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Bridging the Gap between the Gig Economy and Migration Policy

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Executive Summary

Recent technological change has ushered in seismic shifts to labor markets, economies, and migration patterns around the world. One of the most prominent trends has been the rise of platform work and the "gig economy"—that is, work or services mediated through digital platforms and generally performed by independent contractors or freelancers. While data on the prevalence of gig work is patchy, a growing bench of evidence—from the rigorous to the anecdotal—indicates that immigrants are at the core of this growing sector in many economies worldwide. Increased digitalization in North America and Europe has shifted some low-wage work in sectors such as taxi driving and domestic work to online platforms, raising concerns about the macro impacts of such developments on wages and labor standards in sectors where these have long been scrutinized. Meanwhile, in Latin America, many people working for app-based delivery services are migrants and refugees, including sizeable numbers of displaced Venezuelans.

The interdependence of immigration and the gig economy is increasingly becoming clear. Gig work offers fewer barriers to entry than many other types of work and can offer valuable flexibility to new arrivals. Immigrants with limited proficiency in their receiving country's language, an absence of local networks, or difficulties getting foreign-earned degrees or professional credentials recognized often find traditional jobs out of reach. This is especially the case for many people in temporary or limbo status, given that employers may be less willing to absorb the risk of hiring and training employees whose future in a country is uncertain. Gig work, because of its flexible schedule, can also be readily combined with other activities, such as traditional employment, participation in language training, or enrollment in programs to plug gaps in one's education and training. But there are notable trade-offs as well. These include unpredictable earnings, bureaucratic requirements associated with self-employment, limited access to social protection (including sick pay, unemployment assistance, and retirement benefits), few opportunities to develop occupational networks, and a lack of upward mobility.

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These benefits and drawbacks of platform work for migrants were cast into sharp relief by the COVID-19

pandemic. The gig economy became both a survival tool for migrants and other workers who lost jobs, and a way to access essential goods and services for consumers who relied on delivery drivers and gig work shoppers during lockdowns and personal quarantines. But despite growing awareness of the value of such activities, some gig workers (especially, but not exclusively, those with a migrant background) were excluded from fiscal stimulus packages, furlough or temporary social protection measures, and emergency immigration policies, exemplifying the long-standing gray area in which their employment status and entitlements exist.

As governments have grappled with the meteoric rise of the gig economy, migration and migrants have been somewhat of an afterthought. Many governments have focused on how to classify workers, while others have sought to expand eligibility for minimum wages and holiday or sick pay to gig workers. But even where policymakers have sought to think creatively about how to include platform workers in social protection systems, they have largely overlooked key considerations in the migration policy space. For instance, most labor visas are framed around employer–employee relationships, so even someone wishing to enter a country for gig work in a highly paid or shortage sector (such as elder care or information technology) would be ineligible for most visas. Moreover, when employment is a condition for transitions in immigration status (such as in some pandemic-era regularization programs and the post-Brexit "settled status" for EU nationals in the United Kingdom), gig workers often fall through the cracks. As a result, the vulnerabilities of migrant gig workers have become somewhat self-perpetuating, as migrants are more likely to enter this work if they are in a precarious immigration status, and those who do this have fewer opportunities to transition out of this status as a result. Additionally, the absence of regulation, scrutiny, or clear corporate responsibilities related to checking employment authorization can mean some workers float beneath the radar, share gig platform accounts, or fail to fully document their income and entitlements.

To ensure that the rise of the gig economy, and immigrant employment within it, has a positive impact on these workers as well as the societies in which they reside, governments, civil society, and platform companies need to work together to ensure gig workers do not fall through the cracks of integration and social protection systems. Efforts in this vein could include ensuring that immigrant integration programming is accessible and relevant for gig workers, exploring ways to combine gig work with training and credentialing in shortage sectors such as care work, and creating incentives for workers to save for retirement or periods when they are unable to work. There is also a stark need for more research on the intersection of migration and gig work. This includes both broader data collection on the prevalence of the gig economy and migrants within it, but also research on the interaction between the gig economy and broader labor market conditions.

An Afghan doctor driving an Uber as he struggles to get his medical credentials recognized in a new country has long been a social trope. It is now time for these anecdotes to be better scrutinized and their policy implications addressed.

1 Introduction

In the last few years, the gig economy has taken center stage in policy debates around the world. Though it has been a growing fixture of the global economy for more than a decade, it expanded amid pandemic-era lockdowns and economic upheaval. Lockdowns and layoffs, coupled with greater demand for delivery services and flexible schedules, prompted huge increases in participation in the gig economy among immigrant and native-born workers alike. One study estimates that 2.1 million new workers entered the U.S. gig economy in 2020.[1] And a study by the World Bank shows a similar increase in the online gig economy worldwide, catapulted by the pandemic.[2] This growth has sparked debates surrounding gig workers' classification and access to social benefits, but fewer policy conversations have focused on the role that migrants play within the gig economy.

