandemic that caused her to halt her taxi service. Eventually she moved to Muscat, acquired a taxi plate, and joined OTaxi.

Another woman, who appeared to be very young, was from a relatively poor family and only had a high school education. She said she was very new to OTaxi, but had been a taxi driver for some time already with her own informal ladies' taxi business. People found her through WhatsApp and paid cash. She said she joined OTaxi only because it makes it easier to find more customers. For her, it was a necessary way to make money. She was very keen to still be paid directly with cash, rather than through the app, and offered to bring me to a cash machine to facilitate this.

Even before OTaxi carried out a market study and survey of women which suggested there would be demand for female drivers, Harith had received several clear indications that this was a market opportunity. He recalled a woman calling OTaxi in 2018 to specifically request a female driver. He had to tell her that they did not have any female drivers, but he was curious and asked her why it mattered. She explained she was going to an event in full makeup and did not want the driver looking at her. He explained that some conservative women who wear *hijab* (a traditional head scarf) would not be comfortable to be driven by men alone in a car. He expected this to be OFemale's main market. However, he was surprised to find that women he described as "open", which he defined as women who didn't wear traditional clothes or head coverings, also preferred female drivers when they were available. He took such interactions as indications that there was demand for women from various walks of life and levels of conservativism. Indeed, customer demand rose quickly. During the period of field research, several friends and acquaintances suggested I use OFemale when I did not have access to a car. I was told that it had become quite popular among their (Omani female) friends and colleagues.

OFemale was officially launched on International Women's Day in March, 2022. The service began with 25 female Omani drivers, and by early 2024 had expanded to 250 in the Muscat capital area, with services also at their start in Sohar and Salalah. OTaxi management reports a tremendous response from female customers, so much so that they rarely advertise the service – in the first years, almost not at all. Word of mouth was already producing more demand than the

supply of drivers. OTaxi social media accounts thus focused on driver recruitment. This was very evident in posts throughout 2023 and early 2024. Their Instagram account, for example, features multiple testimonials from female OTaxi drivers lauding the opportunity and the freedom drivers are afforded through this flexible work (OTaxi_Oman, 2024). Public signs also appear around town, aiming to recruit female drivers to the app (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Advertisement to recruit drivers to OFemale. The sign reads, "Monthly earnings up to 500 Omani rials per month. Join the OTaxi Female fleet." Photo by author. 22 December 2023.

The short supply of drivers was not for a lack of interest. The OTaxi team suggested they had many women interested in becoming drivers but estimated a two per cent conversion rate from expressed interest to uptake. One of the main deterrents seemed to be concerns about family and social perception, the OTaxi team explained. They were confident, however, that many women were interested in driving. It was just a matter of time and the snowball effect. A majority of sign-ups to the platform were already secured through word of mouth. Existing drivers would tell their friends about the opportunity. When women knew other women on the app, they were more willing to sign up as drivers too.

Ongoing national unemployment pressure also created an environment that made platform work and non-traditional work more tempting. Even the media announcements of OFemale's launch were framed as solutions to the job-seeking situation. News outlets highlighted how OFemale would provide "employment opportunities for female jobseekers, allowing them to work as taxi drivers or… to earn additional income (while in the queue for jobs)" (Thomas, 2022). The OTaxi Instagram account also explicitly targeted jobseekers as potential drivers. During the Spring 2024 graduation period, they targeted new graduates with recruitment ads. For example, the cover image for a reel posted in May (see Figure 2) addresses female graduates

directly. The image, with the OFemale bright pink background colour, invites female graduates and job seekers to "register with us as a driver!" OFemale thus taps into both a national need and a global trend where platform companies offer techno-fixes to different economic and social problems. Here it is explicitly connected to the jobseeker issue.

Figure 2. OTaxi Instagram reel cover photo (account: otaxi_oman), Posted 10 May 2024. https://www.instagram.com/p/C6y3kWZNQyR/. The image reads, in the feminine singular, "Graduate? Jobseeker? Register with us as a driver."

This is no surprise when you consider that Omani women constitute 62.5 per cent of all the registered job seekers in the country (NCSI, 2021a: 28). Young citizens, and women in general, are disproportionally affected by the structures that make integrating citizens into the workforce – both encouraging private sector employers to hire Omanis and making the private sector more attractive to citizens – so challenging (See Ennis, 2024: 242–279). Despite Omani female labour force participation increasing steadily over recent decades, Omani women hold only 3.2 per cent of private sector jobs. The data looks slightly better in the civil service where women hold approximately 36 per cent of positions (ILO, 2022; NCSI, 2019). Indeed, a majority of jobs in the private sector are in manual labour or service sector occupations. Both these occupational categories primarily employ expatriates, with manual labour positions (in large sectors such as construction) demographically dominated by male expatriates (NCSI, 2020). Working in the public sector or for state-owned enterprises feels more hospitable to female employment. It offers positions which are generally more secure, better paying, and with shorter working hours, so it is unsurprising that women prefer these.

