Newbridge Art Project – 'Workforce'

Feminising the Platform Economy?

Al James and Jennie Temple

Recent years have seen a rapid growth in interest amongst academics, labour activists, policy makers, and media commentators with the series of dramatic, digital transformations of work, employment and labour relations that have accompanied the extraordinary growth of on-demand labour and gig work in the so-called 'platform economy'. Underpinning these transformations, the internet is used to unbundle production and value creation from formal employment, with online labour markets and algorithms used to manage and motivate work carried out beyond the spatial and temporal boundaries of 'typical' workplaces. Other monikers include the collaborative / gig / on-demand / and peer-to-peer economy. Whatever the label used, commentators are excited about the possibilities of online work platforms for enabling workers from a wide range of backgrounds to access new forms of 'flexible' work that fit around personal life commitments, in contrast to many workers' increasing difficulties of meeting the demands of 'mainstream' office environments. Indeed, these new forms of 'flexible' platform work and gig income opportunities are now recognised in multiple sectors (notably in professional services, household services, personal transport, last mile logistics). Recent estimates suggest that over 70 million people worldwide now use online work platforms to access work opportunities; with the peer-to-peer economy in the EU, worth an estimated €28 billion.

Crucially however, the quality of those online on-demand work opportunities is also prompting growing criticism around attendant working conditions, wage levels, and distributions of income and wealth. With reference to a range of online work platforms (Uber, TaskRabbit, Upwork, Amazon M-Turk, Helpling), critical work to date has identified: the 'dark side' of 'platform economy labour relations for workers who have limited legal protection as self-employed 'independent contractors' on for-profit platforms; how digital platforms and clickwork are potentially crowding out old jobs rather than creating new ones; and how digital on-demand work is reinforcing stubborn labour market inequalities rooted in gender and race, re-inscribed through customer reputational reviews and the digital platform algorithms which route jobs out and set the terms under which digital workers labour. These critiques find expression in a range of provocative terms including 'sharewashing', 'crowdfleecing', and the 'share the scraps economy'.

Yet within this critical research agenda, women remain strangely marginalised – despite them representing 52% of workers accessing online work platforms weekly in the UK. As such, we know very little about the everyday work-lives of these women, and their experiences of using online work platforms to help reconcile work, home and family, and to negotiate better labour market outcomes relative to 'mainstream' employers. Part of the problem is that, because many of these women engage in gig work carried out within their own homes, they are less visible than the likes of Deliveroo and Uber workers whose much studied gig labours are also more publicly visible within our towns and cities. Over the last 2 years, I have sought to address this major blindspot, by documenting the lived experiences of female returners with young families juggling gig work with the messy and fleshy everyday activities of family and household care, in ways that potentially disrupt (versus reinforce) stubborn gendered labour market inequalities. 52 interviews later, my work has engaged with women using a range of popular online jobs platforms in the UK (PeoplePerHour, UpWork, Fiverr, Elance, TaskRabbit, Copify, Freelancer) to access paid gigs in white-collar desk work (including communications, marketing, business devt,

HR, office support, web, design, graphics). The interviews offer some vivid insights into the contradictions and hardships experienced by these women in relation to wage precarity, 'management' by algorithms, work-life conflict, and health and safety, as they seek to negotiate better work-lives via digital work platforms. By way of introduction to this rich work, some short interview excerpts are included here. The interviews have identified some personal hardships that many women face working online. Inspired by these interviews, the study also includes a series of artist renderings of women's digital work-lives, produced by Jennie Temple. Some of these images are also included here.   Many more are at http://geoworklives.com

'I started using Upwork probably just after I had my daughter, who is nine months old. During my maternity leave. So, I told my employer I didn't want to go back to work because weighing everything up I didn't want to pay somebody to look after my daughter, so I could go back to work, it just didn't make sense in my view. So, I decided to start doing the online freelancing work. It does take quite a long time to build up your reputation on the site and earn enough money to make a living. Most people would look at it as a step down.'

