

Digital Policy Hub – Working Paper

# Technology, Bodies and Emotions: Researching Gendered Gig Work

**Laila Mourad**

Summer 2024 cohort

## About the Hub

The Digital Policy Hub at CIGI is a collaborative space for emerging scholars and innovative thinkers from the social, natural and applied sciences. It provides opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students and post-doctoral and visiting fellows to share and develop research on the rapid evolution and governance of transformative technologies. The Hub is founded on transdisciplinary approaches that seek to increase understanding of the socio-economic and technological impacts of digitalization and improve the quality and relevance of related research. Core research areas include data, economy and society; artificial intelligence; outer space; digitalization, security and democracy; and the environment and natural resources.

The Digital Policy Hub working papers are the product of research related to the Hub's identified themes prepared by participants during their fellowship.

## Partners

Thank you to Mitacs for its partnership and support of Digital Policy Hub fellows through the Accelerate program. We would also like to acknowledge the many universities, governments and private sector partners for their involvement allowing CIGI to offer this holistic research environment.



## About CIGI

The Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) is an independent, non-partisan think tank whose peer-reviewed research and trusted analysis influence policy makers to innovate. Our global network of multidisciplinary researchers and strategic partnerships provide policy solutions for the digital era with one goal: to improve people's lives everywhere. Headquartered in Waterloo, Canada, CIGI has received support from the Government of Canada, the Government of Ontario and founder Jim Balsillie.

Copyright © 2024 by Laila Mourad.

The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Centre for International Governance Innovation or its Board of Directors.

Centre for International Governance Innovation and CIGI are registered trademarks.

67 Erb Street West  
Waterloo, ON, Canada N2L 6C2  
[www.cigionline.org](http://www.cigionline.org)

## Key Points

- Recent trends in the emerging global gig economy highlight the growing prevalence of technology, its role in economic development and its impact on women's work and labour market transformations.
- Macro-level policy analysis of the intersections of technology, gender and labour focuses on potential problems and solutions for navigating access and knowledge barriers, developing technical skills and building capacity for women.
- This working paper demonstrates how the Gig Economies Living Lab (GELL) model can be applied as a framework to conduct policy research through a critical feminist approach that centres the micro-level everyday experiences of workers in the gig economy. The author examines the intersection of technology with individuals' daily work and life practices in relation to their bodies and emotions.
- This analysis is based on interviews conducted with 25 home-based women gig workers in the emerging food tech economy in Egypt. Through this research, the dynamic relationalities between humans and technology, as well as the intersection of bodies and emotions with notions of economic agency and productivity, are explored.
- Integrating workers' emotions and bodies in the analysis of gig work creates opportunities for policy research to explore the purpose, productivity and performance of work beyond material and structural factors. This means including non-material and relational factors that shape and impact workers' choices, opportunities and experiences within the digital economy.

# Introduction

Innovations in technology have paved the way for disruptive economic practices that have resulted in global labour market transformations. In the context of the Southwest Asia and North Africa (SWANA) region,<sup>1</sup> research and policy reports have addressed the potential for technology, entrepreneurship and the digitization of work to enhance women's empowerment and economic participation (Assi and Marcati 2020; Olmsted, Arja and Copland 2021). In the case of Egypt, research on women's entrepreneurship has shown that more than 50 percent of women's enterprises are home-based, many of them emerging and existing within the informal economy and predominantly including small-scale trading enterprises such as home-based food vending (Carr, Alter Chen and Tate 2000; Nasr 2010; Rizk and Rashed 2019). While there is no exact figure for the number of home-based enterprises using technology, current data and policy reports demonstrate the growing digitization and infiltration of technology in the Egyptian economy, as well as the continuous increase in mobile and internet usage across the population (as of 2021, 57.28 percent of the population is using the internet) (AlAzzawi 2021; Kamel 2021). These trends highlight the growing prevalence of technology, particularly its role in economic development and its impact on women's work and labour market transformations.

