

**Juliet Webster** | Work & Equality Research, London

# **Digital work: Gender divisions, gender relations, gender perspectives<sup>1</sup>**

Thank you very much for inviting me to talk today. I'm going to talk about the gender dynamics and the gender dimensions of digital work. And what I'm going to spend my talk doing, is to look at what we mean by digital work and what its key features are, plus some questions about how gender is tied up in digital work, the kind of work that we are all doing now, with devices and computers. And I want to argue that the kind of gender disadvantage that used to characterize certain areas of the labor-market and characterized the jobs that were done primarily by women in the past, has now become mainstream across most of the labor-market. So, I'm going to argue as I go through the talk, that gender disadvantage in work is becoming normalized. And finally, I'm going to ask how can we move away from the individualization of remedial measures towards collective actions to improve labor rights and employment conditions, which I think hopefully should make a nice introduction to the talk that Sara de Heusch is going to give in a minute about her work and her organization.

So, these are the main questions that I'm going to pose this evening, and drawing

---

<sup>1</sup> *Transcribed text of Juliet Webster's speech at the event Work/Labour in the Digital Age - Program Technology, Society and the Left, Nicos Poulantzas Institute and Transform! Europe. Video available at <https://vimeo.com/398214474>*

on research done by colleagues across the EU in which we try to chart the dynamics of what we call virtual work and its worth saying at this point that we are all by now very familiar, I think, with the notion that conventional computing jobs, technological jobs, have always been jobs that women have largely been under-represented in. So, we know about that, researchers know about that, feminists have been disappointed by it for years, policy-making institutions throughout the European Union and in several member-states have attempted to implement quite diverse public policies in order to address the under-representation of women in computing, so that's all so far and so good in 30 years of effort of trying to address gender inequality. However, I think with digital work now, in the sense that we mean it tonight, what we are seeing is a different technological landscape, and a very different, what we call: labor-scape, so labor-force, and it's the gender issues around this new labor-scape that I want to focus on this evening.

## **What is digital labour?**

So, what do we mean by digital work? One of our colleagues in the research network, whose work I'm talking about tonight, Ursula Huws, defined digital labor, very usefully in my view, as labor, whether paid or unpaid -and that's crucial-, that is carried out using a combination of digital and telecommunications technologies and/or produces content for digital media. So this is not simply work that is performed using digital technologies as we might have said with previous generations of computing, but it's also work that can produce content for those technologies, and crucially, can produce value for digital and New Media owners. And the contemporary digitalization of work has in my view afforded certain distinctive features which I just want to cover now. I think there are three main characteristics of digital labor that are important and which I want to return to again and again throughout tonight. The first is the idea that labor is performed remotely. It can be remotely from clients, remotely from employers, remotely from colleagues and remotely from other organizations in value chains. It's often invariably precarious and insecure, and crucially for gender, and for the gender relations

within the labor-force and within the population as a whole, digital labor blurs the boundaries that we traditionally understand as having been placed around work. And those boundaries are both spatial boundaries, boundaries of place, but also boundaries of time.

So, if we start with looking at remote work, the performance of labor remotely, or what we might call dislocated work, we can think about whole raft of forms of which this takes place. So, we can think about more and more groups of workers who are multi-locational, who are nomadic, who are mobile, largely afforded by the growth in mobile technologies, mobile devices and cheap wireless telephony and cheap connectivity. Those technological developments have abolished the need for fixed work-places almost altogether. So, now the communications or information work-processes now circumscribe the spatial location of work. In other words, where once mobile working referred to things like insurance salesmen taking their laptops into their car and entering data after meeting with a client, now we can argue and we can see that dislocated work is now characteristic and quite commonplace among almost all professional, creative and white-collar workers, not just insurance salesmen, travelling sales-people. And that development has taken the workplace into multiple locations. We're not familiar with, the idea that, you know, in public transport, in shops, in cafes, in restaurants, in public parks, almost everywhere people may be at work on their devices. The collective experience of work as a result has become utterly disrupted by this development. Because the boundaries of the workplace have become blown apart. So, we all know again from personal experience, that there's nothing really to identify the mobile worker to you or me as we sit and look at him or her. The person sending messages on her mobile phone on the metro might be communicating with colleagues or equally might be playing games and we don't know. And, as the Australian academic Melissa Gregg argued, this has happened to such an extent, that we can no longer tell what work is anymore. We really don't know.

