4. Working conditions, geography and gender in global crowdwork

Janine Berg and Uma Rani

INTRODUCTION

Crowdwork is low paying and suffers from inefficiencies in design that hurt workers. But while the poor quality of the work is evident for workers in the Global North, many argue that these jobs are a boon for the Global South where wage levels are lower and job prospects are worse. Given more limited job opportunities and the possibility that remote work provides to remain in one’s country of origin, it is not surprising that a number of developing country governments and some international agencies are providing assistance to support workers to pursue crowdwork. But is crowdwork the ‘silver bullet’ that some suggest and which the Global South hopes for? This chapter makes a comparison of working conditions of crowdworkers in the Global South and Global North drawing on findings from a survey undertaken by the International Labour Office (ILO).

In 2015 and 2017, the ILO conducted a survey on five leading, English-language microtask platforms: Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT), Clickworker, Crowdflower (since renamed Appen), Microworker and Prolific to learn more about workers’ experience. The survey was first posted in 2015 on the AMT and Crowdflower platforms for respondents to fill out and then reposted (with some adjustments) in 2017, on these two platforms as well as Clickworker, Microworker and Prolific. The final clean sample included approximately 3,500 completed questionnaires from workers present in 75 countries, although this chapter’s analysis is based on a sample of 3,189 workers. The survey responses provide information on the socio-demographic characteristics of the workers, their reasons for performing crowdwork, their financial situation, their working conditions, as well as the different work experiences of the crowdworkers.

As the focus of the analysis is to explain job quality and work motivations among workers in the Global South and Global North, we disaggregate findings between the Global North and the Global South as well as by sex, when
relevant. For the purpose of this chapter, we define workers in the Global North as workers from North America and Western Europe, and those from the Global South as workers living in Latin America, Africa, Asia, as well as the transition countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In total, workers from the Global South comprised 30 per cent of the sample (970 individuals). Of the total sample, 38 per cent were women, and although among workers in the Global South the proportion of women dropped to one in five, it was nearly three in five in the Global North.

Digital labour platforms comprise an array of different work modalities that have the common feature of having work mediated through a digital platform, either a website or app. In addition, most work on digital labour platforms, whether it is an Uber driver in San Francisco, a computer programmer in Ukraine, or an audio transcriptionist in the Philippines, is subject to different sorts of algorithmic management, either regarding how the work is assigned, its monitoring or supervision, or how workers are disciplined. These algorithmic decision-making processes are nonetheless reliant on humans – initially in their design – but also in the data provided to the platforms, especially through client reviews.

Web-based digital labour platforms are cross-border – neither the client, customer nor the worker need to live in the same locality. The borderless nature of the internet means that workers from around the world can provide services through these platforms, so long as they have access to reliable internet connection and the terms of service of the platform, or the clients posting tasks, allow them to work. As such, digital work constitutes a ‘planetary labour market’ (Graham and Anwar 2018). However, as Mark Graham and Amir Anwar (2018) explain, the borderless nature of the work does not mean that geography disappears, but rather that the work is organized to take advantage of this global reach, allowing not only the possibility of getting work done at any time of the day, but also at a lower overall cost.

Though digital labour markets are the latest manifestation in a decades’ long shift of outsourcing across borders, there are important differences with traditional business process outsourcing (BPO) as outsourcing is not to enterprises in the Global South, but rather to individuals (Berg et al. 2021). Digital platforms have, for the most part, classified these workers as independent contractors, thus they are not privy to the protections and benefits that an employee working in a BPO firm would receive, even if the work they are doing is for a client located abroad (James and Vira 2012). This poses problems in ensuring adequate social and labour protection for workers, but also in applying local regulations. Moreover, should a worker want to contest his/her classification in court, or should a dispute arise between the parties that would merit recourse to the courts, the parties are likely to face ‘conflict of law’ issues in deciding upon the proper jurisdiction to bring forth the case (Cherry 2019).
Crowdworking has become a global phenomenon, with workers represented from most countries of the world (Berg et al. 2018; Graham et al. 2017). Because of the ability to perform the work ‘anytime, anywhere’, crowdwork can create income and employment opportunities in regions where local economies are stagnant (Nickerson 2014; Roy et al. 2013; Narula et al. 2011), or for workers, who for personal circumstances are not able to access traditional employment opportunities. This attribute has led some commentators to refer to crowdwork as a ‘silver bullet’ in the fight against poverty (Schriner and Oerther 2014), and, indeed, several UN agencies, including the World Food Programme, have developed programmes to train refugees to perform ‘lower-skilled, labor-intensive digital services, such as data entry, data cleaning, photo editing, and image annotation’ with the hope of accessing income-generating opportunities on crowdworking platforms.5