Throughout its modern development planning history, the Omani state has paid attention not only to ways of increasing Omani representation in the private sector, but also of increasing female labour market participation. For example, its fifth Five-Year Plan (1996-2000) paid significant attention to various Omanisation initiatives, and noted a "particular focus on the participation of women" to achieve these ends (The Fifth FYP 1996-2000, 1997: 193). Moreover, integrating women into the labour force is viewed as a productivity win. The discourse of women's liberation becomes tied up within neo-liberal solutions where women attain their freedom through the market whilst also contributing to its growth (Ennis, 2019).

In the face of structural challenges and private sector resistance, self-employment and entrepreneurship solutions come in vogue. It is within this context that the discourse around gig jobs emerge. Indeed, neo-liberal solutions suggest that increasing the flexibility of the labour market will stimulate more job opportunities in general. Such suggestions, however, fail to address the increasing precarity that comes alongside flexibility. Flexibility usually entails lower pay and limited job security. The labour market protections in place around citizens in the economy means a majority of this flexibility is offloaded onto the expatriate labour force. Yet gig work in occupations that are reserved for citizens – such as taxi driving – has created an "opportunity" for citizens, and, in the case of OFemale, for female citizens to "take advantage" of this flexibility. And thus, women find more opportunities in private sector employment just as the employment opportunities become more insecure and less remunerated – a trend called the feminisation of labour.

The expansion of platform labour in Gulf economies is thus not as bounded containers, but embedded in the global political economy and social-spatial processes that have regional labour markets seeking the lowest cost of labour abroad, while at the same time expressing hysterical anxieties about the dominance of foreigners in the economy. The jobs crisis emerges alongside an economy deeply embedded within global and regional trends. The racialised and gendered hierarchies of the labour market are thus part of the constitution of how platform capitalism unfolds in the Gulf.

Excavating the Gendered Discourses Around Gig Work for Women

Who are the Omani women who drive for OTaxi? Although one might expect there to be some demographic uniformity among OFemale drivers, there is actually significant diversity. The population of drivers ranges from young women to older women; from single women to married or divorced; from high school graduates to university degree holders. Although drivers tend not to come from elite, well-connected families, they seem to spread across the citizen working and middle classes.[4] Women's reasons for applying as drivers are just as diverse. Certainly, being a new jobseeker was a common motivation for signing up as a driver, as conveyed in the opening vignette and indicated by the targeted ads. However, it was not only female jobseekers registering with the new service. Some survey respondents claimed that they had been accountants or data entry specialists prior to joining OTaxi. Others drove as a second job. Joining the app – both why they joined and how they interpret it – must be read within an overarching platform-fix narrative that views the entry of the app as a win-win-win for the economy, for drivers, and for customers.

[4] In contrast to traditional forms of production and service, it is worth noting that most gig workers globally have to finance their own capital, with Uber drivers in many markets having to own their own car (Buchak, 2024: 219–220). With OTaxi, most OFemale drivers provide their own car as well, but OTaxi helps organise lease-to-own arrangements for those who need further support.

This section discusses OFemale drivers and how they adopt and react to gendered discourses around gig work in their experience with the platform. Through the discussion thus far, it is apparent that the entry of digital platforms into Middle Eastern economies is framed and discussed across different discourses connected to the promised techno-fix for economic maladies. We can identify three main categories of these discourses around the OFemale case study. First, women can attain freedom *through* the market by joining the workforce – in this case, through the application. Second, women are protected *from* the market by regulations that reserve positions and occupations for citizens, and can assume these safely through norms that design and mediate socially-acceptable forms of work. Third, the platform contributes to the national economy and responds to one of its central problems by creating flexible work opportunities. These three discourses are apparent in the narration of the case study above. We now turn to how women internalise and engage with these discourses.

Omani women as ride-hailing application drivers "are simultaneously celebrated and undesirable" labour (Al-Saleh, 2022: 1136) – a pattern reflecting Al-Saleh's analysis of Qatari women engineers. The celebration is manifest in policy announcements, launch events and advertisements. It is not merely rhetorical: policy mechanisms are put in place and business actors such as OTaxi create pathways to facilitate women's entry into platform work as drivers. The undesirability is situated in social perceptions and narratives around the prestige of the work and its suitability for women. The celebration and undesirability are interwoven throughout the three discourses identified above.

