

Digital Policy Hub – Working Paper

Gig Economies Living Lab: Bridging Global Divides in Research

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About the Hub

The Digital Policy Hub at CIGI is a collaborative space for emerging scholars and innovative thinkers from the social, natural and applied sciences. It provides opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students and post-doctoral and visiting fellows to share and develop research on the rapid evolution and governance of transformative technologies. The Hub is founded on transdisciplinary approaches that seek to increase understanding of the socio-economic and technological impacts of digitalization and improve the quality and relevance of related research. Core research areas include data, economy and society; artificial intelligence; outer space; digitalization, security and democracy; and the environment and natural resources.

The Digital Policy Hub working papers are the product of research related to the Hub's identified themes prepared by participants during their fellowship.

Partners

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Key Points

- In an ever-growing digital economy that is constantly changing the nature of work and transforming societies, the “gig” economy has emerged to connect workers and consumers through mobile and digital platforms.
- Research on gig work in the Global South is limited, and existing research primarily focuses on gig work in the context of the Global North. There is a growing need for a collaborative approach to gather, analyze and design innovative practices and solutions.
- This paper presents the proposition for a gig economies living lab (GELL) model that potentially serves as a hub and space for multi-stakeholder research, data gathering, cooperation, engagement and innovation.
- In the case of researching the digitalization of the global economy, specifically gig economies, a living lab serves as a feasible model for adopting a worker-centred, intersectional and transnational research approach.
- The purpose of a multi-stakeholder living lab would be to work toward: integrating workers' voices, knowledge and experiences, specifically those who are marginalized within global governance frameworks and mainstream definitions of gig work; utilizing an intersectional lens to account for gender, racial and material hierarchies among workers in various societies; and bridging the global divide in data and analysis by decentring the Global North and incorporating the knowledge, experiences and realities of the Global South and marginalized communities within the Global North.

Introduction

Who is a worker? What does gig work mean? How are non-standard forms of employment and labour defined and understood in a global economy that continues to shift and transform with the rise in digitalization, platform work and automation? These are all challenges that exist within research and policy-making spaces that aim to classify workers or to outline the necessary mechanisms needed for upholding their fundamental rights at work. There are also difficulties in implementing health and safety procedures, imposing regulations and providing social and legal protections. Policy research highlights how the temporary nature of gig work inevitably creates weaker job security for workers, provides irregular income, grants less access to company benefits or training, and increases precarity overall.

There are challenges in measuring and collecting data on gig work due to the non-traditional or often informal relations between contractors and workers, unlike more direct and formal relations that exist between employers and employees, which makes it difficult to provide accurate figures. The most recent estimate is that around 1.1 billion gig workers exist worldwide, with projections that this figure will continue to rise in upcoming years (Zgola 2021). The limited access to data results in most of the current research on gig economies to be focused on developed countries (the Global North), which means many economic trends and social issues in so-called developing countries (the Global South) remain unexplored. These include changes that impact local work practices, employment trends, education and training policies, existing gender and class hierarchies, and development agendas.

This paper is the first in a series that explores the relevancy, urgency and possibilities of a collaborative approach to researching the emerging digital economy. The global divide in data collection, research and analysis on the digitalization of economies and labour, impacts the ways in which knowledge and research are produced, the stakeholders who become involved and the extent to which the policies designed and implemented are inclusive and comprehensive. In what ways does this global divide in research and governance of economic digitalization reinforce existing political and socio-economic hierarchies in the global economy and among nations and communities? What are the existing mechanisms by which global governance institutions attempt to bridge this divide? How can workers, defined broadly, and other stakeholders contribute to innovative and alternative policies that align and speak to their diverse needs within the emerging gig economy?

Toward an Alternative Research Approach

This paper presents the proposition for a GELL model that potentially serves as a hub and space for multi-stakeholder research, data gathering, cooperation, engagement and innovation. A living lab can be understood and defined as a methodology for applied research and a way to prototype, experiment and validate research in real-life settings (Ballon and Schuurman 2015). Usually, projects are housed in a university institution and involve scholars, researchers, practitioners and various stakeholders including government representatives, private sector actors and policy makers. Living labs are, therefore, meant to provide the space for multi-stakeholder engagement and collaboration based on shared values and mutual goals (ibid.). Due to the dynamic nature of the living lab, research activities are designed to be interactive, innovative, practical, efficient, strategic and inclusive. Considering the various expertise, backgrounds and diverse skills of people participating in a living lab, it becomes a hub for knowledge production, research, innovation, experimentation and ongoing dialogue.