Schriner and Oerther (2014), studying rural Kenya, document how workers engaged in crowdwork were able to utilize their incomes to set up small businesses and invest in education, likely improving their potential future earnings. Sundararajan (2016) advocates the development potential of crowdworking platforms as they create opportunities for non-specialists to access the labour market, while improving computer literacy. As a result, there is an underlying notion that crowdwork can provide gainful employment opportunities for developing country workers who have limited prospects. Given this, it is not surprising that policymakers from countries as diverse as the Philippines, Nigeria and Malaysia have sought to benefit from crowdwork by investing in digital infrastructure and programmes to train workers to perform tasks such as content access, search engine optimization and content creation on crowdworking platforms (King-Dejardin 2020; Graham et al. 2017; Kuek et al. 2015; Schriner and Oerther 2014). In pursuing such a strategy, it is necessary to ascertain both the quality of the jobs being created, but also the longer-term potential for growth of the individual workers’ skill and career prospects as well as other possible linkages with the local economy.

This chapter assesses the working conditions of workers on five microtask platforms based on the results of the ILO survey discussed above, disaggregating by Global North and Global South as well as by sex. The section that follows provides background information on the socio-demographic characteristics of the survey respondents. This is followed by a section on working conditions, which reveals findings with respect to remuneration, the availability of work and the workers’ access to social protection.
WORKING ON CROWDWORKING PLATFORMS: MOTIVATIONS AND WORK HISTORIES

In order to work on the microtask crowdworking sites, workers need to be digitally literate, have access to the internet, a computer to work on, and reasonable levels of English. It is thus not surprising that overall educational levels in our sample are high.

Figure 4.1 Levels of education, by Global North/Global South and sex

Among workers in the Global North, nearly half (48 per cent) have a college degree or higher, and 29 per cent have some college education. In the Global South, education levels are even higher, with 72 per cent holding a college or post-graduate degree (Figure 4.1, Panel A). The educational profiles in the Global South are even more impressive when the data are further disaggregated by discipline: about 57 per cent of the workers are specialized in science and technology (12 per cent in medicine and natural sciences, 23 per cent in engineering and 22 per cent in IT and computers). Across gender, a higher proportion of women workers had a college or post-graduate degree (78 per cent) compared to men (71 per cent) in the Global South, while there were no differences in the proportion of workers having higher education in the Global North (Figure 4.1, Panel B).

The survey asked workers about their reasons for undertaking crowdwork; if workers responded with several reasons, they were asked to identify the most important one. For one-third of the workers in 2017, the most important reason for performing crowdwork was to ‘complement pay from other jobs’, while for just over one-fifth it was because they ‘prefer to work from home’. Disaggregating by Global North/Global South and male/female, we see that there is a four percentage-point difference between men and women both in the Global North and Global South, who state complementing pay as their primary reason (Global North: men, 39 per cent, women 35 per cent; Global South: men 22 per cent, women 18 per cent) (Figure 4.2). In both the Global North and the Global South, women reported more frequently than men that they crowdworked because they preferred to, or could only, work from home. In particular, the response ‘can only work from home’ had a ten percentage-point difference between women and men in the Global South (17 per cent for women versus 7 per cent for men) and an eight percentage-point difference in the Global North (13 per cent for women versus 5 per cent for men). This response can be attributed to the disproportionate shouldering of caregiving responsibilities by women across the world, regardless of the level of economic development.6 When asked about main activity prior to beginning crowdwork, nearly 30 per cent of women reported caregiving as their main activity, compared with just 10 per cent of men.

Women and men from the Global South were also more likely to indicate that the pay was better than other jobs available. This response was particularly prominent among workers from Latin America, where 22 per cent of workers selected this reason as their principal motivation, many of whom were living in Venezuela.