So that one form of dislocated work at one end of the spectrum. But at the other end of the spectrum we can point to the whole global trade, the growth in the global trade of tele-media business and information services which have created groups of service workers who are strung out along global value chains or doing different jobs in different parts of the globe. I'm thinking for example here of software workers who might be in India but responding to markets in America, so they're sort of doing follow-the-sun working, and completely working at completely out of time with their geographical location. So, those two forms of dislocated work, and there are many others some of which I'm going to come back to in a minute.

### **Labour market segregation by sex**

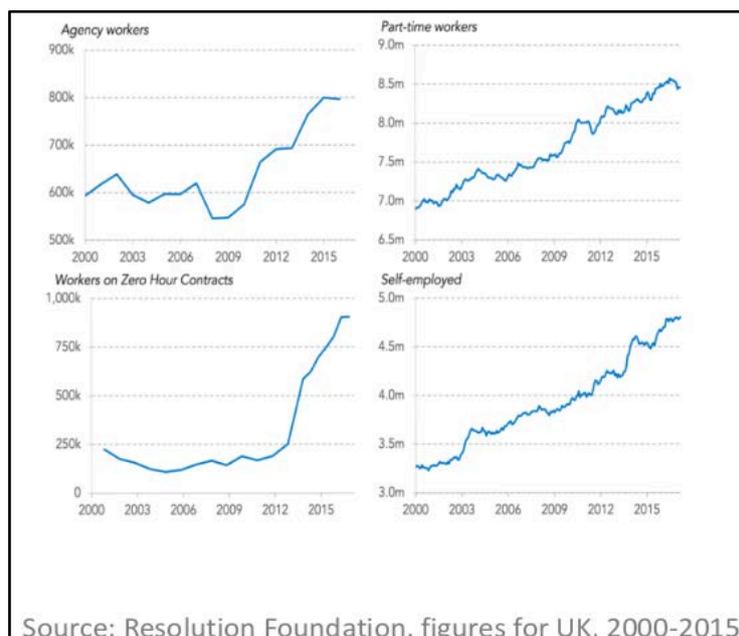
The labor market in digital work, like the labor market in more conventional software development and other forms of computing, is a labor market that is segregated by sex. So, if we think about software developers, or gamers, or New Media professionals, we're talking about mostly men. We see that these fields are numerically dominated and often embedded within those forms of work, is a culture of sexual harassment and sexism. Legion examples of, for example, sex discrimination and dismissal of workers in Silicon Valley, which still go on and which are by now very old examples of sexual harassment, which speak of a gendered culture of work as well as a masculine, numerical domination of those kinds of jobs.

But on the other hand, we can think of things like off-shore information services, such as the services I just described, where workers in one part of the world may be meeting markets or market demands in a quite other part of the world. Or, we can think of click-work, repetitive online working, which I'll come back to and describe in a moment, in which women are largely over-represented. So, I want to argue, that virtual, or digital work, reflects, extends and entrenches, long-run occupational dynamics of gender disadvantage in the labor market. Now, if we think for example about click workers, people who are working online doing

miniscule operations for a remote requester, a remote employer, we find that typically, so far as we know about who they are, they are typically young, they're slightly female-dominated, aged 16 to 35 and in general trying to do this work in order to piece together an income and a livelihood from disparate forms of employment. So, this is not a form of employment that on its own can sustain a livelihood, or sustain a life.

## Gender disadvantage is normalised

What we find then, is that this produces a whole class of workers who share some of the precarious conditions of working that we have come in the past to associate with female labor, but are now much more normalized. So, gender disadvantage is normalized. And in this slide, we are looking at data for the U.K from 2000 to 2015, and different kinds of work are sometimes called a-typical work, so agency workers, part-time workers on the top two rows, and on the bottom two rows, workers on zero-hours contracts and self-employed. The important thing to notice is the trajectory of the graphs over those 15-year period and in particular what I'd like to draw your attention to is the one on the bottom left, which is the graph of zero-hours contracts, which have taken off exponentially in the U.K in the last 8 years and that growth has continued.