For migrants especially, this period cast the promise and perils of the gig economy into sharp relief. Gig work became a lifeline for furloughed or laid off employees.[3] Consumers turned in droves to on-demand shoppers and delivery drivers to access food and other basic goods during lockdowns or self-quarantine, while media reports began to refer to them as "essential." Yet gig workers and self-employed people sometimes fell through gaps in the generous furlough and unemployment programs introduced in many high-income countries, as did temporary and unauthorized migrants who, if engaged in gig work, may have been doubly disadvantaged. And one-off, pandemic-era regularization programs designed to address the heightened precarity of unauthorized migrants and help meet labor shortages, such as those in Italy and Spain, left out gig workers by requiring employer sponsorship or focusing on specific sectors. As a result, many migrant gig workers faced growing vulnerabilities, a loss of income, or were forced to continue working at the cost of greater COVID-19 exposure.

The pandemic also uncovered longer-standing fissures in government policies at the intersection of migration and gig work. Labor regulations and employment-based immigration policies tend to be designed around traditional employer–employee relationships; for example, it can be harder for gig workers to access permanent status on the basis of their work. The growing use of platform work in middle-income countries, such as by displaced Syrians in the Middle East and Venezuelans in Latin America, has raised questions about whether this type of work mitigates or expounds the vulnerabilities of asylum seekers and refugees, and about the broader impacts on labor standards and formality. And increased mobility and humanitarian protection claims have shone a spotlight on the challenges newcomers face to swiftly accessing (regular) work, uncovering larger trends in how gig work and migrant labor market participation interact in destination countries. Policy debates have focused primarily on whether all gig workers (immigrant and native born alike) should be categorized as employees or self-employed contractors, leaving out broader considerations at the nexus of migration and gig work.

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As high rates of migration persist worldwide and the gig economy shows no signs of slowing down, the time is ripe to examine how immigration and labor systems could be better attuned to this growing form of work, including by strengthening labor standards, supporting immigrants' long-term integration, and reducing workers' vulnerabilities. This policy brief examines the responses of governments around the globe to the rise of the gig economy and migrant employment within it, and how gig economy labor policies and migration policies could be adjusted to benefit migrants, receiving communities, and labor markets. The brief starts with an introduction to the gig economy, who works in it, and some common challenges faced by migrant (and other) gig workers. It then considers key questions at the intersection of gig work and immigration and integration policy, and policy responses in these areas to date. The brief concludes with a set of recommendations for governments and a call for greater research on this fast-evolving phenomenon.

2 What Is the Gig Economy and How Large Is It?

The "gig economy" broadly refers to the matching of providers to customers, typically for one-off or short-term requests, in an array of work arrangements such as freelancing, independent contracting, and consulting.[4] "Platform work" more narrowly refers to types of economic activity that directly connect individual workers to customers via a digital platform.[5] While the most well-known types of platform work are services such as on-demand driving, delivery, and home services (such as those provided by cleaners and health aides), which the International Labor Organization (ILO) defines as occurring via "location-based platforms" in that they require someone physically present to perform the work, platform work also includes remote work through "web-based platforms" (such as translation; legal, financial, and patent services; and design and software development).[6]

The gig economy has grown rapidly, from 142 digital platforms worldwide in 2012 to more than 777 in 2020, counting those that facilitate both remote and location-based work.[7] The highest concentrations of gig workers (both web and location based) are thought to be in the United States (29 percent), India (8 percent), and the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland (5 percent).[8] But data on the gig economy is patchy, and estimates of the prevalence of platform work vary widely. In the United States, for instance, the May 2017 Contingent Workers Supplement to the Current Population Survey (conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau for the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics) found that 1 percent of the U.S. workforce was engaged in work through websites or apps in 2017, while other studies point to a figure closer to 24 percent.[9] Key reasons for this variation include differences in how gig workers are defined (app-based workers versus fixed-term contract workers), whether datasets include only people who earn their primary income from platform work or also those who use it as supplemental income, and a reliance on self-reported data, with individuals defining the scope of their own work in different ways.[10]

Nonetheless, the more recent data that exist indicate that digital labor platforms have grown tremendously since their inception, especially during the pandemic, and become an important feature of work worldwide. The World Bank estimates that 4.4 to 12.5 percent of the labor force worldwide was comprised of online gig workers as of 2021.[11] And a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center that accounted for both full-time and part-time gig work estimated that 16 percent of Americans used gig work to earn money in 2021.[12]