Much of the celebration is situated within the first discourse, where women's liberation is located in the market. Joining the market promises freedom and autonomy through independent income. For example, at the coverage of the inauguration event for OFemale services in Salalah, a city in the south of Oman, panel discussions focused on "the importance of empowering women in the transportation sector and society as a whole", and ceremonies were held to recognise OFemale drivers (OTaxi, 2024a). Likewise, media coverage of OFemale describes the service as a "game changer for Omani women" which offers "them a stable income and flexible working hours" (Times News Service, 2024). This celebration of female empowerment through the platform is grounded in a neo-liberal form of feminism, which comes with a shift in focus from a collective struggle for women's liberation to one that is highly individualised and communicated in individualistic terms. This grounding of women's liberation in the market has been dubbed both market feminism and the neo-liberalisation of feminism (Elias, 2020; Kantola and Squires, 2012; Prügl, 2015). That is, it is a feminism that is embedded in neo-liberalism and represents not just a set of policies, but a mode of governance. This mode "produces subjects, forms of citizenship and behaviour" which constructs individual women as entrepreneurial actors, and creates new social identities and discourses that frame and incentivise all behaviour as entrepreneurial (Brown, 2003: 37–41). In this avenue, OFemale is marketed as "a significant opportunity for Omani women to enter the workforce and gain financial independence" (Times News Service, 2024). Even other companies in the country jump on the individual empowerment and entrepreneurial narrative. Mitsubishi, for instance, used the choice of an OFemale driver to purchase their ASX model as a marketing opportunity, suggesting "Mitsubishi ASX empowers Omani female OTaxi driver" while describing the driver as "inspiring" and "distinguished by her pioneering spirit" in her choice of vehicle (TAS News Service, 2024). The emphasis of gig work discourses on individual responsibility and entrepreneurial attitudes contribute to this broader trend of constructing women as neo-liberal subjects and inserting them into economic citizenship through their market inclusion (Altan-Olcay, 2014; Elias and Roberts, 2018; Marchand and Runyan, 2010). Neo-liberal feminism has become a political discourse and a set of norms that

govern individuals and corporate rationalities, and sees individuals as responsible for their own well-being. Within this context, neo-liberal feminism frames flexibilisation as aspirational (Rottenberg, 2013; Shibata, 2021; Wood et al., 2019).

Meanwhile, the flexibility is also praised for offering women acceptable work that allows them to balance their domestic and family obligations with a job. We thus see the second discourse of protection at work, which concurrently speaks to patriarchal norms rather than just market feminist ones (Kantola and Squires, 2012; Peterson, 2003). The work opportunity is carefully celebrated both for giving women jobs, and for giving jobs in which they can consider gendered social expectations for "balancing" women's work in and outside the home (OTaxi, 2024b; Times News Service, 2024). Al Saleh (2022) and Ennis (2024: 233–236) both discuss how gendered expectations of suitable jobs for women materialise in private sector discourses around women's employability in the region.[5] Similar dynamics are at play here. Framing women's participation in gig work as socially positive doubles as a way to balance perceptions that view the type of work as undesirable. As noted earlier, not only did male bureaucrats wonder why women would need female drivers to begin with, but also some aspiring female drivers agonised over what their familial and social circles would think of them in such an occupation. They worried about whether driving would be viewed as socially respectable.

OTaxi management were convinced the initially slow pick up in driver numbers was primarily due to this worry and a general negative association with the occupation. Indeed, driving as a form of labour in the economy is both gendered and racialised. Omani men were long the exclusive holders of taxi licenses, while domestic (private) drivers tend to be men from the South Asian subcontinent. Likewise bus and truck drivers of different categories are always men. In nationalising certain driving occupations, the hope was that as the state reserved such jobs for citizens as a form of economic protection it would encourage citizens to consider the form of work. Likewise developing a service *for* women and *by* women demonstrated how not only the state but also the company specifically had women's development and protection in mind. The protection begins with women as customers who are offered a safer alternative, and extends to drivers who are provided a safe platform and customer base. News articles cite drivers not only praising the convenience of flexible hours, but how safe they feel while working (Times News Service, 2024). In addition to the app tracking routes in real time, OTaxi noted that they put safety mechanisms in place, including call numbers and a team ready to respond should anything go awry or if a driver felt unsafe during a ride. OFemale drivers are also invited to weekly meet-ups at OTaxi offices to discuss work and receive guidance from Omani women working in OTaxi management.