The vision for the GELL model is that it would bring together researchers, academics, policy makers, private sector companies, gig workers, unions, international organizations and government representatives. The involvement of workers, unions, cooperatives and other labour organizations would offer alternative ways of defining and classifying workers and their diverse needs through a worker-centred approach. It also provides the opportunity for utilizing an intersectional lens that considers the various structural barriers, issues, struggles, oppressions and lived experiences of workers. Lastly, it creates the space and opportunity for a transnational perspective, whereby stakeholders at various local and global levels can collaborate and connect over issues and initiatives beyond material borders.

Methods: Thematic Analysis of Policy Reports

The proposition for a GELL model is based on a thematic analysis of major policy reports and working papers on gig work that were published in the past decade by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and World Bank (Balliester and Elsheikhi 2018; Berg et al. 2018; Datta et al. 2023; ILO 2021, 2022; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018; Stefano 2016; World Bank 2019; Hacki 2021). The focus of this paper will be solely on analyzing these policy reports, in an attempt to centre mainstream policy narratives, including the opportunities, challenges, gaps and potentials they present. These policy reports were analyzed using a qualitative methods approach where key codes were used to map out and summarize the intersections of macro-level economic crises, labour market transformations and workers' everyday lived experiences.

Building on this thematic analysis, this paper highlights the growing need for alternative approaches to research issues related to gig work, gender, economic development and technology at both local and global levels. Through using a grounded theory and bottom-up approach, the paper addresses some of the gaps in existing policy frameworks, namely the need for: broader definitions of worker and labour practices, workers' rights, and protection and access barriers; inclusion of multiple factors that result in diverse experiences of gig workers, which include gender, race, class and culture; and practical strategies to implement multi-level stakeholder engagement and collaboration in governance and management of gig economies. In the second section of the paper, the GELL is presented as a model that upholds worker-centred, intersectional and transnational research practices toward potentially bridging the global divide in data and policy on gig work and digital economies at large.

The Global Divide in Researching Gig Economies

Over the past decade, the global economy has witnessed major shocks, shifts and transformations, including the rise in migration and refugee displacement, poverty, income disparities, financial crises and unemployment, gender disparities and informalization of work (World Bank 2019). These global trends are further exacerbated as a result of unprecedented shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the exponential advancement of technologies and the expansion of digital economies worldwide. Research on labour market transformations discusses the need for long-term structural change in the global economy, and for inclusive and sustainable recovery measures, as well as the potential role of technology-driven solutions in eliminating informality, reducing poverty and providing social protection for workers.

Policy reports published by the ILO in 2021 and 2022, present data and case study examples on how the gig economy in many instances is seen to provide flexible opportunities to migrants, refugees and marginalized communities as a source of income and transitional or extra work (Hacki 2021; ILO 2022, 2021). Migrants and refugees who often face discrimination and barriers to employment tend to resort to

work in the gig economy, often in informal or precarious roles that are more available and open for hiring (Hacki 2021). However, there are challenges and issues that exist in gig work as it relates to workers' protection, regulation and access issues. At the macro-level, the differences in internet access and uneven digital infrastructure worldwide contribute to the growing digital divide where people do not have equal opportunities for connectivity or resources for developing their technical skills and knowledges (ibid.). The unequal access to digital infrastructure, limited training or lack of knowledge limits the potential of workers within the gig economy to grow professionally within this sector and confines them to informal and precarious roles (ibid.).

The World Bank report *Working Without Borders: The Promise and Peril of Online Gig Work* highlights that “While gig work is creating new work opportunities, it comes with significant challenges. Risks and inequalities still exist in the gig economy. Those without access to the internet or to digital devices such as laptops, smartphones, and tablets remain excluded. Many workers experience discrimination in accessing work or high-paying tasks, particularly women and workers in developing countries. Besides, gig jobs are sporadic, do not always provide clear career progression pathways for youth, and leave many people spending long hours searching for gig tasks without success” (Datta et al. 2023, 10).