3 Migrants in the Gig Economy

Though worldwide data are unavailable, regional and local studies suggest that immigrants actively participate in the gig economy in advanced and emerging economies, in some cases outpacing native-born workers' participation. Studies covering a wide geographic scope, including a 2022 qualitative study conducted in several cities around the world, have found that migrants are highly represented in location-based platform work.[13] City- and country-specific studies have had similar findings. For example, ethnographic research conducted in Berlin in 2021 found a prevalence of newly arrived migrants performing platform work, typically delivery or transportation services,[14] and research in Ecuador shows a boom in the gig economy, with many of the workers being migrants from other parts of South America.[15]

Each of the locations in these studies has distinct economic and migration dynamics that help explain this potential overrepresentation. This includes differences in the abundance and accessibility of local job opportunities to newcomers, and challenges related to the scale or pace of migrant arrivals, which can affect their labor market integration. In any case, such studies make clear that migrants constitute a notable portion of gig workers in many parts of the world and across varied migration and economic landscapes.

A. *Why Do Migrants Work in the Gig Economy?*

A wide range of factors can contribute to migrants' decision to take up gig work. These may include difficulties finding traditional employment due to having limited host-society language proficiency; a lack of locally recognized credentials; trouble navigating an unfamiliar labor market; discrimination; temporary, limbo, or unauthorized status; and limited social and professional networks. Immigrants have long used self-employment as a way to navigate limited standard employment opportunities in a new society,[16] and platform work is particularly accessible given its low set-up costs and administrative requirements compared to other forms of entrepreneurship. For instance, a study in Berlin found that many migrants are drawn to platform-based work because it has minimal barriers to entry and enables them to quickly become economically independent.[17] The fact that platform work apps are often available in different languages and enable workers to interact with clients without much verbal communication can also make them appealing and accessible.[18]

These platforms' flexibility, incentive structures, and payment schedule can also be attractive. For instance, bonuses or surge pay are common during periods of high demand or off-hours (such as the middle of the night), and these features can draw in newly arrived migrants and other workers willing to absorb hardships to earn more money.[19] For immigrants unable to find work commensurate with their foreign-earned qualifications and professional experience, gig work can be a stepping stone that makes it possible to earn money while plugging gaps in education and training. This is the case in Canada, for example, where some migrant health-care workers perform on-call care work via platforms such as care.com while waiting for their credentials to be recognized.[20] Additionally, for people with child-care responsibilities or who are returning to the workforce after a career break, gig work's flexible hours and location can be useful and, thus, potentially reduce workforce barriers for groups underrepresented in the labor market.

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Gig work may appeal more or less strongly, and for different reasons, to people with different types of immigration status. Most newly arrived labor migrants, by definition, are relatively unlikely to be gig workers since most labor immigration involves an element of employer sponsorship (that is, an employer bringing a migrant to the country for a particular job), and platform companies are not allowed to sponsor contractors or part-time workers. Instead, many migrants who work in the gig economy likely arrive on a different visa type, such as a student or family-sponsored visa, or qualify for or are seeking humanitarian protection, such as refugees and asylum seekers. One study conducted in Berlin found that many migrant gig workers hold working holiday visas (which are usually time-limited and have fewer restrictions), student visas, or other types of EU visas that allow for work authorization and mobility between countries.[21] International students often seek flexible working arrangements and are limited by the terms of their visa to working a certain number of hours per week, both factors that may make platform work appealing (especially in places such as the Netherlands, where gig workers are exempt from the maximum-hour threshold other workers are subject to).[22] Additionally, jobseekers who enter a country via its points-based system (which allows people to immigrate based on having in-demand skills but not necessarily a job offer) could end up working in the gig economy, especially soon after arrival and if they face barriers to labor market access. This points to the need to consider gig work's integration implications, especially as newcomers become longer-standing residents.

For groups with insecure or temporary migration status, gig work may be especially attractive, if not the only option. Individuals with a form of temporary legal status (such as temporary humanitarian protection recipients, asylum seekers waiting for a decision in their case, and refugees awaiting resettlement to another country) may be unsure where they will end up or how long they will stay, and digital labor platforms may make it possible to work despite this uncertainty and when other prospects are scarce. For instance, platforms have been set up to connect displaced Ukrainians with remote tech jobs.[23] It is difficult, of course, to distinguish between migrants and refugees who choose gig work for its flexibility and ease of access from those who would prefer a more stable form of employment but accept it as the best option available, as well as to disentangle migrants' attitudes toward gig work from broader concerns about immigration status and uncertainty about the future. But either way, gig work's accessibility and flexibility appear well-suited to the circumstances of people in short-term and transitional statuses.

