The Intersectional Precarity Of Gig Workers
The Case Of Food Couriers

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Cycling, work, deliveries

- Bicycles and platform work - the paradox of flexibility
  - The flexibility of the bicycle with regards to both normative physical capabilities and urban environments
  - Platform work as flexible work that obscures nevertheless its precarity
  - The affinities between the two and the popularity of cycles for platform food delivery

- History of cycling for work and deliveries
  - Bicycles transitioned from elite leisure practice to a working-class tool - and still used by working class and the poor in Global South (and North) for platform work
  - From commuting to work by bicycle to using bicycles to do the work
  - The precedent of cycle messengers of the 1990s
  - The digital age, the rise of bike deliveries and the future of work
From the right to a livelihood to the right to the road

- **Play**
  - The **flexibility** of cycling and work and their relationship with play
  - Cycling’s **ambiguous relationship** with work and play
  - **Gamification** used to recruit, exploit and keep captive users & workers
  - **Flexploitation**: control/choice and the two identities of workers (only the “fun” one is advertised)

- **Complex precarity**:
  - Precarity linked to type of **entitlement** that cyclists have as road users: insecure space, spatial disregard and police neglect
  - **Intersectionality**: starting with cycling, and adding individual dimensions such as race, class, gender, disability.
  - **Precarity beyond economic insecurity**: This anxiety is ‘not just about paychecks, but equally about issues of identity, gender and family, national membership and so on that were long anchored by the social ideal of the “proper job”’ (Ferguson & Li 2018, p. 2).
Decolonisation

- The need for situated knowledge (Haraway, 1986). Switching focus from our dominant western research to giving voice to Global South researchers.
- Geographical scope: gig economy is a global phenomenon and so are the workers’ struggles; focusing on local specificities. In South America, the gig economy emerged within a context of historical and structural forms of oppression (colonial and related to the international, sexual and racial labor division), which add to the neoliberal ones.
- Situated knowledge production; sharing our personal situation.
- Migrant and ethnic minority workers provide an ‘infrastructural role’ for these platforms, ‘one that is as vitally important to their business model’s viability as the steady influx of investment capital’ (van Doorn et al. 2020, p. 2).
Women

• The Gender Gap
  • In Platform Delivery: 13% (Spain), 6% (UK), 5% (Argentina).
• Background:
  • Gender gap in Cycling
  • Gender gap in cycle messengers
• Factors of influence:
  • Physical effort - Perceived competency
• Self-protection strategies against hostility, sexual harassment and neglect
  • Individual: self isolation, hiding in solitary spaces, hiding their identities under clothes
    • Missing information from peers -> financial disadvantage (to add to the pay gap)
  • Group: women social networks (Whatsapp), women and non-binary groups within unions.

Juan Manuel Maidana, La Factoria
Women

• Public exposure of women’s bodies leading to stress and feeling unsafe
  • Constant exposure to harassment -> working in a permanent state of vigilance and tension
  • Women are more affected by forced hypermobility - avoiding certain areas and times of the day
  • Privacy infringements by company. E.g. visible name & phone no.

• Wider meaning of safety and security
  • Higher exposure to road unsafety
  • Road and sexual harassment combined (gap in the research) “We can expect women riders being more exposed to a higher crash risk while doing the same job”
  • Sexual violence against women from companies, colleagues, clients, passers-by.

• Occupational health
  • Lack of access to toilets - increased risk of urinary infections
  • Working while in pain / recovery from labour, exhaustion because of pregnancy or motherhood, etc.
Migrants

- **Overrepresentation** of migrants and ethnic minority groups: in Spain 64% of riders are from Latin America, in Argentina 65% of Glovo and 84% of Rappi riders are migrants.

- The **level of precarity** varies depending on individual circumstances and migrant status (documented/undocumented).

- **Algorithms are biased** against “diverse” workers.

- **Platform companies take advantage of work restrictions imposed by migration systems** upon undocumented workers.
  - **App renting and the invisible workers**
    - Lack of the most basic employment, financial, health protection covered by the platforms - the story of Pujan
    - “Hacking” the system or convenient labor force for companies?
    - (Undercover) immigration raids assisted by platform companies
  - **Fear and silence:** Undocumented migrant workers do not often participate in resistance strategies:
    - Fear of deportation
    - Language and knowledge barriers.
Resistance

• The capacity of platform workers to self-organise has been dismissed in recent years. Yet, they are at the **vanguard** of strikes and protests **across the world**.

• **Individual** forms of contesting the algorithm
  • Working for multiple platforms, rejecting long distance orders, switching to different vehicle accounts to get more orders, delaying the collection of orders from restaurants to be allocated a double order etc

• **Alternatives**: cooperativism
  • CoopCycle, a European federation of bike-delivery coops. Pooling resources to develop shared open-source software

• **Strikes**: International co-ordination

• **New Unions**
  • Recently established, fill the gap left by existing unions
  • Global initiatives - global platform companies

Working for multiple platforms to maximise earnings. Credit: José Sherwood
Intersectional resistance

• Unions **supporting migrant and women workers**: IWGB (in the UK) and IWW

• Women, more involved despite being less represented in the workforce - **feminist approach** of unions and cooperatives.

• **Unequal involvement of migrant workers:**
  • Undocumented migrant less likely to get involved but
  • documented migrants very engaged.
Concluding remarks

• This chapter shows the intersectional layers of precarious work, which starts with the intrinsic precarity of cycling mobility.

• We have demonstrated that, amongst cycle food couriers, there is a minority of women as well as a majority of migrants whose work experiences are not only hidden from view but, most importantly, are indicative of additional discrimination and exploitation processes at work in the gig economy.

• Colonial dynamics are still playing a remarkable role in both how oppression and resistance occur. Challenging neoliberalism and conquering technology could work as a way to resist the history of conquest that countries in the Global South have been subject to.

• Even in an increasingly digitalised and atomised working environment, organisation of workers is created at street level. Due to their flexibility, cycles have the capacity to create sociabilities and to be used as an instrument of resistance.
Thank you!
We’ll deliver your food by 8:38

Delivering to:
Buckingham Palace, Westminster,
SW1A 1AA

Your order:
- Katsu chicken curry: £11.85
- Edamame with salt: £3.95
- Duck gyoza: £5.95

Total: £21.75