Figure 4.2  Most important reason for performing crowdwork, by Global North/Global South and sex
Figure 4.3 Reasons for not engaging in more crowdwork, by Global North/Global South and sex (percentage)

The survey asked about the financial situation of the workers and their households. Among workers in the Global North, 84 per cent reported that their household income was sufficient to cover their basic expenses compared with 75 per cent of workers in the Global South. While most workers could meet their basic needs, many were seeking additional sources of income either from crowdwork or non-crowdwork activities. About 86 per cent of workers from the Global North in our sample reported that they would like to do more crowdwork; in the Global South, the proportions were higher, with 93 per cent stating they would like to do more crowdwork. Roughly two-thirds (63 per cent in the Global North, 67 per cent in the Global South) stated that they would also like to engage in more non-crowdwork activities. When asked why they were not doing more crowdwork, over 50 per cent of the workers stated that it was because there was not enough work available. This points to an excess supply of labour on crowdworking sites, a finding documented in other studies of the platform economy. For example, Graham and Anwar (2018) estimated that only 7 per cent of workers registered on the Upwork platform have succeeded in securing a job on the platform. They calculate an ‘oversupply of labour’ percentage of over 90 per cent for most countries. This oversupply of labour is endemic to digital platform work given that most platforms do not limit the number of workers that can enrol. As more workers come to learn about crowdworking – especially if it is being advertised through government-sponsored training programmes – future income opportunities are likely to worsen.

2 WORKING CONDITIONS OF CROWDWORKERS: HOW WELL DO WORKERS FARE?

Crowdwork is appealing to workers as it allows the possibility to work from home as well as to combine the work with other work and non-work activities. It is also a new source of employment, which is of particular importance to countries that are experiencing economic and political crises, such as Venezuela, or where, in general, job and income-earning opportunities are scarce. But when assessing working conditions, it is important to keep in mind that the work on these platforms is, for the most part, being done by the well-educated of these societies, particularly in the Global South. Moreover, as mentioned previously, the workers are not hired as employees, but rather they work as independent contractors and thus do not receive benefits typically associated with the employment relationship, such as annual or sick leave, or social security protection. Given this, in this section we examine the working conditions of crowdworkers in the Global South and Global North across gender, focusing on remuneration, availability of work, working time and social protection.
2.1 Remuneration

The two ILO surveys conducted in 2015 and 2017 captured different aspects of the working conditions of the workers engaged on microtask platforms. To assess the remuneration of the workers, the surveys captured the time spent by crowdworkers doing paid work (i.e. actual work tasks that the crowdworker was paid for) and unpaid work (searching for tasks, taking unpaid qualification tests or screening tests in order to qualify for the work, communicating with requesters or clients, leaving reviews, etc.). It is important to consider unpaid work in the analysis as it constitutes approximately one-quarter of the workers’ time, and the paid work cannot happen without it. In addition to revealing information on earnings from crowdwork, the survey also captured income earned from other jobs in a typical week, which permits an understanding of overall hourly earnings.

Table 4.1 presents the hourly earnings, for both paid work and paid and unpaid work, by gender, and across the Global South and Global North at nominal values and PPP (purchasing power parity) adjusted. Overall, the average hourly nominal earnings from crowdwork for the workers in the Global North for both paid (US$5.8), and paid and unpaid work (US$4.3), was higher than that of workers in the Global South (US$2.8 for paid work and US$2.1 for paid and unpaid work). Moreover, the distribution of earnings was skewed low, such that in both the Global North and South more than 60 per cent of the workers earned less than the mean earnings. In both the Global North and South, women earned less than men, which may at first appear surprising given that payment is by piece and most tasks are not allocated based on sex. Nevertheless, further analysis of the data reveals that the earnings gap between men and women can largely be explained by the individual characteristics of the worker (crowdworking experience and educational level) and the domestic responsibilities that women shoulder (Adams and Berg 2017). The survey revealed how women choose to crowdwork as it allows them to earn an income yet still tend to unpaid care responsibilities.

In the Global North, the average hourly earnings of the workers from crowdwork were low, often below the local minimum wage. The federal minimum wage of the United States (US) is US$7.25, yet 48 per cent of the American workers on the Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT) platform earned less than this minimum if just paid work is taken into consideration; increasing to 64 per cent when unpaid work is taken into account. This finding is further confirmed in a study by Hara et al. (2018), in which the activities of approximately 2,500 workers on the AMT platform were tracked via a plug-in over a two-year period. The study found that taking into account unpaid work, the median hourly wage was around US$2 per hour, and the average mean wages of workers was US$3.13 per hour. The study further found that only 4 per
cent of the workers earned above US$7.25 per hour, raising concerns about sub-minimum wages (Hara et al. 2018).

