

Guest Editorial

The Gig Economy and Women Workers in the Middle East

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“Beyond 9 to 5: how online gig work can create more jobs for women,” promised a 2023 World Bank report (Datta et al., 2023) as it proposed a potential solution, in four points, to increase women’s access to global labour markets. The same year, the following headline dominated *Forbes* magazine: “The Middle East is fast becoming a leader in the freelance revolution”; the text praises youth and women “driving greater innovation and entrepreneurship” in the region (Younger, 2023). The context behind the headlines, and feminist political economy academic research, suggest caution beyond these triumphalist tones. First, literature on platform capitalism has long noted that digital labour is becoming “feminised”, with a remarkable increase of global women’s participation in online gig work since 2015 (James, 2022; Palagashvili and Suarez, 2021; Rodríguez-Modroño, Agenjo-Calderón and López-Igual 2023), while feminist scholars have highlighted the need for a gender perspective on female work to interrogate the blurred boundaries between the spheres of production and reproduction in the gender division of labour (Kergoat, 2004; Kian, 2014; Rai, Hoskyns and Thomas, 2014). The World Bank Report 2023 estimated that there are 154 million to 435 million online gig workers worldwide, compared to 48 million registered in 2015 (World Bank, 2023). Of this total, about 64 million online gig workers are women (James, 2022). Second, a more nuanced perspective of women’s experiences outside of the Western context is crucial to better frame the global opportunities and risks for women in online so-called “gig” work¹, where the expansion of informality and precarious conditions as a result of neo-liberal agendas intersect with issues of self-empowerment and fictitious freedom coming from flexible yet unprotected low-pay employment (Shibata, 2019). As Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) reminds us in *Epistemologies of the South*, there is a need to broaden the focus beyond the “cognitive injustice” of ignoring forms of knowledge produced outside of the Global North. Third, when it comes to the South West Asian and North Africa region (here referred to as the Middle East only for convenience of access, despite acknowledging the colonial origin of the term), this necessity becomes even more evident as digital platforms are rapidly increasing and local – yet not exceptional – coping strategies are being employed by the 43 million registered online gig workers (World Bank, 2023). Moreover, the region has the lowest female labour force participation (FLFP) in the world – just 21 per cent, against 50 per cent globally – despite rising education levels for women and lowered fertility rates (World Bank, 2022).

Unravelling the puzzle of and reasons behind this contradiction has generated a vital debate among scholars with many potential explanations spanning from patriarchy, religious and social norms (Chamlou et al., 2016; Salehi-Esfahani and Bahramitash, 2015; Solati, 2017), discriminatory laws and economic policies (Karshenas, 2001; Moghadam, 2013), and oil-related lack of economic diversification (Ross, 2008). According to the World Bank, with a fully digitalised economy in the Middle East and North Africa, the FLFP would almost double, from about 23 per cent to more

¹ Gig work entails fragments of work where the exchange of labour is mediated via digital platforms with their plethora of short-term contracts and technically “independent” workers.

than 45 per cent, and this could lead to a rise in GDP per capita of about 46 per cent over 30 years (World Bank, 2021a).

It is therefore important to take this complex context into consideration to avoid fallacious conclusions on how global challenges have been recalibrated locally, while discrediting the perspective of those women workers who are renegotiating their roles in the private and public spheres on the brink of uncertainty.

This special issue tackles the dynamism of platform labour in the Middle East from a gender perspective. Despite local differences and specificities in terms of economic development and lifestyles, the issue combines a regional and local approach instead of proposing a division into sub-areas of the region, as the most recent literature, available data and ethnographic research from this special issue highlight common features rather than broad differences when it comes to platform labour and women participation. The most important similar patterns include discriminatory practices, conservative policies, and issues of formalisation in a broader context of informality (Assaad et al., 2020; Karshenas and Moghadam, 2021; Khoury and Moghadam, 1995; Solati, 2017; Tansel et al., 2022).

The following questions are addressed throughout the special issue: What is the impact of the so-called gig economy on women workers in the Middle East? Does digitalisation represent a catalyst for female labour participation in the region or a burden leading to further financial insecurity and invisibility? How are ordinary women gig workers re-imagining their lives mediated by technology, and challenging unwritten rules, patriarchy and lack of access to the labour market? In particular, the articles investigate the relationship between the daily and the digital to explore the role of platforms in shaping female labour participation and women's empowerment, as well as issues of precarisation and marginalisation (James, 2022; Woodcock and Graham, 2019). Featuring case studies from Egypt, Iraq, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, the special issue speaks directly to the academic debate on global gig economies, thus contributing to a more plural understanding of gig work in a multiplicity of contexts, practices and experiences.