The intersection of macro-level economic issues, labour market transformations and the everyday experiences of workers highlight the urgency of researching gig economies for policy makers and other stakeholders involved. While policy documents address the key trends, opportunities and challenges of gig economies, there remains room to explore and question how the global divide in research and policy making manifests in understanding and defining gig work, protection, access, rights and governance frameworks. The following subsections focus on some of these gaps by highlighting the importance of worker-centred, intersectional and transnational approaches to research and policy making.

Worker-Centred Research

Protection and access barriers and challenges were the most mentioned issues in the policy documents on gig work. Existing data and research on gig work shows that globally gig workers suffer from risks of low or non-existent social and legal protections, especially in the context of rising informality and lack of social insurance programs. Social protection coverage and labour protection are fundamental components of decent and fair work practices that are upheld by the ILO and other governance and regulatory bodies worldwide. In terms of access issues, current research reveals the barriers in accessing digital infrastructure such as the internet, connectivity, tools and resources. Beyond these material barriers, there are also access issues related to knowledge, skills, digital literacy, training and education programs, and legal or collective representation (ibid.). As the *Working Without Borders* policy report by the World Bank argues, “Online gig work can support inclusion on the supply side by providing work opportunities for youth, women, relatively low-skilled workers, or people in areas with insufficient local jobs while also widening the talent pool for MSMEs on the demand side, although people without internet access could remain excluded” (ibid., 9).

There are several local and global initiatives that advocate and work toward the rights to access data and privacy, and other soft-law practices such as creating codes of conduct and completing platform certifications. In some areas, “worker centres” are actively involved in protecting and bargaining on behalf of gig workers by exploring various online forums and tools for raising awareness, engaging unions and organizing collective bargaining campaigns and actions (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018). Policy researchers continue to advocate for more effective taxing systems to fund social protection programs, and for workers to be able to collectively bargain and be represented when discussing their rights with employers and governments. There is a growing need for unconventional, community-based initiatives to protect vulnerable workers using innovative and practical strategies. Worker-centred solutions for protection and access barriers therefore require a broader definition of workers and a holistic understanding of their various needs and their diverse experiences that cannot be universalized or have a one-size-fits-all policy.

Intersectional Research

Gig work has provided opportunities for women, youth, migrants, refugees and marginalized communities to earn more income, utilize their time and skills, and integrate — albeit informally — into the global economy. As mentioned in the previous section, workers’ experiences differ in the gig economy, and the challenges and barriers they face are impacted by several structural factors such as gender, race, class and culture. Many of the policy reports discuss the potential of technology, digitalization of work and entrepreneurship in enhancing women’s empowerment and economic participation. Women’s access to technology and economic tools is related to their class and social background, level of education and social norms that may limit their freedom of mobility.

In a thorough systematic literature review, Mónica Grau-Sarabia and Mayo Fuster-Morell (2021) provide an overview of how gender has been studied in the digital economy. They demonstrate the ways in which major international institutions and private organizations and associations use women’s participation and an economic mainstream approach to researching gender and technology. This approach provides a surface-level conception of women’s labour and the digital economy, since it does not include a critical lens of the structural or relational aspects of technology and labour or how racial hierarchies are reinforced through these emerging relations and economies. Thus, a critical feminist lens of analysis is important in understanding how gig work impacts women’s everyday lives, especially under the current global economic system.

There is a need for intentional and inclusive policies and programs to promote women’s participation in the gig economy, yet very rarely do policy documents utilize an intersectional lens in analyzing and thinking through these issues (Crenshaw 1989). In addition to existing gender inequalities in labour markets and some of the structural barriers women face, including social contracts and non-inclusive governance practices, there are also safety concerns, limited internet access and digital literacy. These challenges are not only experienced by women, but by many other marginalized and disenfranchised communities globally. Many of the policy reports highlight the discrimination women and racialized people face in accessing jobs, the barriers to entry and lack of available opportunities in many contexts.

An intersectional framework is necessary to integrate the diverse experiences of workers, and design policies and solutions that do not undermine the structural barriers they endure, but instead work on eradicating and transforming them.

Transnational Research

The ILO policy report *World Employment and Social Outlook: The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work* highlights the need for a global governance framework that provides solutions for gig workers' challenges and barriers. It presents the urgency for multilateral action and global solidarity among multiple stakeholders and actors in researching, collecting data, experimenting and implementing innovative solutions and policies to protect and support gig workers. Multiple stakeholders and actors are mentioned throughout the various policy documents, including national governments, private tech companies, workers and employers in the digital economy. Governments and international organizations need to work together to ensure domestic laws are applied to gig workers, and legal provisions and fundamental rights are protected (Hacki 2021).