Similarly, in Germany the minimum wage was set at Euros 8.84 in 2017, which is equivalent to US$9, which is advertised as the average earnings that a worker can earn on the German platform, Clickworker. However, the ILO findings show that the average hourly earnings among the survey respondents on Clickworker was US$4.6, which is roughly half that of the minimum wage; only 11 per cent of the survey respondents on this platform earned US$9 or more per hour for paid work, and the proportion fell to 7 per cent when both paid and unpaid work were accounted for.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 4.1</th>
<th>Hourly earnings of crowdworkers, by sex and Global North and South (US$) (nominal and PPP adjusted rates)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Paid work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nominal ($)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global North</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global South</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data trimmed at 1 and 99 per cent by region.

Some of the differences in hourly earnings between the Global South and North are due to the nature of tasks and platforms that workers from different regions can access. Among the survey respondents, most of the workers in the Global North were performing tasks on AMT, Clickworker and Prolific which included the better-paid activities of content writing, content creation, and taking surveys and participating in experiments. In contrast, workers from the Global South (with the exception of Indians on the AMT platform) worked on the CrowdFlower (since renamed Appen) and Microworkers platforms, performing low-paying tasks such as data collection, categorization and content access. Prolific, which primarily posts surveys from the academic community, endorses ‘ethical rewards’, requesting researchers to reward participants with at least US$6.5 per hour; however, its pool of crowdworkers is primarily from Europe and North America.

In addition, many platforms offer design features that allow clients to restrict access to their task according to various criteria, including sex, or country of residence of the worker. As a result, platforms are able to exploit the geographies of space, and outsource different types of tasks to different
regions, contributing to earning differentials among workers. For instance, on AMT the difference in the hourly earnings between American (US$6.90) and Indian (US$2.48) workers is substantial (Rani and Furrer 2019). This is largely because some of the better-paying tasks on the AMT platform, such as content writing, content creation and editing, are often only available to American workers, while low-paying tasks, such as data collection and content access, are left to Indian workers. Similar findings of restricting access to certain tasks based on nationality and gender were also observed in other platforms, such as oDesk (now Upwork) (Beerepoot and Lambregts 2015), Microworkers (Hirth et al. 2011) and Nubelo (now Freelancer) (Galperin and Greppi 2017). In addition, the amount received is often lower than what is stated on the platform, as the workers pay transaction fees for withdrawing the money or they lose money in exchange rate conversion.

Nevertheless, it is also true that when hourly earnings are adjusted for purchasing power parity (PPP), then the differences between regions reverses. Table 4.1 presents PPP-adjusted hourly earnings for both paid work and unpaid work. Using PPP, the disparity in average hourly earnings is flipped, with workers in the Global South earning US$6.4 per hour compared to US$4.8 per hour in the Global North for both paid and unpaid work. Beerepoot and Lambregts (2015) find a similar trend when earnings were adjusted for PPP for workers in developing and advanced countries performing tasks on oDesk. As observed with nominal values, women in both the Global North and South earned less than men after PPP adjustments. The PPP differential works to the advantage of the platforms (and their clients), allowing them more easily to outsource tasks to lower-wage countries where low payment levels are more likely to be accepted.

While the PPP-adjusted higher earnings of Global South workers when compared with Global North workers may give the impression that these jobs are paying well, it is important to keep in mind that relative to the high education levels and local labour market earnings prospects, the wages are still relatively low, even in the Global South. In a related study, the earnings of Indian microtask workers with workers in the Indian local labour market is compared (ILO 2021). The study finds that offline workers who performed similar tasks in the local labour market (US$4.4) earned 1.5 times more than online microtask workers (US$2.6).

For many of the croworkers, both in the Global North (55 per cent) and the Global South (40 per cent), crowwork is not their only job; rather they are dependent on crowwork as a secondary source of income, often because they do not have sufficient earnings from their main job. In the overall sample, 16 per cent of the workers are engaged in regular employment, 31 per cent of the workers have temporary employment or work on a part-time basis and 16 per cent of the workers are self-employed. Overall, the hourly pay from other jobs
was three times higher in the Global North (US$18.3) compared to the Global South (US$5.3). Male employees in ‘regular’ or standard employment in the Global North had higher average earnings in the Global North (US$27.3) compared to other work statuses, while female self-employed in the Global South had higher average earnings (US$9.7) (Table 4.2). For many of these workers, crowdwork provided additional incomes to support their livelihoods.