By proposing a collection of original and pioneering research on an understudied topic as applied to specific contexts in the region, the special issue broadens the analysis of the so-called gig economy beyond a mere economic lens, bringing together multi-disciplinary insights and approaches from sociology, political economy and digital anthropology. It shows that online gig work is neither a crystallised nor monolithic dimension. Instead, platforms have, in some instances, become vectors of formalisation instead of leading only to informality, such as in the case of taxi driving apps and home cooking/food delivery where apps have led to the strengthening of regulation as formality was not the norm before. Women, in particular, adapt to neo-liberal conditions of flexibilisation to sustain their needs in contexts where processes of labour informalisation have long permeated the development of labour relations (Mezzadri, Newman and Stevano 2021).

Platform Labour, Gender, and Home: Issues of Empowerment and Invisibility

As tech offers flexibility, exacerbating the neo-liberal trends of eroding labour conditions and weakened social security, women gig workers in some of the Middle Eastern contexts explored in this special issue have re-interpreted their digital experiences as everyday disruptive tools to renegotiate social norms. While acknowledging their precarious and vulnerable conditions, they have turned home – traditionally known as the sphere of reproduction – into a site of production and a creative alternative to combine their family care duties and empowerment. Feminist scholarship connects narratives of empowerment to reflections on autonomy and agency in the

everyday space of intermittent paid and unpaid work (Elias and Rai, 2019; Elson, 1999, LeBaron, 2010). Income-earning and control over personal finances contribute to building a more solid picture of (economic) independence that eventually provides women with further resources to exercise their agency within and outside the household. However, as Rai's research brilliantly shows, discriminatory legal frameworks and a lack of structural support for caring mothers and workers may eventually discourage female labour participation, as the human cost of caring can deplete women's energies (Rai, 2024).

Drawing on debates highlighting the interplays between exploitation and capitalist relations where the everyday is commodified and constituted in processes of social reproduction in the Global South (Mezzadri et al., 2021), this special issue further explores women gig workers' perspectives on the precarious labour mechanisms of a region – the Middle East – in a way that helps understand how labour mechanisms are shaping up globally (Salamey, 2009). In particular, home and the everyday negotiation of the private sphere are at the core of these processes. The region can offer valuable insights to recalibrate the global understanding of how women workers are blurring the boundaries between the public and the private dimensions as connected to labour participation and social reproduction. This is not to say that there are “unique” attributes or crystallised shortcomings in the Middle East, which might fall into shallow culturalism about women's lives in the region with any intentions to fall into the trap that feminist scholar Lila Abu-Lughod defined as “narrow analyses of empowerment indexes – modernization, human development, and (neo)liberalism” (Abu-Lughod, 2009). By critically embracing the ethical dilemmas posed by the construction and circulation of discourses of empowerment on women in the Middle East as victims who “need saving” (Abu-Lughod, 2013), this special issue is a venue for bottom-up perspectives on women's political and economic imaginaries.

Providing context to official data is part of this endeavour. As mentioned earlier in this introduction, despite rising educational attainment, the Middle East has the lowest labour market inclusion rate for women globally (ILO, 2020). What contributed to narrowing women's access to the labour market was patriarchal social norms and gendered spaces dominated mainly by men (Kandiyoti, 1998). In the case of the region, the concept of neo-patriarchy, as defined by Moghadam (1998; 2020), constitutes a useful lens to capture the interplays between gender relations and capitalist relations in the labour realm. Defined as “the result of the collision of tradition and modernity in the context of oil-based dependent capitalism (...) and limited industrialization”, neo-patriarchy involves state institutions and organising mechanisms, imposing norms on women's spatial presence and participation in the public realm. Perpetuating the “patriarchal gender contract” (Moghadam, 1998), the patriarchal state(s) have created the conditions for women's labour exclusion, setting several mechanisms favouring men as the breadwinners and confining women to domestic gender regimes.

Nevertheless, these limitations have not hindered women from working in the informal sector or as unpaid employees in family-owned activities (Solati, 2017). In a context where traditional gender roles tend to confine women to the private sphere or caregiver duties, women who have sought to be economically active have found it easier to work from home. Similarly to other contexts in the Global South, the informal sector in the Middle East – as embedded in processes of unorganised and popular economies (Mezzadri et al., 2021) – provided women in the region flexibility while keeping them de facto invisible and underpaid due to lack of legal framework and social protection, fostering gender inequality through discriminatory family laws (Karshenas and Moghadam, 2001; Solati 2017; World Bank, 2021b).

It is precisely in this space of marginalisation that women are seizing the opportunity to renegotiate, re-adjust and renavigate their roles between the public and the private spheres, where

the dimensions of production and reproduction intertwine, while trekking the rising path of the gig economy in the region. In this sense, gig work via digital platforms could mark a shift and impose a change in pace. Some of the case studies collected in this special issue describe promising approaches and coping strategies which women gig workers put in place to cope with issues of economic insecurity, financial (in)stability and overall precarity.