B. What Challenges Do Migrant Gig Workers Face?

Many of the challenges faced by migrant gig workers reflect broader challenges with platform work. First, because platform workers are most often classified as self-employed or independent contractors, they are barred from certain benefits and worker protections enjoyed by employees. In an ILO rapid assessment survey conducted in four countries, seven out of ten location-based gig worker respondents did not have access to sick leave or a way to recoup lost earnings in the event of contracting COVID-19, and eight out of ten had to purchase their own personal protective equipment.[24] In many countries including the United States, health insurance is tied to employment contracts, as is sick leave, unemployment insurance, and guaranteed hours off and pay. During the pandemic, some governments took steps to ensure platform workers were covered by unemployment insurance and other benefits, but in some contexts, they fell through the cracks. Some platform companies took steps to mitigate the risks for workers. For example, Uber paid more than $30 million to drivers who contracted the virus and had to quarantine, based on the company's financial assistance policy,[25] and Lyft committed $6.5 million to COVID-19 relief and mitigation efforts such as pay for sick leave and personal protective equipment.[26]

Second, a body of research has highlighted low income, "algorithmic management" (including "nudges" and bonuses or other incentive structures), and a lack of transparency as challenges faced by many location-based platform workers in understanding and predicting their earnings.[27] For instance, a survey conducted by the Economic Policy Institute in the United States found that gig workers often experience low or uncertain wages, and many struggle with bills or rely on food assistance.[28] Recent protests by platform workers in the United Kingdom targeted rising costs associated with the spiraling cost of living (including of fuel and equipment), alongside low incomes.[29] Many of these challenges interact with immigration-related vulnerabilities, for instance if migrants working in the gig economy also face barriers to a country's public welfare programs and services (whether because their immigration status makes them ineligible or because of access challenges, such as language barriers). And for newcomers without access to credit, taking on debt for equipment can be a factor in vulnerability, such as if they end up owing loan sharks or companies.

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Less clear is whether platform work helps or hinders integration, and here there may be opportunities as well as challenges. Some commentators have described the gig economy as a "double-edged sword" for immigrant integration.[30] On the one hand, it can provide rapid access to the labor market, with low barriers to entry and considerable flexibility—features well suited to migrants who want to quickly earn money and become self-sufficient.[31] On the other hand, there are limited opportunities for advancement and upward mobility, since app-based gig work in particular (compared to platform-based consulting) tends to be relatively low-skilled and bring low pay. This creates a risk that some migrants get "stuck" in platform work and become unable to move into jobs that might be more commensurate with their skills and experience.[32] Moreover, the relative isolation of drivers, shoppers, and food delivery workers may delay the process of building social networks with colleagues and acquaintances, or be dehumanizing and commodifying in a way that could exacerbate the sense of alienation and culture shock that newcomers sometimes feel.[33]

In recent years, several platform companies have sought to respond to these concerns and provide access to legal services or training. For instance, drivers for Lyft can take free language courses, with the company paying for Duolingo Premium subscriptions for its drivers in some cities and, in others, partnering with the National Immigration Forum to provide in-person language courses.[34] And in France, Uber partnered with the nongovernmental organization Each One to offer job training programs for refugee and migrant couriers, and after completing the program 31 attendees were offered full-time work at other companies.[35] However, some features of location-based platform work, including independent work, unpredictable demand, and off-hours, can make it ill-suited for language development and upskilling.[36] For example, a new arrival hoping to learn the local language may not have frequent opportunities to practice if they are driving for a rideshare company and minimal communication with customers is needed, and someone hoping to further their education may be unable to attend classes if it means turning down deliveries and, thus, income.

Finally, the distant, fully online relationship between digital platform companies and workers has in some countries raised concerns about whether this is enabling some individuals to avoid scrutiny of their immigration status and work authorization. Many countries have systems to check the work authorization of people in traditional employer–employee relationships, but within the self-employment and contract work sphere, those same oversight mechanisms are more limited (for instance, there are no workplace inspections) and work authorization may not always be required.[37] Many digital platforms require a background check and proof of the right to work (such as a social security or national insurance number),[38] but some researchers have warned that many lack the mechanisms to properly verify work authorization.[39] There have also been some documented cases of migrants who do not have work authorization "renting" a platform account from an existing worker who does.[40] In the United Kingdom, for example, independent contractors for some platforms can lawfully allow "substitutes" onto their accounts, and it is the account holders' responsibility to ensure that the substitute meets all eligibility criteria.[41] Yet, without oversight, this can easily be misused, as highlighted by the death of a 17-year-old boy who died driving a borrowed delivery motorbike for a service that officially requires its workers to be 18 or older.[42] The grey area of accountability for such platforms both makes them prime for fraudulent use by workers and leaves gaps in companies' responsibility.

