Special issue on remote work

Bringing precarity home: digitized piece work and the fiction of flexibility

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The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated a global transition to digital mediation of work. For some, this has meant work previously done at office desks can now be performed remotely. However even before Covid-19, a shift to fragment, automate and outsource work that could be performed remotely and online had begun. This work, sometimes called 'gig work,' has been hyped as 'flexible,' and promoted as a 'lifestyle' option. In reality much gig work is simply piece work, benefitting from a captive global workforce locked into unpaid care burdens. The rise in remote work, coupled with challenges to care infrastructure, poses a real danger to hard-won gains for gender equality and other rights at work.

The term 'work from home' has entered the lexicon as businesses have been compelled to find ways to accommodate lockdowns and restrictions on their operations. Schools in several countries have adapted to remote learning. As children attended classes from home, working parents have learned to juggle their schedules to supervise children's learning. As Covid-19 variants continue to disrupt school and office schedules, there is growing demand for flexible work schedules.

Work fragmentation

But for many, online work is far from flexible. Digitization is transforming work into ever smaller 'micro-tasks', resulting in unprecedented levels of global labour arbitrage. Platforms that enable remote work have changed the nature of how some jobs are performed, and have introduced entirely new types of work too. Tasks serving emerging artificial intelligence supply chains, such as geo-tagging or content moderation, are online and outsourced, often to countries with plentiful low-wage and precarious workforces.

Labour outsourcing in the digital economy is much like systems of old for distributing piece work to home-based workers. Platforms such as Mechanical Turk, Rev and Upwork are designed so all work is performed virtually. Therefore labour arbitrage can take place at a global level, pitting workers in low and medium income countries against those in OECD countries as they bid for tasks. In all countries, workers also face the fragmentation of piece work assignments into ever smaller 'micro-tasks'. Workers must be hypervigilant to compete for tasks that may disappear within seconds.

Platforms exacerbate this problem, with predictably gendered consequences. Those engaged in web-based tasks spend a significant proportion of their time in unremunerated work searching for suitable tasks. Grey and Suri (2019) describe this

hypervigilance: "Those … who make the most money spend hours monitoring their dashboards and scrolling through pages upon pages of job postings … They must be ready to snap up a well-paying or fast-and-easy task the second it pops onto their screen, lest another worker click the link and accept it first.'

The pace of traditional piece work relies on human 'jobbers' who distribute tasks. But online, algorithms assign tasks that may disappear within seconds, creating an inhuman acceleration of pace that reduces rather than increases workers' ability to control their time.

Algorithmic patriarchs?

Corporations that dominate the platform sector actively promote precarity as a 'lifestyle choice.' An expensive political campaign in California underwritten by platform companies relies heavily on sleekly-produced 'testimonials' that heavily feature Black and Brown workers, both female and male (Athreya, 2020). In almost every testimonial, proponents plead for continued flexibility so they can care for children or elderly parents. The campaign, which seeks to overturn a law providing legal protection to gig workers, illustrates how firms promoting platform or 'gig' work benefit from social norms that tolerate and even valorise unpaid care burdens.

Women continue to shoulder substantial unpaid care burdens worldwide and this limits their ability to engage in paid economic activity. Additionally, the continued drive to divest from public education systems over several years, or failure in some countries to invest in the first place, has undermined an important component of our care infrastructure. This increases the unpaid care burden on parents, especially women.

Veena Dubal's recent interviews with low-wage female platform workers in the eastern United States highlight the ways in which searching for work online exacerbates the problem of time poverty: 'If I work 12 to 16 hours a day, I'll make maybe $5 an hour. But that's when there is work, but when you're sitting in between jobs and you consider that time, when you're just looking for work, then the hourly wage falls dramatically. There are so many of us now, and fewer quality jobs. Sometimes I wake up in the middle of the night just to see if I can grab some good requests' (Dubal, 2020).

A 2021 ILO report, *The Role of Digital Platforms in Transforming the World of Work,* found that approximately 23% of all women who perform work on platforms have children under the age of six; however, that is 50% for respondents from low and medium

income countries. The ILO also found that women were more likely than men to report that they would forego sleep to access online tasks at times when they did not have unpaid duties.

Platform work and the ability to be hypervigilant may be most accessible to those who have no unpaid care burdens, and who therefore would also be most available to obtain formal work during regular, set working hours. Algorithms that assign work are designed to reward those who are most constantly available with more desirable and lucrative assignments. Do algorithms, over time, reinforce bias against those with greater unpaid care burdens? Over time, does this lead to systematic discrimination against women in assignments? And most importantly, is this indeed the intent of platform design? We are only beginning to collect the data necessary to understand the effects of platforms on labour market gender gaps (Adams-Prassl, 2021).

Unfortunately, national laws prohibiting workplace discrimination may fail to suffice when the manager is an algorithm. After all, who is to be held accountable? Anonymous message boards or help desks are often the only point of interface for workers to obtain information on work assignments. Gray and Suri (2019) refer to this as 'inadvertent algorithmic cruelty', since it removes the possibility of empathy between worker and employer. Platforms are unforgiving in circumstances where workers are unable to complete tasks. There is no consideration or understanding of human exigencies, such as the need to care for a sick family member or an unforeseen household emergency. Many workers report that they face harsh penalties if they do not perform a task to specification, and even when such decisions appear arbitrary, are unable to contest them (Anwar and Graham 2019).

We have witnessed an increase in unpaid care needs that is likely to continue, given the pandemic's potential long term health consequences and a rise in the number of chronically ill, as well as the effects of school disruptions and long term mental health impacts of the crisis. This will inevitably lead more people, disproportionately women, to step out of the full-time labour force, with long term consequences for their income and professional advancement. Many of them will turn to gig work.

Di Paolo's 'Schools and the Consequences of the Pandemic' (2020 in this publication) points out that public education systems have long been fighting privatization. Education systems have been further eroded by the pandemic's effects. 'Costs before quality' in Italy is equally true in other countries. In a shocking recent study of US teachers one in four had considered leaving their jobs in the past year (Washington Post, 2021). Organizations hoping to benefit from monetization of education in the US are funding movements to further demoralize teachers, administrators and school boards, creating more uncertainty for working parents who may be beginning to return to office work. Resignations from education and other care professions are leading to more uncertainty for working families. People now seeking to juggle care needs and paid work may be lured into the immediate option of task-based platform or gig work, which intensifies the snowball effect: more families

resort to precarious work rather than sustaining political demands for long term public investments in care sectors.

Unequal by design

Corporate narratives that valorize the acceptability of unpaid care burdens have shifted the policy debate away from what must be done to alleviate burdens so caregivers can enter paid employment. Instead, the private sector has at best failed to defend public education, and at worst hastened its demise while elevating demand for a casual, informal, on-demand workforce. We must pay attention to the danger that this change will reinforce patriarchal norms relegating more and more women from the public domain to the home where they become trapped in precarious work.

The choice to allow these patterns to be reinforced by algorithms is ultimately the result of a human intention. Algorithms acting as managers are not programmed to maximize fairness. Equal access to meaningful work in the digital economy requires the human decision-makers behind these choices to step into the light and address the consequences of design choice on economies and social safety nets. Only when we deal, finally, with the need for public investment in all care sectors can we begin to envision real flexibility and real choice in platform-enabled work.

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