Now, that rise of what we might call virtual vulnerable work signifies a labor force that is both vulnerable and overworked, even though it appears from the statistics that people are working less or fewer hours or whatever, quite the reverse is the case. And its particularly true of zero-hours workers. So, what's also surprising about some of these developments is that while some of these kinds of very insecure forms of work are particularly characteristic of the lower levels of the labor market, they're also increasingly found in highly professional areas of work such as engineering. Precarious work is historically quite commonplace at the lower margins of the labor market and commonplace when it's done by women, migrant workers, the young and so on. And its very unprotected by regulation. So today's digital workers, I think, those who are doing these kinds of work, in these kinds of conditions these graphs exemplify, today's digital workers exemplify and typify this kind of precariousness. So, once the precariousness was confined to a labor underclass which incidentally was predominantly female, now I think this kind of precariousness is characteristic of most if not all forms of work. And in that sense, the disadvantage associated with gender patterns, with gendered working patterns, is becoming normalized.

According to the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, self-employment in the European Union is higher now than at any time in the past. And a sizeable chunk of that self-employment is accounted for by the growth of online work platforms, such as Appwork or Amazon Mechanical Turk. These are platforms that register millions of freelancers and post hundreds of thousands of jobs every month. The freelancers who registered with these platforms are from across the labor market.

So, at the higher end, they can be media-oriented digital professionals, they can be video-makers, animators, web and mobile app builders, graphic designers and so on. And their skills, then are in I.T, in programming, or design, or multimedia, or writing or translation or sales and marketing, or even finance and management. And

in Germany, as I've mentioned, more and more very highly skilled work, such as automotive engineering is being drawn into online app outsourcing. So there are platforms now available for hiring engineers to build planes and cars, or to build components to planes and cars.

And these people are sometimes known as click-workers at the lower end of the labor market. Click-workers are performing very tiny operations, tiny elements of complex tasks, or projects which are being broken down into small tasks. So, they might be entering data, or taking images, or transcribing scanned texts, or in a digital tech store checking product sentiment or ratings online. And those are tasks which require very few skills, very little time, minutes or seconds to completed by means of simple clicks. They're performed by disparate human beings, not necessarily algorithms. Some of them can't quite be automated, but they are fundamental to what's known as the gig economy and they've been described as the dull, brainless, low-paid tasks that keep the internet economy firing on all pistons.

These tasks having then been farmed out to disparate workers, when the resulting databases and work that is done, or the digitized texts or the image libraries or whatever is generated from their separate efforts are recomposed by the requester or the employer back into a final product or project. Now what that means is that those kinds of digital platforms are separating the worker from the employer crucially, so the worker and the employer or the requester never meet. The request is posted online, the worker tenders for the job not knowing who they're competing against for that job. They feel themselves under pressure to undercut the unknown competition which might be in India or it might be in Europe, or it might be in America, it could be anywhere. But the worker doesn't know that. So clearly, there's a tendency for this kind of employment to drive down both pay and working conditions.

Now, if we then think about a very different form of digital, New Media and cultural work, access to work is generally much more personal, but it's equally precarious

in a different sense. It's governed by personal networks very often, and informal recruitment practices. So, employment can be precarious. There's a lot of freelancing in this area of employment, so workers have to be risk tolerant. They have to be willing to have what we might call feast and famine contract work. So they might get a glut of contract work, followed by nothing, and they have to manage that. And that has been described as bulimic working by Andy Pratt. And that kind of bulimic working has become normalized in the New Media sector. Oftentimes, it's assumed and presumed and hoped by employers that workers will accept these conditions simply because of the love of the work itself, the sense of passion if you like, that they get from doing this kind of work and particularly in New Media, so no matter how menial the work they're doing, they have to be passionate about it.

So, in all these forms of work, we're seeing working conditions where legal frameworks and employment protection are largely absent. The frameworks and the safeguards that shield conventional employees working for physically fixed employers don't cover this kind of digital workers. So, they've got no cushion against exploitation, disputes about payments, which are rife, or even negative reviews, which at a stroke can destroy your career, or your carefully built up online reputation. And that low pay is buttressed by an informality and lack of transparency in many areas of digital work, and, on top of all this, there's a pervasive individualism throughout that labor market that masks all the structural inequalities, which exist, and places considerable pressure on workers to develop individualized coping strategies, to which we might say no to the two-hour working week.

So just to summarize some of that then, what I'm arguing is that the gender disadvantage of precarious employment is normalized in digital work, in the sense that much digital work is insecure, and affects people in a marginal labor market position. That pay and contracts can be very uneven and low pay and even no pay is rife. That there is no employment protection nor are there employment rights, that in many fields people get their jobs through their personal connections. And that, speaks against the kind of transparency that we know, those of us who work

in gender equality in the workplace, is absolutely vital to advance gender equality. So the pervasive individualism and the individualized coping strategies that workers have to adopt, mask the structural inequalities that exist in this field.