Table 4.2 Hourly pay in other jobs, by work status, sex and Global North and South (US$)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Global North</th>
<th></th>
<th>Global South</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All workers</td>
<td>20.9</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>18.3</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary employment</td>
<td>16.8</td>
<td>13.7</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-employed</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>17.7</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regular employment</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>17.5</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Data trimmed at 1 and 99 per cent by region.

2.2 Availability of Work

A high proportion of workers in both the Global North and Global South expressed that they have the desire to do more crowdwork, but there is not sufficient work available to perform. This apart, it is also difficult for crowdworkers to secure a desirable and well-paying task due to high level of competition for tasks from the global labour force (Beerepoot and Lambregts 2015; Berg et al. 2018). This often leads to a situation whereby crowdworkers have to constantly search for tasks. On some platforms such as AMT, workers use scripts that enable them to sort tasks and more easily identify those that are well-paying, without losing time to reload their web browser. However, such strategies cannot be adopted on all platforms as many of the platforms block the use of such scripts. As a result, many crowdworkers also piece together work by working on multiple microtask platforms so that they have sufficient work and income. The proportion of workers working on multiple platforms was higher in the Global North (46 per cent) compared to the Global South (40 per cent).

On average, workers in the Global South worked for more hours per week when compared to the workers from the Global North. This was true of workers who did crowdwork as a secondary job (31.9 hours in the Global
South compared with 23.4 hours in the Global North), and those that did crowdwork as their main job (34.6 hours in the Global South compared with 23.4 hours in the Global North (see Table 4.3).

Table 4.3  Intensity of time spent on crowdwork, main job versus secondary job, Global North and South

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Global North</th>
<th>Global South</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of hours/week</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… doing paid CW</td>
<td>20.0</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… doing unpaid CW</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total CW</td>
<td>27.4</td>
<td>34.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Share of individuals (%) doing CW …</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… in the morning (5am–12pm)</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>58.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… in the afternoon (12pm–6pm)</td>
<td>76.2</td>
<td>51.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… in the evening (6pm–10am)</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>71.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… in the night (10pm–5am)</td>
<td>37.3</td>
<td>55.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>… on 6 or 7 days per week</td>
<td>53.2</td>
<td>67.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


An important distinction in the working conditions between workers in the Global North and the Global South concerns working time arrangements and asocial hours. As workers accept tasks as they are posted, they are required to adapt to the temporal distribution of jobs (O’Neill 2018). Depending upon their location, tasks might be posted at different times of the day. The survey findings showed that a higher proportion of workers in the Global South (56 per cent) worked during the night (10 pm to 5 am) compared to only 37 per cent of the workers in the Global North (Table 4.3). This is because many clients on the platforms are located in the US, and post their tasks during their business hours, which is evening or night-time in some parts of the Global South (such as Asia or CEE). Similarly, a high proportion of crowdworkers worked for six or seven days a week in the Global South (68 per cent) compared to the Global North (53 per cent). The pressure to earn sufficient incomes through crowdwork forces many of these workers to be available during asocial hours, with negative consequences for work-life balance.
2.3 Social Protection

Another challenge that presents itself in the context of platform economy is access to social protection. The 2017 survey findings reveal that overall only one-third of the crowdworkers surveyed on microtask platforms were covered by any form of social insurance (Berg et al. 2018). In the Global North, about 60 per cent of the workers for which crowdwork was their main job were covered by health insurance and 20 per cent had a pension and retirement plan. Not surprisingly, workers for whom crowdwork was a secondary job had a higher proportion of insurance coverage, reflecting the likelihood that they received some of these benefits through their main job (Table 4.4). In the Global South, there is a similar pattern of higher coverage among those for whom crowdwork is a secondary job. There were no gender differences in the proportion of workers covered by health insurance in the Global North, whereas in the Global South women had greater health insurance coverage. More men than woman had a pension/retirement plan in the Global North; this pattern is not observed in the Global South. In both the Global South and North, it is likely that for those whom crowdwork was their main source of income, many are receiving insurance coverage from their spouses. In both cases, the work they are doing on crowdwork platforms is not directly contributing to social protection coverage, with important consequences for those workers who do not have access to coverage through other sources, be it another job, a spouse or a government-funded, non-contributory system. For these reasons, there are risks from crowdwork with respect to individual coverage but also the long-term sustainability of social security systems, regardless of the place of work.

