

ARGENTINA

Digital labour platforms in Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area: On Work Conditions and Gender Inequality



What is the effect of app-based platforms for the personal service sector in Argentina? This project explores the labour conditions and performance experienced on the platform by workers like food delivery riders, hail-riding drivers, home cleaners and office repair providers in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area. It examines through a gender lens the extent to which its flexible character influences the incorporation, job retention and the performance of women and men.

CONTEXT

In Argentina, the participation to the platform economy is a recent but rapidly expanding phenomenon. The severe recent economic crisis and its reinforcement with the Covid-19 crisis have been destabilizing to standard work relations, in an environment where informality is widespread and where gender inequalities are experienced across occupations. The high rate of internet connectivity (with coverage among the highest in Latin America) as well as the hardship of the economic conditions experienced in the labour market provide a particularly favorable environment for the expansion of the platform modality.

GOALS

The research partnership between AFD and the Economics Department at the Instituto de Ciencias of the Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento (UNGS) seeks to create some primary qualitative and quantitative data on platforms in Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area.

It explores app-based platforms for the personal service sector, such as the ones for domestic work, office repair services, food delivery and ride-hailing services. The project develops articles inspecting various aspects of the platform economy, characterizing the workers that engage in it, their labour conditions, as well as their perceptions about this type of insertion. It enquires about the levels of flexibility and/or control posed by platforms on the work process, inspecting the relationship with existing labour regulations and its

16/12/2019

Project start
date

16/04/2022

Project end
date



Buenos Aires
Location



Fighting Inequalities ,
Employment , Health and
Social Protection , Gender
Equality
Sectors



53 000 EUR
Financing amount

ONGOING
Status

implications for workers' labour conditions. Moreover, the research identifies the opportunities/obstacles for entry and permanence in the analyzed occupations and the way in which gender restrictions operate.

METHOD

The project is based on a mixed methods' approach, developing its primary qualitative and quantitative data.

In the first phase of the project, a series of in-depth interviews and focus groups is conducted with workers of each occupational group in order to delve deeper into the different dimensions of platform work.

In the second phase of the project, building on the information from the qualitative data collection, an ad-hoc quantitative survey is designed to collect data about workers on the platform to strengthen knowledge on their experience. The survey is based on a non-probabilistic sample with gender quotas per platform, seeking to ensure comparability among occupations and demographic groups. Moreover, thanks to a collaboration with the ILO Country Office for Argentina, the data is inspected jointly with an existing dataset produced by ILO.

RESULTS

Several articles and presentations stem from this fruitful collaboration, with five initial research papers available for download in the AFD repository.

- **The first article investigates whether working through a digital platform increases labour registration in high-informality occupations.** It analyses how labour entry occurs in three selected platform-based occupations in Argentina. Considering the peculiarities of each occupation, it identifies which elements may contribute to a "formalization effect" and how this is experienced by workers. The main results of this working paper show that "formalization" is dependent on several factors: a platform's business model, or the company's interest and need to promote or encourage such process; the pre-existing occupational dynamics in terms of formalization; and general labour market conditions. In the context of an Argentine labour market harmed by a prolonged recession, most transitions to formality via the platform occur to previously unemployed workers who join them. However, given that in many cases unemployment is preceded by stable waged jobs, formalisation promoted by platforms (usually through the figure of the registered independent workers) is often perceived as a setback.
- **The second article explores the challenges posed by regulation of platform labour, based on the case of Argentinean riders.** The article analyses the treatment of three dimensions that tend to be at the centre of riders' own concerns when it comes to the regulation of their occupation. First, the preservation of flexible schedules is found as a strong driver for riders participation into the platform. Second, the continuity of income self-regulation is a very relevant aspect for workers, even though this often implies overworking. Third aspect is an effective access to social protection, found as a major threat for riders' job safety and well-being, and the absence of an occupational hazards insurance for riders stands out as a real barrier for workers.
- **The third article explores how the digitalization of the work relation affects domestic workers in Argentina at the onset of the Covid-19 crisis.** It analyses the use workers do of Zolvers, the only digital platform for domestic service in the country, and it compares what are the differences between jobs that have been taken on the platform and those outside. The working paper argues that the association between domestic service and the platform

economy should be analysed in context: the uberisation of the activity is not a linear and uniform trend, but rather a contextual one. Compared to off-platform jobs in the sector, the article finds significantly higher levels of registration among Zolvers workers. This is particularly relevant since Zolvers' jobs are characterized by few weekly hours, a kind of insertion that has proved most resistant to formalisation policies in the sector. The article delves into the reasons behind these phenomenon, which are tightly related to the platform business model. However, in the context of the Covid-19 crisis, the working paper also shows that registration, although having a protective effect, does not counteract the vulnerability implied by short-hours job positions, whose termination is substantially cheaper than full-time work.

- **The fourth article investigates gender inequalities among platform riders and drivers.** It identifies whether there exist gender gaps in terms of hours and income and what is their magnitude. Moreover, it analyses some possible determinants, including features specific to these occupations. The working paper finds that platforms are facilitating an increase in female participation due to three main factors: the impossibility of finding another job, the impersonal recruiting mechanisms and time flexibility offered by platforms. This trend still implies significant gender gaps. The analysis suggests that the differentiated economic performance of male and female riders and drivers is mainly associated to pre-existing gender inequalities that are reinforced by algorithmic bias in the platform. In particular, the scoring system of platforms tends to reward intensive workloads and participation in the more profitable shifts, such as nights and weekends. This implies important obstacles for women in terms of both their care responsibilities and their need to prevent street insecurity events.
- **The last article delves deeper into female platform drivers' labour market trajectories.** It inspects the profile of female drivers joining the platform in exploring which previous job experiences may have helped them to dare into a male-dominated occupation. Additionally, it reviews how, once in the platform, female drivers juggle between this activity and their socially assigned care responsibilities. The working paper shows that female drivers participation defies the idea that occupations involving driving or circulating in public spaces are inappropriate for women. However, this conquest has strong limits. The working paper finds that the daily efforts to reconcile paid work together with domestic care activities imply negative impacts in terms of earnings levels and health. The situation exposes an omnipresent unequal gender order, which still needs to be systematically questioned and confronted.

The Research Conversation webinar "Digital labour platforms: what challenges and opportunities for Argentina?" has been organized to discuss the results of the research project.



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