### **Burden of these arrangements is disproportionately borne by women**

So those are the working conditions that are widespread in digital work. And though they represent the normalization of gender disadvantage across the labor force, I want to argue that the negative burden of these arrangements is still disproportionately borne by women. And it's disproportionately borne by women because women are often drawn into things like freelancing and self-employment, because these arrangements apparently offer solutions to the conflicting demands of paid work and family caring. This. For this reason, it's perhaps unsurprising that the small majority of crowd workers at Amazon Mechanical Turk are female, according to the European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions, and in New Media work too, there's a predominance, as I've said, of temporary intermittent and precarious jobs which are still dominated by women, as well as young and able-bodied workers. And in both kinds of work, both contracts and pay come in very unevenly. And gender pay inequality is a widespread feature of all these very informalized working arrangements. Women are much more poorly protected or much less well protected by trade unions than men are, in general, much less likely to enjoy the benefits of such collective organization as exists in these newly emerging industries and the organizational forms of the internet economy.

And finally, we could also point to the very performance of the work itself as a form of gender. Angela McRobbie has argued, for example, that this idea of passionate working is, she says "inscribed with a distinctive mode of gender retraditionalization, whereby the conservatism of post-feminism reinstates young women's aspirations for success within designated zones of activity such as creative labor markets, or creative work, which then become spaces for the

deployment of highly normative femininity", "like", she says, "girlish enthusiasm, which can be constructed, rather, as a willingness to work all hours for very little pay, in the hope of gaining a foothold in the world of work". And much digital work is premised on this idea that if you do this job for a tiny amount of money, it will open another door. So there's this constant mirage of further opportunities that are offered.

## **The high personal price we all pay**

Now, this double aspect of work, the growing precariousness of work is matched by a growing intensification and extensification of work. So, people working harder on the one hand -work becomes intensified and much more concentrated- but at the same time, work is reaching into more areas of our lives. Many groups of digital workers, are on call constantly and desperately attempting to control their burgeoning workloads at the expense of their private time and activities. And so, there's a price that comes with all this.

Our colleagues Rafnsdottir and Juliusdottir in Iceland, looked at online workers from home. And they found that, as we know, working online from home is one method by which women professionals are invited to improve their work-life balance. But it's palpably the cause in fact, as much as the solution to overwork, so it's this always on expectation that's made of these digital workers generating huge individual stress and guilt, we're all very anxious now because we feel stress and guilt about what we're not achieving, the messages we're not dealing with the emails we're not dealing with and can't get to. And the impact upon family life and families, family relationships, households and so on, is a massive one, because people feel themselves highly conflicted between their work and their family relationships.

And this is all taking place in the teeth of an ideology of rampant individualism. In other words, people feel that this is about their own personal inability to navigate those two worlds rather than a structural problem. And so consequently, people deploy individualized coping strategies for managing what are actually structural

problems. And I give you the example of Sheryl Sandberg's book, published some time ago, *Lean in*, aimed at women working in the IT sector. But, a solution that was saturated with gender messages, but also fundamentally a solution that impressed upon workers that they had to take their own individual measures in order to deal with this.

## **Gendered labour in private time and space**

Now, a lot of digital labor, as we know from our own personal experience is now done in the home. And the home conventionally has been reserved for the performance of domestic and caring labor, for private and personalized pursuits free from the contamination of paid work. Even though, as we know, for women, it's never been synonymous with leisure. But when the home is transformed into a work place of the mobile professional or the self-employed creative freelancer, it becomes the site of these competing forms of labor: physical, administrative, affective, emotional, so that it's not possible any longer to delineate, which is actually work and which isn't. And it's the competition between those different demands that are made on digital workers, the decisions that have to be taken about how to prioritize one area of activity over another and the conflict for time and space that is characteristic of the usual gender dynamics of the domestic sphere. It's so, that's so damaging to individual health and domestic relationships.

So, we have digital labor being moved right into the heart of the home, and the boundaries of paid work and life being dissolved so that the home is now the site of competing forms of labor. And when paid labor starts to make incursions into domestic time, often under the rubric of flexible working, the time of household members becomes an even more contested terrain. So, people in domestic relationships start arguing about the time and whose time is more valuable. So we have tiny fragments of time for paid labor and private pursuits been struggled over, which encapsulates and reinforces the gender power-relations of the household, and the relative valuing of its members' time.