Precarious Lives, Digitalisation and Coping Mechanisms

Gig economy practices are precarious by nature. They are inherently connected to the action of selling “fragments” of work to digital platforms, meaning that pieces of workers’ time become commodities in exchange for pay. Under-regulated, “uncertain, unpredictable and risky from the point of view of the worker” (Kalleberg, 2009: 2), highly insecure in terms of legal frameworks and financial stability, these conditions leave workers exposed to multiple forms of vulnerability encompassing different dimensions of their lives. In the words of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 95), precarity is a “new mode of domination in public life ... based on the creation of a generalized and permanent state of insecurity aimed at forcing workers into submission, into the acceptance of exploitation”.

The contributions in this special issue tell the stories of this process of acceptance, which has also generated a suspended time and space for (re)imagining the uncertain futures. Within the uneven development of platform capitalism, as in the various case studies explored by the articles in this collection, women gig workers in Egypt, Iraq, Oman and the United Arab Emirates are writing new chapters in the global practices of precarious work in the gig economies.

The diversity and fluidity of gig work teach us that local contexts can help us to reconceptualise what precarity means in order to find more complex and effective solutions. Blurring the boundary of what is seen as “work” for women in the gig economy and what is valued or not when it comes to informal activities in the sphere of reproduction are part of this process where many questions arise. What is at the intersection between labour and the household for women working from home, for example? How does technology impact women’s daily lives in contexts where the public sphere is mainly dominated by men? The intrinsically flexible – and therefore precarious – nature of online gig work connects both to the legal and the emotional aspects of vulnerable existence from a gender perspective, as it opens up new horizons for further reflection on temporal autonomies and perceived freedoms.

Laila Mourad’s contribution on the “daily digital” and everyday practices of re-imagining technology among home-based women gig workers in Egypt follows this line of thought. Most of the women interviewed felt that informality gave them flexibility while guaranteeing them access to a certain degree of empowerment. They tell a story of a new sense of economic agency while paradoxically choosing precarity to survive daily life’s challenges and family-imposed hassle. Mourad’s article also provides a unique perspective on the emotional factors and the connection to the class aspect and interpretation of being confined to the home sphere for women coming from different backgrounds. Some women might perceive working from home as hindering their access to the public sphere. By contrast, women from younger generations do not interpret this as an obstacle to their empowerment.

Hosseini-Milani, Jensen and Shah’s article collects the stories of Iraqi women involved in platform work. Some of them found a sort of relief in the precarious balance of flexible and insecure work. Despite difficult access to social protection and financial insecurity, working from home has granted them certain forms of perceived empowerment as they feel more protected from the risks of discrimination and harassment in the workplace, while being able to keep performing

their family-related caring duties.

The case of the female taxi service on the ride-hailing app, O'Taxi, in Oman, as analysed by Ennis using semi-structured elite interviews and rapid ethnography, which builds on long-term ethnographic research on labour conducted by the author in the country, shows that the abovementioned process of acceptance shapes up into new forms of adaptation to neo-liberal conditions in order to sustain women. The voices of Omani female drivers reveal a constant tension between gendered discourses, neo-liberal labour dynamics and personal perceptions of flexibility as being either a liberating or an oppressive necessity. Through the prism of Harvey's concept of techno-fixes (Harvey, 2001), Ennis contributes to the global literature on platform capitalism by making sense of the spatial fix created within the Omani labour market by the elites in response to economic challenges such as youth unemployment.

Despite triumphalist narratives glamourising online gig work as a tool to enhance self-employment and entrepreneurship, individual workers have very little power to negotiate wages or working conditions with their de facto employers (the platforms), while carrying more responsibility for their own wellbeing on their own shoulders. Women gig workers' room for manoeuvre in the cases of Iraq and Oman lies in more independence from their husbands' or families' control, further flexibility in terms of family commitments and care-work, and social relationships outside the restricted household-related circles. A more restricted yet interesting form of women's agency is exposed by Malit's article on Filipina domestic workers in the United Arab Emirates. Although legal restrictions, precarious conditions, social challenges and discrimination are highly detrimental within the gig economy framework, female migrant workers have started to tactically capitalise on the co-ethnic migrant enterprise infrastructures and connections with other Filipina domestic workers to carve out their own minimum – yet not sufficient and sustainable – space in the labour market.

As feminist scholarship reminds us, without rights there is no equity, no tangible opportunities and no real representation. Further chances for women to gain not only access to the labour market with the processes of platformisation but also recognition through formal rights in the Middle East require a few preconditions, such as infrastructural interventions (Internet broadband, see Viollaz and Winkler 2020), digital skills, financial inclusion and a more inclusive legal framework. The emergence of collective forms of organisation – which are currently limited and under-researched – would represent a fundamental step to support these preconditions for regulating working conditions on digital platforms, ensuring adequate social protection and allowing women's voices to be heard. Overall, in the Middle East as much as globally, in contexts where issues of capitalism and digital workerism (Englert, Woodcock and Cant, 2020) intersect, discourses on digitalisation and narratives of fictitious freedom (Shibata, 2019) are clashing with the increasing precarity of isolated and invisible workers.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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