Finally, the celebration of Omani women as ride-hailing application drivers, and specifically of OTaxi for creating this opportunity, is equally connected to the third discourse of generating employment. OFemale thus advertises itself and is celebrated for both creating jobs and facilitating women's entry into the labour market. The service enters an economic and political space where job creation is the demand of the day. With so many women in the queue of job seekers, any private sector actor's announcement of creating "Omani jobs for Omani workers" (Ennis, 2024: 66) is praised both as a positive economic development or celebrated as good corporate social responsibility. In this vein, OTaxi regularly describes itself as always "committed to empowering women" (OTaxi, 2024a). The service is further described as an especially "valuable employment avenue" for women who have not completed higher education (Times

[5] In both studies, we see that despite women's willingness to join traditionally masculine occupations, employers themselves justify their choices not to hire women by claiming that women would not accept the type of position or its accompanying conditions.

News Service, 2024). Job creation is key, but it intermixes with the other two discourses. The same article goes on to say:

> Whether they want to continue their studies, support their families, or contribute to their household income, driving for OFemale offers a reliable way to achieve these goals. The flexibility of the job also allows many women to take on a second source of income, balancing it with other commitments. (Times News Service, 2024)

The three discourses, then – freedom through the market by achieving liberation through joining the private sector, freedom from the market by having jobs reserved for you and ones that are safe and appropriate, and gig work as job creation – all respond to the narrative of a domestic economic challenge with a techno- or platform-based solution.

The ways women adopt and reify these discourses are just as telling as they are muddled. A few stories are illustrative. One of the women who drove me had left her job as an engineer to drive. I estimated her to be in her early 30s. She was single and had graduated from Musannah College of Technology some years before. She moved to the capital for work and was most recently working for a small private sector company as an engineer. She left her job six months before we met in order to start driving for OTaxi. She explained she did so because of how much she valued her freedom. "With driving, I have freedom! I love freedom," she explained. She continued:

> I like my freedom. I control my time. I don't have a boss standing over me telling me to do this or do that. I don't have to be in an office at specific times. I can choose which rides to take or not. (Muscat, 9 January 2024)

It is worth noting that small, private sector companies tend to offer low salaries and unfulfilling career growth prospects (Ennis, 2024: 202-236). I asked her what her family thought of her driving a taxi. She said, "*Wallahi* [I swear to God], not one of them know. They still think I'm working as an engineer. You know, we don't have that much openness here. I can't really tell them. They won't like me driving." With all her education and her success at attaining a job in her field, it was difficult for her to explain the choice to leave her position. Yet to me, she described freedom through the platform not only as escaping work surveillance and control, but also as feeling freedom through mobility – through movement on the road. This way of earning money suited her view of her own personality and lifestyle, which she perceived as different from the social norm, informing me that she loved the single life and never wanted to get married.

Her interpretation of freedom rhetorically touched upon market freedom, as well as freedom from both patriarchal norms and workplace surveillance. Her embrace and celebration of this physical mobility and freedom provided through infrastructure also resonates with Menoret's work on joyriding in Saudi Arabia and ways of seeking freedom and subversion (Menoret, 2014). There are certainly large differences, with Menoret's case of Saudi joyriding being a gendered male activity which was both dangerous and not always legal. Yet the sentiment is telling. Freedom can be both experienced and fetishised in diverse ways.

This encounter did not seem to be the norm, but is illustrative in how it touches upon the breadth of experiences with these new gig work opportunities. More drivers seemed to join for financial need or job-seeking reasons, or both. Another driver I had a long conversation with during our drive was a single mother with three children. She was well-educated and had a secure job at a public school where she worked in administration and as a social worker for kids. She drove for OTaxi part time, she explained, because her job does not fill all the hours of the day

and this work was flexible. When we met, she had already been driving for about six months so she could make more money. I said, "Oh, that's nice – some extra income." She quickly laughed and rolled her eyes: "It is not extra income. It is necessary. When you have big responsibilities, it is necessary. I am the only one taking care of my family. I'm a single mother. I must work." OTaxi allows her to work flexibly from 5am to 12am if she wants. She could sign into the application to indicate her availability for rides at times that suited her, and could then choose what ride requests she wished to take. Alongside the importance of this flexibility, proximity to her location was also important to her decision-making on whether to accept a ride. She did not want to venture far when it was near her children's school pick up time.