And, it's long been argued, quite rightly in my view, that not all time is equal. And like skill, time is valued differently depending on whose time it is. So, in private and public transactions alike, those with the most power in society, are most able to manage their time and that of other people. Studies of women struggling to manage the different demands on them imposed by their paid employment, their caring responsibilities, and the increasing opportunities afforded by digital technologies to be constantly in touch are numerous. We have legion reports now of time poverty, and not only among working mothers. And all of that, it remains wrapped up largely in a highly ideological notion that work is fun and that therefore it's incursion into private time is unproblematic or even welcome. And Melissa Gregg, again, has written, to say, if labor politics were once premised on the idea of placing limits on work, reducing hours as much as winning rights and benefits, today's iconic workplace settings often aspire to produce an environment actively hostile to the idea of work as laborious. So we have this contradiction between the aspects of work that are pleasurable, or creative or fun, which poses such challenges for us when we want to understand what virtual work is, because that kind of fun does seem to respond to our most basic of human needs to express our creativity through work. But it costs people so dearly and it's so demanding of individualized solutions.

## **Digital work as social reproduction**

Okay, well now I just want to wrap up with a couple of final ideas and one is the idea of digital workers' social reproduction. Social reproduction has been traditionally defined as the unpaid labor which is involved in reproducing the labor force, the maintaining and caring for families, the performing of domestic labor, that kind of thing. Capital depends as much on social reproductive labor as it does on directly productive labor. But in the era of digital work, social reproduction, I think comes to mean something new. First, we have what we're all doing all the time these days, a form of unpaid consumption labor that's done now by us as

consumers and was once done usually by employees. So we have the self-service economy, in which people become transformed from consumers to producers or what Don Tapscott called prosumers. People who are doing their own online banking, their own online shopping, their product research, their ticketing, their travel administration. So the domestic sphere again is becoming the site of greater and greater quantities of both paid production and unpaid consumption labor. And with it, the established association of social reproduction with female labor alone is being redefined, raising the question of how we conceptualize the gendered labor of social reproduction in the future.

But I think it's also entered the process of value creation for capital in another sense, and that is in the personal branding and identity management that we all find ourselves doing. Which particularly if we're on social media, it's the currency of social media use and it's essential in growing areas of paid work. So, professionals and freelancers increasingly have to create employability narratives about themselves, continuously packaging or reproducing themselves or versions of themselves for online consumption. And online freelancing in particular depends fundamentally upon freelancers to effectively market themselves over and over again, in the style of true full-blown entrepreneurs. And we can think now of all this, this work that is often described as life maintenance that we all have to do, which I think takes up more and more of our time so that we are indeed, not only all very anxious now, we're all incredibly busy now.

### **What are the possibilities for collective action?**

So after that slightly disconsolate picture of digital work, what hope is there for and what possibilities are there for collective action as opposed to individualized responses? I think there are some, and I just wanted to offer a few examples. And I'm sure that Sara will tell us a lot more when she speaks. But there are whole examples of groups of workers using social media to organize. And I'm thinking here particularly of groups of workers in China who work in some of the electronics

factories in quite hard and organized working environments, who are nevertheless using WhatsApp groups to do so. The same has been found among Uber drivers and Deliveroo, not drivers but cyclists. Some have used app strikes, in other words, switching off the apps that govern the taking and the performance of orders. They've called for workers to be reclassified as employees. We have the Turkopticon. The Turkopticon is the inversion of the panopticon, the all-seeing thing that looks at all the workers through software. The Turkopticon is an initiative that's been developed in Germany for click workers to use as an online platform to share information about the requesters and the employers who they work for. So that they can call out for example, or expose people who routinely don't pay; people who try to post jobs that are, frankly, unfeasible at exploitative low rates.

In other words, they're using the very technology that is being used against them. We've had conventional walkouts by Google employees in the US, and equally coalitions of labor leaders and community organizers in initiatives like Silicon Valley Rising. So, there are signs of collective action. There are signs of new organizations being formed to represent workers who conventionally have been poorly represented or unrepresented by traditional trade unions who have had great difficulties or unwillingness to organize these kinds of workers. So there are positive signs ahead. And I leave you with a thought that we may see a lot more militancy in the years to come than we've seen so far. Thank you.