'Rather than being a set nine to five job, with the platforms, you can bid, and you can do the work, an hour in the evening or two hours or whatever you need to do. Most of the time it's when [my daughter]'s in bed, I can go and do the work whilst she's asleep and have the monitor with me, so I can keep an eye on her while I'm working'.

'I completely juggle it. At the moment until September I don't have any days where I don't have one of the children with me, the nursery schedules don't overlap. So, I work in the evenings a lot, I work at weekends a lot when my husband is around to help a bit. You know, two and four-year olds need a lot of attention, they are not easy to sort out. The children go to bed at seven, usually and then I will sit with laptop to about eleven'.

'In the evenings when the children are in bed and it's a lot quieter and I can sit and trawl through the lists of jobs. And then make my applications and proposals then, but again, doing it that way you probably do miss out on a lot of jobs that are posted during the day that people have sat and applied for and they have disappeared, and you don't know that. It's very tricky. I would say that I am at a disadvantage at not being able to sit in front of a computer all day and catch these jobs as soon as they are posted'.

'I think it's just the nature of online work, people expect instant reply's, people expect you to online all the time working from home that is one of the disadvantages. Having that kind of separation is quite difficult. So I do lots at night-time, I get up early and do bits in the morning. Yeah, I think you just have to be prepared for that because it's kind of the nature of the beast, really'.

'It's very detrimental if you get a couple of bad feedbacks. You know, that then restricts you applying for other work for months ahead until you can build up your good feedback again. It's like a credit rating'.

'It's hard not to take feedback personally, I think that because everything is remote and virtual people don't even really realise necessarily that they are talking to an actual person... it just says in this big, angry red box you have not got this project, or

something like that. If you could characterise what rejection looks like on screen, it's that. The first time I got one of those I was like, oh, ouch, that's brutal'.

'I wasn't well last year with some problems with my spine, which was causing numbness and pins and needles through my fingers, which obviously for a typist isn't ideal. I was really struggling to type during those times, because it was literally causing me pain. So, I had a couple of months were I was very limited with what I did because of the pain I was in. It has a massive impact if I don't work on the overall family. And you don't get paid for sickness, most things you have just got to put up with and deal with. It took a while to get ourselves straight again'.

'My biggest problem was getting people to pay me on time. I think, some of my biggest corporate clients, they sometimes pay, three or four months late and I have no recourse but to keep chasing them. So, it's obviously really annoying, a waste of my time and it's hard to manage your budget'.

'Most of the people that I do work for are men'.

'People sending messages saying, 'Hello, lovely lady.' Just that kind. It's awkward, especially for my husband. It's not easy. Because I'm putting a smiley photo out there. You want to look professional but… I just ignore it. I just block people'.

'I actually had a customer last year… He knew I had a child. He'd always be calling and I wouldn't answer. Then I'd get emails straightaway, "Are you not interested? Shall we not pay you this month?" I found that very uncomfortable. Also, he was a man, he had my address because my invoices were there and I didn't feel safe. For a few days I was living in paranoia that he was going to send me a letter or he was going to turn up here. That's awful. No one should have to feel like that'.

In combination, these personal testimonies directly challenge celebratory claims surrounding online work platforms as a means for empowering women and female returners in relation to work-life balance, 'flexible' working and economic opportunity. It is important that scholars and activists make visible an invisible, home-based female workforce and give them voice. And to expose gendered constraints on women's abilities to compete on online work platforms.   In response, the next phase of this research explores the kinds of improvements that women would like to see platform developers make in order to reduce the hardships they face.

Dr Al James is a Labour Geographer at Newcastle University with research interests in digital work futures, gender and families. This short introductory piece draws on a research project funded by the British Academy. You can find more information about this project and its key findings at http://geoworklives.com His recent book *'Work-Life Advantage'* (Wiley-Blackwell) explores the challenges of juggling work, home and family amongst technology workers – and why it pays employers to care!

Jennie Temple is an artist and art educator based in Edinburgh. For more information on Jennie Temple's work, visit: http://www.jennietemple.com/

I actually hate to work in bed,
but when it's late I do it.

That's part + parcel of being a mum.

"I have breast-fed whilst on the phone to clients and I have breast-fed while I've been physically typing."