4 Policy Responses

As governments have grappled with how to design and implement policies in response to the rise of the gig economy, migration-related considerations have not been front of mind. Moreover, the precise nature of the policy challenge varies by context. In many African countries, for instance, where the informal economy is large, research has suggested that the gig economy could provide more consistent employment resulting in more regular wages and opportunities for advancement, though critical gaps in access to social protections remain.[43] In Colombia, the gig economy has provided an important source of work for displaced Venezuelans, given the challenges to accessing other work opportunities and against the backdrop of huge pressures on services and labor markets.[44] Many middle- and low-income countries thus face huge development and migration challenges within which increasing the size of formal work and strengthening social safety nets is just one piece of the puzzle.

In advanced economies, government priorities that may be affected by migrant gig work vary widely, including preventing downward pressure on wages and labor standards, balancing the need to maintain a social safety net with efforts to contain spiraling costs, facilitating immigrant integration, and securing public trust in immigration policies. In practice, however, polices related to migrant gig workers have often been disjointed and ad hoc,[45] in part because this issue spans several policy portfolios. And in many places, migrants' contributions to the economy are often not widely recognized and policies tend to focus on cracking down on violations, such as working without authorization.

Policy issues at the nexus of migration and the gig economy fall into the following categories:

A. Adapting Immigration Systems to a Changing World of Work

Labor immigration systems aim to meet current labor shortages without undermining longer-term productivity and prosperity or broader workforce development. Platform work amplifies this central trade-off in designing labor migration policies. In theory, migrants who take up gig work could help meet low- and high-skilled labor shortages in sectors such as child care and information technology, but gig work could also exacerbate the risks of admitting immigrants to a country, namely the risks of displacing resident workers or contributing to a downward slide in wages. Moreover, many of the checks in place to ensure that labor immigration pathways are not misused and that new entrants do not end up under- or unemployed—from guarantees of a job offer, to workforce inspections—do not apply to platform work. It is therefore unsurprising that governments have excluded platform work from most, if not all, labor visas.

Nonetheless, countries are beginning to experiment with pathways more aligned with emerging and nontraditional labor market trends. For instance, digital nomad visas allow remote workers to enter and live in a country while earning income from an employer or clients elsewhere.[46] Policies that create greater flexibility in immigration systems, some in ways that may apply to gig work, fall into three main categories:

1. **Admission without an employer sponsor.** Employer sponsorship is central to most labor pathways, but in some cases, governments have loosened these requirements to make it easier to admit people with highly sought after skills and thus facilitate local economic development, innovation, or workforce productivity. For example, some countries have introduced job-seeker visas that focus on skills, especially in shortage sectors or for skilled workers.[47] Meanwhile, points-based systems, such as those in Australia and Canada, have long offered pathways to admit highly skilled workers without a job offer. The risk of underemployment is often a concern with such pathways, and it is thus unlikely that governments will explicitly target platform workers. However, if platform work (or certain kinds of it) were to become a major tool for meeting labor shortages in key sectors, such as information technology or care, it could strengthen the case for admitting more people, including gig workers, with particular skills rather than a traditional job offer.[48] This poses the question of whether platform companies could be required to take on greater responsibilities for identifying workers abroad with in-demand skills and/or taking on a role in helping those workers get their credentials recognized, which might place companies in a more traditional employer–employee relationship in a way that could undermine the flexibility of gig work and intensify debates over workers' classification as contractors versus employees.

2. **Admission to facilitate self-employment.** In some circumstances, governments may wish to admit foreign workers with greater flexibility in terms of the types of employment arrangements permitted, such as when seeking to promote innovation around a burgeoning tech cluster where many people may be informally collaborating with one another. Freelance and self-employment visas are available in several countries, though these often have quite stringent criteria. In Germany, for instance, freelancers are required to demonstrate their financial security and that their business will have a positive impact on the economy, including by showing a viable business plan and likely impact on innovation and research.[49] Digital nomad visas, which allow people to work as consultants for companies abroad, offer fewer bureaucratic requirements and greater flexibility for those who can meet the often high income requirements (Dubai, for instance, requires $3,500 per month[50]). But unlike self-employment visas, digital nomad visas require workers' business activities to not be part of the local economy. As the proportion of nontraditional workers across the skill spectrum grows in many labor forces, so too does the case for greater flexibility in how international workers are admitted—both so companies can bring in top talent, but also so countries or localities can compete to have jobs created there rather than elsewhere. Governments may wish to consider short-term, self-employment visas or allowing companies to bring in seasonal workers as contractors rather than full employees in sectors where this is common practice, such as construction, however they will have to balance the need for greater

flexibility in changing labor markets with the risks of misuse.