Discourses celebrating her economic salvation through the market ignore the precarity that drove her to drive to begin with. She was not happy with her need to take a second job, but felt she had to do so. At the same time, she appreciated the opportunity as well as some of the aspects of the form of work. In addition to the flexibility and autonomy the platform offered her, she enjoyed meeting and talking with different people. "I often feel like a therapist during my rides," she said. "I listen to people's problems. People really open up to me." Smaller difficulties she described were that everything to do with driving was the driver's responsibility – from car maintenance to fuel and insurance. She said she would love to complain more about these things with me. However, overall, she thought this responsibility was mostly fair because she earned the majority of the fare (OTaxi keeps 16 per cent).[6] Flexibility came with responsibility, both for herself in striving for work-life balance, and also as a driver for OTaxi and being responsible for the tools of her work.

This rationalisation directly speaks to neo-liberal narratives, and also demonstrates the ways in which neo-liberalism becomes a set of norms that govern her (and other drivers') behaviour. It is not only through rules of conduct on the app, but also forms of self-disciplining and motivating work behaviour. In this regard, she also expressed specific appreciation for the incentive structures and competitions OTaxi offered, which were designed to encourage drivers to work more and do better. These competitions offered her the chance for greater success and motivated her to drive more in order to participate. It is not only competitive incentive structures; OTaxi also offers training programmes for female drivers to build their "confidence", develop their skills, and provide a "flexible and motivating work environment". The training targets "balancing professional and personal life, controlling stress, taking responsibility, and time management" – all to positively impact the company's service (OTaxi, 2024b). Through these exercises emphasising individual responsibility and improvement, the platform celebrates its role supporting and enhancing "women's position in the transportation sector" (OTaxi, 2024b).

Conclusion

Driving gigs may be an opportunity, an experience, or a job of last resort for Omani women. This article demonstrates that digital platforms such as OTaxi offer techno-fixes for economic problems while simultaneously reproducing and even intensifying weakened labour conditions. The services are viewed as a positive sum opportunity for women's integration into the labour market and as a way to empower women in the economy. Yet this coincides with the feminisation of Omani labour. OFemale facilitates the inclusion of more women into the labour

[6] Although it varies by market (due to varieties of regulation and driver activism), Uber, by comparison, retains 20 to 25 per cent of rider fares in some markets. Some drivers accuse it of collecting more, however (Angrist et al., 2021: 274).

market at the same time that the labour market is offering less secure and lower paying jobs.

While there is no doubt that gig work, algorithmic management and digital platforms are making a large impact on consumption patterns, work and economic life in the Gulf, the ways in which digital platforms mediate work, and gig work itself, materialise in largely similar ways around the world. The entry of digital platforms into the regional political economy creates both opportunities for capitalists to launch new work-on-demand applications, and work for job seekers. The expansion of a digitally-mediated gig economy transforms labour markets around the world in such a way that we can say that platform capitalism influences the restructuring of labour markets through regulatory, technological and policy mechanisms that together enhance worker productivity and precarity. So, on the one hand, the applications are lauded for the promises of earning potential, freedom and autonomy, while on the other hand, gig work is characterised by its precarity and unpredictability. These become institutional features that are embedded as a solution within an already challenged labour market.

The OFemale case explored in this article thus provides some insight into how platform capitalism functions in the Gulf. While this article addresses the unique case study of a driver-on-demand application for female citizens, we should keep in mind that many of the digital platforms for on-demand services in the Gulf, like much of the world, primarily draw on migrant workers (Altenried, 2021; Gebrial, 2022; Van Doorn and Vijay, 2021). This case sheds light on how the discourses of freedom, protection and job creation unfold around female labour market participation. The stories of drivers show a combination of incentives for joining the app. We see examples of those who join to avoid being jobseekers, others who do so to bide time as they wait for a job or marriage or children, others are motivated by financial necessity, and others just want change. OFemale offers a form of work for female citizens and fills a service gap in the market. At the same time, women make use of these opportunities, interpreting their reasons for joining and their experiences with driving gigs diversely. Many lauded both the earning opportunity and the flexibility as hugely important and beneficial. Moreover, we see both the celebration of women joining the ride-hailing platform and the anxieties around the desirability of the form of employment. Efforts to increase the desirability of ride-hailing work are all tied to market logics, from the economic benefits for the economy to the individual advancement and liberating potential. Often the rationalisation becomes bound up simply in job creation. Not only do companies and institutions adopt a neo-liberal discourse in the celebration and framing of women's driving gigs, some female drivers themselves internalise this discourse to celebrate their market inclusion. This form of job creation raises questions about the development of labour markets in the platform economy – where freedom and flexibility translates into irregular work and earnings. In this case, women adapt to neo-liberal economic conditions by driving gigs to sustain themselves.

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