Author/s:
Churchill, B

Title:
System update: The gender pay gap goes digital

Citation:
Churchill, B. System update: The gender pay gap goes digital. The Sociological Review Magazine, https://doi.org/10.51428/tsr.cqln6753.

Persistent Link:
https://hdl.handle.net/11343/340243

System update
The gender pay gap goes digital

Brendan Churchill
6th February 2024

The term "gig economy" is often referred to as the "sharing economy", "on-demand economy", "platform economy" or "crowd-working". It involves using digital platforms such as Uber, Deliveroo and Amazon MTurk to secure work in exchange for payment. This set-up creates a digital marketplace for consumers and a labour market for workers.

The proliferation of digital platforms over the past few years has changed the way we live and work. Uber's infamous "No shifts, no boss, no limits" pitch to prospective workers exemplifies how the gig economy offers a mirage of "freedoms", such as autonomy, flexibility and, to a lesser extent, a workplace free of bosses and supervisors. However, the digital platform economy has failed to disrupt the gender inequalities that plague work in the wider economy.

Geographer Al James argues that the gig economy for women is built upon the "digital re-inscription of stubborn 'analogue' gendered labour market inequalities". My research shows that women on platforms do similar things to those they ordinarily undertake in the analogue labour market, such as caring or administrative jobs. These are lower paying than the delivery and driving work on platforms such as Uber, which tends to be done by men.

Drawing on data I have collected from the Making it Work in the Gig Economy survey with 900 Australian gig workers, I show that men are overly concentrated in delivery and driving platforms such as Uber and the food-delivery platform EASI, whereas women work across a wider number of platforms. These include Gumtree, a marketplace platform where you can sell goods, and Upwork, where workers can sell services, such as graphic design.

Men and women also *do* different things in the gig economy. Women tend to work as temporary cleaners, carers, writers, editors and ad hoc administrative assistants, whereas men often take jobs as on-demand drivers, gardeners and repairmen.

The pay gap remains in place

These differences create a gender pay gap, which is compounded by a lack of regulatory oversight, such as pay transparency laws. This means that, unlike the analogue labour market, there is little evidence, enthusiasm or effort to address these issues for women in the gig economy.

Documenting the gender pay gap before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, I found that the gap increased from 21 to 26 per cent during the early stages across the Australia's platform economy; this included national lockdowns in the early months of 2020. During this period, a greater demand for male-dominated platform work, such as food delivery benefited men's overall earnings. At the same time, there was a decrease in the demand for the types of labour and the platforms that women are likely to work on, such as remote-based creative and administrative tasks.

My survey of Australian men and women in the gig economy further revealed that men tend to work this way largely because they need an income. By contrast, women were just as likely to say they were part of the gig economy because of its flexibility. This mirrors the situation many women face in the analogue labour market.

Working-hours flexibility – an illusion?

However, the gig economy is rarely a panacea for women when it comes to flexibility and work-life balance. Reilly Kincaid and Jeremy Reynolds argue that platforms maintain a "flexibility mystique" – "an illusory promise that platform work can empower workers to set their schedules and earn a decent income without disrupting their personal or family lives".

This is reflected in some early work on women's, and particularly mothers', lives in the gig economy. Al James's recent ethnographic study of female gig workers suggested that women were in some ways better off because they could manage their time and their schedules, or put in place strategies that worked for them. For example, they could work during term times in order to have more time with their children during school holidays. However, they also encountered new work-life conflicts, such as working too many hours and a blurring between work and home life. The gig economy creates new challenges: platforms may downgrade workers who don't respond to clients quickly enough – platform rankings dictate visibility and, in turn, how much workers will earn. The platform may deactivate them for being non-responsive or not following the rules.

But when I ask men and women how satisfied they are with some aspects of the gig economy, there are some surprising results. Across several domains, such as pay, hours, physical work conditions and support from platforms, women say they are just as satisfied as men. This is despite earlier research that has pointed out that women experience significant challenges in the gig economy eg, earning less and experiencing harassment. The only area where women statistically differ from men is job security, where they struggle with greater precarity.

Despite the reported positives, we need to pay greater attention to women's experiences in the gig economy. If remote working is to live up to its promise of freedom, we must examine and address the obstacles women face.

References and further reading

Churchill, B. (2023). The gender pay platform gap during the COVID-19 pandemic and the role of platform gender segregation in Australia. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1111/ntwe.12281

Churchill, B., & Craig, L. (2019). Gender in the gig economy: Men and women using digital platforms to secure work in Australia. *Journal of Sociology, 55*(4), 741–761. https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783319894060

Foley, M., Baird, M., Cooper, R. & Williamson, S. (2018). Is independence really an opportunity? *The experience of entrepreneur-mothers. Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development, 25*(2), 313-329.

James, A. (2023). Platform work-lives in the gig economy: recentering work-family research. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 1–22 https://doi.org/10.1111/gwao.13087

James, A. (2022). Women in the gig economy: feminising 'digital labour'. *Work in the Global Economy, 2*(1), 2–26 https://doi.org/10.1332/273241721X16448410652000

Reilly, K. & Reynolds, J. (2023). Unconventional work, conventional problems: Gig microtask work, inequality, and the flexibility mystique, *The Sociological Quarterly*. https://doi.org/10.1080/00380253.2023.2268679

About the author

Brendan Churchill

Brendan Churchill is ARC Senior DECRA Research Fellow in the School of Social and Political Sciences at the University of Melbourne. Dr Churchill's research interests include the future of work, the gig economy and under-employment from the perspective of those on the margins – young people, women etc. His current research focuses on youth under-employment and the rise of the side hustle. He is a member of the editorial boards of *New Technology, Work & Employment and Gender, Work & Organization*. Twitter/X: @BrenChurchill

Cite this work

Churchill, B. (2024, February 6). System update: The gender pay gap goes digital [Online]. The Sociological Review Magazine. https://doi.org/10.51428/tsr.cqln6753

Copyright