3. **Flexibility within other visa categories.** Some other visa categories, such as post-graduate work visas and working holiday visas, offer their holders time-limited opportunities to perform platform work abroad, since they tend to have few requirements. For example, working study visas, which allow students to work while completing their studies, have been used by some students to gain employment through platform work, often because they are unable to find traditional work.[51] But while platform work may offer useful flexibility for people wishing to experience a new country on a short-term basis and find easy access to work, working holiday visas have been associated with exploitation in some cases where migrants feel pressed to accept substandard labor conditions to fulfil the requirements for a visa renewal. Thus, concerns have been raised about how these types of contingent visas combined with the fewer labor regulations inherent to gig work could put migrant workers at a double disadvantage.[52]

Immigration policymakers face the challenge of ensuring policy interventions meet current labor shortages, protect local workers, and prevent exploitation, while also shoring up long-term productivity and growth. As nontraditional work grows, they will have to scrutinize whether traditional labor immigration pathways based on employer–employee relationships can deliver on these overarching goals. For instance, a growing use of digital labor platforms may point to the need for more flexibility for people on freelance contracts or working remotely, but it is likely that such pathways will need to maintain skills or income requirements to prevent abuse and public backlash. More broadly, governments may need to integrate analysis of platform work into the existing economic and workforce projection systems that underpin immigration policy decisions.

B. *Supporting Integration and Upward Mobility*

Since most immigrants working in a country are likely to have come through other, non-labor pathways (such as family-based and humanitarian channels), the main policy challenge may therefore relate to integration, rather than immigration, policy. Major challenges include ensuring that migrants and refugees can build skills over time and that they can get previously acquired skills and work experience recognized, so that they can eventually move upward in their occupations.

Due to concerns about integration, several European countries have required or encouraged newly arrived refugees and certain categories of family migrants to participate in introduction programs, which can be time consuming and delay access to the labor market but may ultimately give newcomers a greater chance at securing work that is similar to what they did in their country of origin.[53] This is in direct contrast to the United States, where refugees are encouraged to quickly find work and where social support structures are more limited, factors that have been associated with better employment rates for refugees but also "brain waste" (also known as underemployment or skill underutilization).[54]

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The flexibility of platform work could offer a way to help address this trade-off, by enabling newcomers to quickly access work while also enrolling in programs to build skills over time.[55] "Bridging programs" are a long-standing example of good practice for supporting the integration and mobility of skilled international workers who lack the qualifications to do the jobs for which they have been trained. These offer immigrants competency- or occupation-related skills training alongside work experience, usually at the position within an occupation or sector that has the lowest skill requirements. A light-touch version of these programs could create partnerships between platform companies, employers seeking to hire workers in sectors such as care or driving, and training companies, either with the employers using platform work as a recruitment ground or platform companies recommending long-standing contractors for bridging programs. However, these programs are costly and not widely available outside of places with regulated labor markets (such as Canada, Germany, and Sweden), and even there they tend to have strict eligibility criteria to avoid raising public concerns. An easier sell could be microlearning—virtual or flexible access to training and upskilling, integration services, or language training for platform workers.

With many efforts to support gig workers' integration and upskilling focusing on digital (not in-person) services, this can leave the question of social integration unresolved. Platform work by definition does not involve a formal workplace—a place where newcomers could learn from colleagues about a country's cultural and social norms. As a result, more responsibility may fall on civil-society groups or governments to support the social and cultural integration process. Moreover, little is known about the integration implications of platform work for the children of gig workers (other than concerns about low and unstable incomes, discussed in Section 3.B.). Governments may wish to focus more directly on building understanding of and mitigating the challenges for families associated with the shift toward more platform work.

C. *Fixing Holes in Social Safety Nets*

There are ongoing discussions about what rights and benefits gig workers in general should be entitled to, relative to other workers. The policy conversation has generally focused on the matter of worker classification as a means to limit competition with regular markets and/or facilitate gig workers' access to social safety mechanisms. However, creative approaches have been introduced by both platform companies and governments that try to strike a balance between securing greater protections for workers and maintaining gig work's flexibility.

In the past several years, a number of city, state, and national governments have taken legal action against digital labor platform companies, arguing that the companies should be treating the workers who earn money through their platforms as employees rather than gig workers, including by providing them the full set of rights and benefits enjoyed by full employees. In January 2024, for instance, the U.S. Department of Labor issued a final rule revising guidance on worker classification as employees versus independent contractors, with the aim of preventing a potential loss of earnings due to employment misclassification.[56] And in March 2024, EU lawmakers adopted a landmark platform work directive, which will set out rules for classifying digital platform workers and opening up access to social benefits and labor protections.[57] Because of the relative newness of these rules, their full effects remain to be seen.

