

The gig economy in complex refugee situations

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Research with Syrian women refugees in Jordan suggests that, despite significant challenges, the gig economy has some potential to help refugees participate in host communities and to bolster their economic participation.

As elsewhere in the world, the gig economy – in which companies develop mobile platforms which bring together workers and the purchasers of their services – is fast taking root in Jordan. These platforms enable businesses to order timed and monetised tasks from an available worker, with a fee or commission commonly charged to the worker or client by the platform. Workers take on particular ‘gigs’ without any guarantee of further work and are typically classified as self-employed or independent contractors by gig economy companies. The operating model of gig economy platforms can be divided into ‘crowd work’ and ‘on-demand’ work. Crowd work refers to tasks which are commissioned and carried out via the internet using suitably skilled ‘crowd workers’ located anywhere in the world. On-demand tasks are carried out locally, assuming close physical proximity of service purchaser and provider.

A 2017 study commissioned by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and carried out by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) explored the potential of the gig economy to provide economic opportunities to Syrian women refugees currently living in Jordan.¹ Although the sector is still in its infancy, international companies (such as Uber and Careem) and home-grown companies (such as Bilforon and Mrayti) have already established operations in the country. To understand the implications for humanitarian practitioners of this fast-developing form of paid work in complex refugee situations, we examined the potential and challenges of including the gig economy in livelihoods programming.²

Challenges

The gig economy remains indisputably small. Worldwide, it involves a very modest share of the active workforce, the most

generous recent estimate being 1.5%.³ Our research in Jordan suggests that gig work may involve a few hundred Syrian refugee women at most. On this basis alone, it could be argued that engagement with gig work is not a good use of scarce development and humanitarian resources.

The gig economy does not – as it currently stands – offer decent work as defined by the International Labour Organization (ILO). Therefore, a wider focus on improving access to livelihoods in sectors which offer opportunities for a more stable income, coupled with better working conditions, may be more appropriate.

Furthermore, structural constraints – both practical and political – to accessing gig work present a barrier to entry for marginalised communities. For example, for many refugees in Jordan, internet connectivity is limited or non-existent. Women face further constraints to digital connectivity, sometimes requiring permission to use the internet or due to access restrictions imposed by limited digital literacy.

The legal implications of involvement in gig work may also be of concern to practitioners. It remains unclear whether non-Jordanian gig economy workers are entitled to work permits. Expanding gig work may therefore appear to be supporting workers to access informal work, bearing potential risks for both practitioners and workers themselves. Crowd-work platforms complicate matters further because of their transnational character: workers can be based in one country and undertake tasks for clients based in a second, via platforms located in a third – leaving it unclear which is the legally responsible jurisdiction.

Finally, gig workers in general confront many challenging working conditions, including a lack of social protection and

bargaining power. Refugee gig workers in particular face yet greater difficulties, such as heightened apprehensions around the submission of private information online that might put them at risk.

Opportunities

Notwithstanding the challenges, the gig economy does present some opportunities for livelihoods programming. Early engagement with the expanding gig economy offers an opportunity to understand its positive and negative implications (for gig workers and the labour market more broadly), and to address them proactively while there is time to shape these technologies and their impacts.

Although the gig economy may, in some ways, be little different from other forms of casual, informal work available to refugees, gig workers appear to value some features of platform apps – such as their independent log of hours worked, which alleviates the risk of wage theft and facilitates prompt payment on task completion.⁴ The gig economy also makes it possible for refugees to undertake crowd work, which is not tied to a particular location. This could present new economic opportunities for suitably skilled and equipped workers, although it introduces challenges around the governance and the precariousness of such work.

The gig economy also has potential to help overcome the barriers that restrict the mobility – and therefore participation – of Syrian women refugees in the labour force. Some focus group members reported how home-based gig work could open up opportunities for women's livelihoods. Moreover, on-demand work could expand possibilities for engagement in sectors in which these women may already be skilled, such as catering or tailoring.

Avenues for gig economy livelihoods programming

We believe there is a case for livelihoods programming in Jordan to include opportunities in the gig economy, if integrated alongside robust protection measures and other employment options. Potential avenues for such livelihoods support include:

Engaging in dialogue with government:

Given the lack of clarity around the applicability and enforcement of existing labour regulation in relation to the gig economy, practitioners need to engage with the legal implications and potential risks of supporting gig work. One approach could be to engage in dialogue with the Jordanian government to clarify what engagement the government is willing to permit. At

the same time, it would be valuable to undertake a range of advocacy activities, including calling for government-led social dialogue around opportunities and conditions in the gig economy and policies to promote digital inclusion and permit freedom of association.

Supporting refugee engagement in navigating gig work:

Practitioners should monitor the policy environment relating to refugee engagement in gig work. They should provide timely, ongoing information



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to refugees seeking or involved in gig work about the relevant regulations and the associated opportunities and risks, as well as specific support such as digital literacy training and legal advice. Considering the challenges that gig work poses, this support should include building transferable skills that would enable refugees to seek alternative economic opportunities if they wish.

Encouraging responsible company engagement: Practitioners may be well-placed to encourage companies to pay serious attention to workers' concerns, including around privacy. In addition, practitioners might initiate connections with those crowd-work companies which operate on a more ethical and inclusive model in order to explore their interest in working with vulnerable communities, such as Syrian women refugees. Central to this should be ensuring that companies consider the specific needs of these groups (for example, for robust digital literacy training) and that the work offered is decent and desirable.

Facilitating refugee association: Even in contexts in which refugee association is prohibited, refugees are usually permitted to come together for training led by non-governmental organisations. This could provide a very good opportunity to link with (registered) women's groups to train and support women, and to enable them to advance collective action in different areas of their lives, including by developing economies of scale in small businesses.⁵ Practitioners could also facilitate links between refugees engaging in gig work and labour unions. This would raise unions' awareness of the experiences of workers as the gig economy emerges, so that they can amplify gig workers' voices and advocate on their behalf.

Exploring cooperative models: In a recent precedent, the Jordanian government has permitted agricultural cooperatives to apply for Syrian refugee work permits, acting as the 'employer' and handling their paperwork. These cooperatives have also supported the Ministry of Labour by providing information

to refugees on the work permit process and their rights and entitlement under labour laws. Developing platform cooperative models with existing women-inclusive cooperatives in Jordan and technology company leaders could provide an opportunity to harness digital technology to expand workers' access to paid work and markets, while mitigating some of the challenges posed to workers by gig economy models.

Finally, we recommend that practitioners support the collection of evidence about gig worker experiences in order to inform programming (to support women's economic empowerment) and advocacy (to raise awareness about worker experiences and needs). Taken together, these steps could help increase the individual capacity of workers to engage within the gig economy and – critically – improve the conditions of work itself.

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2. The authors thank Kimberly Behrman, Sawzan Issa, Daphne Jayasinghe, Ghadeer Al Majali, Barri Shorey and Elizabeth Stuart for their contributions to this article.

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