Table 4.4 Access to various forms of social security benefits (share of crowdworkers covered), by sex and Global North/South

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Health insurance</th>
<th></th>
<th>Pension/retirement plan</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Crowdwork is main job</td>
<td>Crowdwork is secondary job</td>
<td>Crowdwork is main job</td>
<td>Crowdwork is secondary job</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global North</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>59.2</td>
<td>68.1</td>
<td>21.8</td>
<td>34.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>60.1</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>18.4</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>59.7</td>
<td>66.8</td>
<td>20.2</td>
<td>32.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Global South</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>44.3</td>
<td>51.5</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>29.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CONCLUSIONS

The development of information and communication technologies has enabled the establishment of digital labour platforms as a business model that allows enterprises to outsource work to ‘independent’ workers located across the world. While this development has allowed workers to easily access income-earning tasks, and the flexibility to complete these tasks from their home, the design of the platforms, the competition among workers for the jobs and the lack of regulation translate into low earnings for what is a relatively well-educated labour force.

Our analysis of the ILO survey of nearly 3,200 crowdworkers reveals that while there are important similarities for workers across the world, there are also important differences depending on whether the worker is based in the Global North or Global South, as well as the sex of the worker. Women are equally represented on the microtask platforms in the Global North, but are less well-represented in the Global South. However, regardless of geography, many women engage in platform work as a means to earn income while they carry out unpaid care work in the home. This extra burden affects their earnings, resulting in lower pay when compared with men.

A higher proportion of workers from the Global South had education in science and technology fields, compared to those in the Global North, yet workers from the Global North had higher earnings compared to workers from the Global South, due to the nature of tasks they performed. Workers from the Global South faced certain restrictions in performing some well-paid tasks, leaving them with the more routine and less financially attractive jobs of data annotation and data cleaning. However, when the earnings were adjusted for PPP, the workers from the Global South had higher earnings compared to their counterparts in the Global North, though in some cases, such as India, the pay was still lower than similar jobs in the local labour market. Moreover, given their higher educational levels, the incomes earned, even once adjusted for PPP, are not commensurate with the level of education; moreover, it raises certain developmental questions about whether this is the best use of skilled labour.
The differentials in cost-of-living work to the advantage of the platforms (and their clients) who can outsource tasks to lower-wage countries, where there is an oversupply of labour and fierce competition among workers for the available tasks. Because of time differences, workers in the Global South were more likely to work asocial hours, and many workers worked seven days a week, affecting their work-life balance.

Currently, the platforms are not subject to labour and social security laws, or collective agreements, allowing an absence of minimum standards with respect to working hours, leave, minimum pay, social security and other benefits. And with an unfettered supply of labour, it is not surprising that earnings are low, or that workers spend substantial amounts of time searching for acceptable work. Given the problems of unemployment, underemployment and precarity in labour markets in the Global South (and increasingly in the Global North), it is understandable that governments, particularly in developing countries, might view platform work as a possible panacea. But in advocating such an approach it is important to appreciate the nature of the work, the benefits and risks to workers and the consequences of leaving this global labour market unregulated. As more workers learn of these platforms, the prospects of improving this situation, in the absence of regulation, are slim.

NOTES

1. Janine Berg and Uma Rani are senior economists in the International Labour Office, Geneva, Switzerland. The views expressed in this chapter are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of the International Labour Organization. We would like to thank Marianne Furrer for excellent research assistance.

2. Workers were compensated for the task of completing the survey. For more details on the survey and the results see Berg (2016) and Berg et al. (2018).

3. This is because the 2015 survey was broken into two parts and we only include workers who filled out both parts of the survey.

4. For a list of countries included in the ILO survey see Berg et al. (2018).

5. See: https://innovation.wfp.org/project/empact

6. In 2018, women dedicated 4 hours and 25 minutes per day on unpaid care work compared with 1 hour and 23 minutes for men (3.2 times more hours than men). The unpaid care work gap exists in all countries of the world, though it is more pronounced in some regions than others (women spent 4.7 times more hours than men in the Arab States compared with 1.7 times more hours in the Americas) (ILO 2018).

7. Adams and Berg (2017) analyse the gender wage gap among American AMT workers and find a gap at the lower end of the wage distribution. The authors attribute this gap to the unpaid care responsibilities that women are doing as they crowdwork which cause interruptions in their work and lead them to favour short tasks that are less well-paid.
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