Proponents of worker reclassification argue that employment status does not necessarily mean a lack of flexibility, and most supporters argue that the classification would bring certain worker bargaining protections in addition to access to other social services.[58] Gig companies have generally opposed reclassification, arguing that their business models would need to substantially change to accommodate certain features of employer–employee relationships, such as the need to ensure workers earn the minimum wage and to offer health care and retirement benefits, and that this would raise costs and could ultimately constrain how many people are able to engage in platform work.[59]

It remains unclear who should bear the cost of gaps in social benefits as the first cohorts of migrant platform workers begin to reach retirement, fall sick, or encounter other forms of vulnerability.

Some governments have found creative solutions to guarantee reasonable and proportionate benefits and protections for gig workers, without necessitating a change in status. In March 2022, Chile made changes to its labor code that include incorporating platform workers into public health care and pensions schemes, and mandating that platform companies guarantee workers' earnings at 120 percent of the minimum wage for the time they spend actively working.[60] Meanwhile, in the United Kingdom, Uber drivers have since 2020 been classified as "workers," a pre-existing third classification unique under UK employment law between independent contractors and employees. As workers, drivers earn at a minimum the national living wage for time spent actively working, and they receive holiday pay and pension contributions.[61]

Platform companies, too, have been adjusting their practices in response to increased pressure to extend benefits for workers. In some countries (e.g., in France, Ireland, and the United Kingdom), Deliveroo offers paid sick leave.[62] Swiggy, a major delivery platform in India, offers accident insurance for couriers (and in certain cases, their family members).[63] Uber offers different benefits options depending on the country, including coverage in the event of an accident or injury, paid sick leave, and family leave.[64]

As yet, however, no governments have discussed the intersection of gig work and migration status, and how it might exacerbate existing challenges such as the exclusion of temporary or unauthorized migrants from social safety nets. Gaps in access to public benefits have more commonly been met with policy interventions that try to make platform companies bear the responsibilities of traditional companies, but recent interventions (such as those mentioned above) point to a potential middle path that could achieve support and promote good behavior among platform companies. However, these only scratch the surface. It remains unclear who should bear the cost of gaps in social benefits as the first cohorts of migrant platform workers begin to reach retirement, fall sick, or encounter other forms of vulnerability. Governments and platform companies would do well to collaborate on long-term planning to mitigate challenges and shift from a "head in the sand" approach to a dialogue on burden-sharing.

D. Minding the Gap on Immigration Status Changes

Migrant gig workers may face greater challenges formalizing their immigration status or gaining access to permanent residence due to difficulties meeting income, employment, or other requirements. For instance, EU citizens performing gig work in the United Kingdom have faced barriers to gaining settled status (the permanent residence status for UK-resident EU nationals after Brexit) because of difficulties proving continuous employment or residence.[65] Another example is the public charge rule that was in place in the United States between 2019 and 2022, where noncitizens could be refused permanent residence if they had drawn on Medicaid or food stamps—forms of assistance that gig workers, like other low-income workers, may use. With status application and renewal processes designed around traditional workers, gig workers may inadvertently fall through the cracks and fail to prove eligibility.

Similarly, one-off or ongoing regularization processes to confer immigration status on unauthorized immigrants have sometimes included and sometimes excluded gig workers. In Spain, certain unauthorized immigrants working in any sector, including the gig economy, can qualify for labor *arraigo*, if certain requirements are met, including having worked in the country for six months.[66] Receiving *arraigo* means that, after a year, an immigrant can qualify for a regular residence permit. Colombia, which has received the highest number of displaced Venezuelans, launched a regularization campaign in 2021 to provide regular status and the right to work for millions of Venezuelans within the country—a rather inclusive effort, given eligibility was not contingent on applicants' work history.[67] By contrast, Italy's pandemic-era regularization policy, designed to support migrants' access to health care, excluded large segments of the irregular immigrant population since it was limited to those working in agriculture and home care and had specific documentation and temporal criteria, including requiring employer sponsorship.[68] And even where gig workers may qualify on paper, they may find it harder to prove they meet income or other requirements, especially if there is no clear guidance for officials on how to handle applications by platform workers. For instance, one way to qualify for Germany's "tolerated stay for work" is for irregular migrants and asylum seekers whose claims have been rejected to show evidence of 12 months of continuous work for 20 hours a week or more and to pay social security contributions, which might be hard for platform workers to prove.[69]

While regularization is always a difficult political decision and often highly controversial, governments that choose to adopt such policies should consider how gig workers fit into the picture. Given the high proportion of migrants working in gig work, and gig work's growing role in many economies, governments should interrogate the potential unintended consequences of any documentary or sponsorship requirements for people in nontraditional work.

5 Conclusion

The rise of the gig economy and migrants' prominent role within it have ushered in a new era of debate around the intersection of nontraditional work and mobility. It is clear that migration and the platform economy have become somewhat mutually reinforcing, pointing to a need for policy responses that are similarly joined-up. There is also a need for more research on the opportunities and challenges presented by these growing phenomena. The goal, at a broader level, should be to build migration and economic systems that are responsive to the interests of all segments of a society, including immigrants, receiving communities, and private companies.