Global governance institutions are already involved in data governance projects, poverty alleviation programs, education and gender mainstreaming initiatives, and management of digital platforms. Policy research on digital economies highlights the significance of developing an international governance system to establish minimum rights and protection of gig workers, advocating for a “human-in-command” approach that ensures decisions affecting work are made by humans. To foster cooperation across social partners and ensure good governance practices, the ILO presents social dialogue and industrial relations as two useful approaches to utilize (Balliester and Elsheikhi 2018). These approaches encourage a multi-stakeholder and collaborative approach toward researching gig economies and call for cooperative models and partnerships between workers, employers, governments and digital labour platforms. This also opens the space for public debates on education and industrial policies to support inclusive economic growth and development and emphasizes the role and responsibility of all stakeholders in the global economy (ibid.).

The word “global” is used in policy reports and research on gig economies at large; however, the divide remains in the data collected, the experiences and knowledge that are centred, and in turn the solutions that are presented. Also, while global cooperation is key, the nation-state and local governments remain core actors in the global economic system, especially as it relates to labour rights and regulations and policy implementation. With this in mind, there is a need for transnational research that engages stakeholders at both local and global levels, and encourages experimentation of pilot projects and methods for social protection, regulation, data management and skills building.

Introducing the GELL Model

Building on the previous analysis that highlights existing gaps and opportunities in policy research on gig work, this final section presents a proposition for a GELL model that is grounded in a worker-centred, intersectional and transnational research approach. The GELL model would be based on the emerging needs of gig workers, and the growing demands of employers and firms, as well as the responsibilities

of governments and organizations in providing fair and decent working standards and preserving rights. The GELL model potentially offers an innovative space where researchers and policy makers can shift the narrative and bridge the global divide in global governance and research on gig work in the digital economy.

In the case of researching the digitalization of the global economy, specifically gig economies, a living lab serves as a feasible model for adopting a worker-centred, intersectional and transnational research approach. The purpose of a multi-stakeholder living lab would be to work toward: integrating workers voices, knowledges and experiences, specifically those who are marginalized within global governance frameworks and mainstream definitions of gig work; utilizing an intersectional lens to account for gender, racial and material hierarchies among workers in various societies; and bridging the global divide in data and analysis by decentering the Global North and incorporating the knowledge, experiences and realities of the Global South and marginalized communities within the Global North.

In order to design such a model and bring it to life, there are several factors to think about, starting with the location, the network that would be formed, the institution that would host it, the participants and stakeholders involved, the projects it would take on and the research outputs that are expected to emerge. In the upcoming papers in this series, a deeper overview of the living lab concept will be presented along with an ecosystem mapping of existing and relevant living labs, both in the Global North and Global South context that may serve as an inspiration to the GELL model. They will also present a summary of potential partners and actors that could be involved and collaborate on the basis of capacity, interests, resources and feasibility. The third and final paper of the series will present the mechanisms, tools and strategies by which the GELL model can be implemented and sustained across different regions and involving various stakeholders.

Conclusion

This paper leaves us with more questions and ideas for researchers and policy makers to think through and assess, but this anticipation and curiosity is what could ultimately drive collaborative and innovative approaches to research digital economies and gig work. International organizations, governments, workers, consumers and employers are becoming increasingly aware of the inevitable digitalization of work. These major shifts in the global economy continue to impact people's everyday lives, often in ways that have not been experienced before, and therefore push us to (re)imagine alternative solutions and possibilities for economic justice.

About the Author

Laila Mourad is a Ph.D. candidate at York University where she is exploring how home-based labour in the gig economy can inform and shape our understanding of the evolving notions of "work" in the digital economy. She applies an interdisciplinary approach to her research of gender, labour and international development, and examines how existing and emerging technologies transform the ways in which household economies and social relationalities are envisioned, as well as their role in development. She is the co-founder of SWANA Collective, a group that aspires to cultivate alternative decolonial spaces in academia and beyond. During her fellowship with the Digital Policy Hub, Laila will examine how existing and emerging technologies transform economic activities.

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