The following recommendations can be a starting point for governments to begin the conversation surrounding migrants and the gig economy:

- **Consider the role digital platforms may play in the future of work and align migration pathways.** Some governments have already started expanding and diversifying options for foreign workers to meet economic gaps through nontraditional forms of work, but they have not yet grappled with the role the gig economy could play. Advances in technology, increased digitalization, and changing labor markets have started to shift more sectors and occupations toward platform work. Gig workers are not just delivery and rideshare drivers, but also coders, care workers, and IT specialists. As governments refine immigration policies to reflect their countries' shifting economic needs, they should carefully consider the interconnection of gig work and immigration, including what visa options exist outside of the employer–employee relationship and what flexible work arrangements are permitted. While there is unlikely to be political support for new pathways for lower-wage platform work anytime soon, given concerns about downward pressure on labor standards, governments should seek to track and analyze the role of platform work in shortage sectors. If platform work grows in importance in meeting labor shortages, policymakers may need to consider ways to make labor pathways more flexible.

- **Identify gaps in data collection on the gig economy and measure migrants' participation within it.** Data on gig work (both web and location based) and, particularly, the prevalence of migrant gig workers are sorely lacking, which makes it hard to craft timely, adequate policy responses to this fast-evolving trend. Governments should expand their data collection on nontraditional forms of work, including on the characteristics of people engaged in this type of work (e.g., nationalities, immigration statuses), to identify notable trends. Data collection efforts could also seek to measure the overall impacts of gig work on different economies. With these types of data in hand, policymakers would be better able to build systems flexible enough to respond to changing realities in the world of work, fill gaps in labor markets, and meet migrant workers' integration needs.

- **Commission research on the intersection between migration, the gig economy, and labor standards.** Policy responses by governments have largely been symbolic or reactionary and focused almost exclusively on employment status and social benefits, but amid rising migration and rapid economic transformations, it is important that both the big picture and its nuances be well understood. While a wealth of evidence on the economic impacts of migration indicates a net positive, researchers often caution of the need to attend to the "distributional effects" of low-wage migration, which may negatively affect previous cohorts of immigrants and certain other groups. Fraught public and political debates about platform work point to the need for more rigorous study of the impact of the gig economy on wages and labor standards.

- **Support the integration of migrant gig workers, including through access to education, skill-building, and credentialing.** Disaggregating migrants who *choose* to work in the gig economy for its benefits from those who *have* to because of limited alternatives is near impossible, but well-designed integration measures could help ensure platform work acts a stepping stone and not a trap. Yet to date, important integration challenges related to gig work have largely fallen under the radar of policymakers, including those related to helping immigrants find work commensurate with their credentials and experiences, build language proficiency, and access opportunities for continued education or upskilling. Governments, platform companies, and civil society should seek to collaborate to make sure that gig workers do not fall through the gaps of broader governmental and nongovernmental integration services, such as by designing flexible and tailored training and credentialing services.

- **Think creatively about access to social protection for nontraditional workers.** Though access to social protections has typically been linked to traditional employment, finding mechanisms to uncouple the two could ensure that gig workers still have access to necessary social protections. Looking beyond the worker classification debate and finding other solutions—such as health-care subsidies, pension schemes, and access to fair wages—could maintain the current structure of gig work without stanching on worker benefits. Government efforts to ensure that gig workers have access to an array of social benefits regardless of their employment relationship could be beneficial for companies and workers alike. Platform companies could also provide information and incentives for workers to plan for rainy days, for instance by making it easier for workers to set aside a slice of their earnings as sickness or retirement savings (e.g., by matching their contributions).

In exploring these and other policy questions at the intersection of migration and gig work, policymakers should seek to design systems able to both respond to immediate needs and adapt to future changes in this rapidly evolving space. Doing so will be essential if countries are to move beyond what have, to date, been disjointed, often reactionary policy responses with limited overall impact. While maintaining many of the perks the gig economy offers, including low barriers to entry and scheduling flexibility, future policy should attend to some of its persistent challenges, such as ensuring adequate worker protections and access to social protections. Migration and platform work have both activated public anxieties in recent years, but symbolic "one shot" policies are unlikely to help address this complex, still-unfolding phenomenon. Governments will need to work across portfolios and develop a multifaceted approach to these issues if labor and migration systems are to serve the best interests of migrants, receiving countries, and companies alike.

In exploring these and other policy questions at the intersection of migration and gig work, policymakers should seek to design systems able to both respond to immediate needs and adapt to future changes in this rapidly evolving space.

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