Previous policy research has hitherto focused on macro-level structural issues that gig workers experience, including protection and access barriers; power hierarchies

---

<sup>1</sup> The SWANA region is popularly known as the Middle East.

built on gender, race, class and culture; and the need for further collaboration among governments, corporations, international organizations and other stakeholders in the digital economy (Mourad 2024). Macro-level policy analysis of the intersections of technology, gender and labour focuses on potential problems and solutions for navigating access and knowledge barriers, developing technical skills and building capacity for women (Grau-Sarabia and Fuster-Morell 2021; Mourad 2024; Olmsted, Arja and Copland 2021). The working papers in this series have presented the Gig Economies Living Lab (GELL) model as an alternative lens in order to research the gig economy through a worker-centred, intersectional and transnational approach (Mourad 2024). The GELL model is not only disruptive in its purpose and structure, but also in the ways in which it conducts research and centres issues that are often marginalized in scholarship and policy discourses on the digital economy. This working paper demonstrates how the GELL model can be applied as a framework to conduct policy research through a critical feminist approach that centres the micro-level everyday experiences of workers in the gig economy.

The experiences of gig workers reflect the various ways in which technology is used, (re)purposed and (re)imagined in work and daily life practices. Rather than focusing on technology in terms of technical skills and capacities, this paper examines the intersection of technology with workers' daily work and life practices as it relates to their bodies and emotions. Bodies in this context refers to the physical and mental effort exerted by workers, while emotions refer to workers' feelings, hopes, non-material needs and affect. The following analysis is based on interviews conducted with 25 home-based women gig workers in the emerging food tech economy in Egypt. In contrast to food tech companies that rely on data and metrics that measure and assess market trends, profit margins and performance indicators,<sup>2</sup> the women gig workers who were interviewed for this paper centred their own bodies and emotions when it came to defining and measuring their work's purpose, productivity and performance. Thinking about technology in relation to bodies and emotions reflects the dynamic and diverse human experiences of and with technology and disrupts the myth of its being an apolitical and neutral object: policy conversations on technology and work are shifted to include non-material and relational factors that shape and impact workers' choices, opportunities and experiences in the digital economy.

## Background and Methods: Researching Gendered Gig Work in Egypt

The gig economy in Egypt is growing and often intersects with work in the informal sector of the economy, making gig work more difficult to measure and integrate into research and development policy discourses. The Egypt Labour Market Panel Survey 2018 and Labour Force Survey do not specifically show data on the level of participation of women in gig work across sectors, but women who are employed

---

<sup>2</sup> This information is based on interviews that the author conducted with the co-founders of Food Lab and Kitchenco in January 2023.

in the gig sector are, for the most part, involved in digital as opposed to physical work (Hassan 2023). There is a need for further data collection and research on the size of the gig economy in Egypt and on the importance of work arrangements and social protection strategies to ensure decent work and limit the vulnerability of gig workers (Assaad 2022). In the past decade, there has been growing private investment and government support for tech companies and start-ups in various industries, including the transportation, retail, finance and food sectors. In particular, there is an emerging food tech space, both globally and in the SWANA region, in which food delivery services, online grocery stores and cloud kitchens are growing in number and market size (Kene-Okafor 2022). This paper examines this food tech space, but shifts its focus away from private tech companies, market entrepreneurs and million-dollar investment funds toward marginalized home-based women gig workers who prepare and sell food informally without an official business license. This shift in focus is intentional, as it attempts to integrate a worker-centred, intersectional and transnational approach into policy research and analysis of gig work (Mourad 2024).

This paper uses qualitative data from the author's doctoral fieldwork research in Egypt between October 2022 and March 2023, when 25<sup>3</sup> women gig workers who prepare and sell food from within the home were interviewed. The interview subjects included those who work on either a part-time or full-time basis and who use technology in some capacity in their work (either via specialized mobile applications or platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Facebook Messenger, YouTube, Instagram and TikTok).<sup>4</sup> Following the interviews, the author conducted ethnographic research with four of the women working in different settings or under different conditions. While some might assume that these "tech-savvy" and entrepreneurial women must be young, affluent, Western-educated and liberal subjects, the sample of women gig workers who were interviewed for this study included women from various socio-economic backgrounds and different levels of education, with more than half of them living in lower-income neighbourhoods and the majority not being professionally trained in business or technology. Most of the interview subjects had previous work experience, including corporate jobs and teaching, yet none of them were professionally trained chefs or had culinary degrees. Even though all of the women gig workers who were interviewed felt that technology was significant in their work, not all of them felt confident and comfortable when using digital tools. Those who had higher-income backgrounds and had completed post-secondary education were the most confident and open to using technology in their daily life and work.

## Intersections of Technology, Bodies and Emotions in Daily Gig Work

In the case of home-based women gig workers in the food tech economy, technology is an important tool for them to sell their work, connect with their customers, learn

---

3 While this number of participants is modest for most social science inquiries that focus on the generalizability and relationality of variables, the author chose to interview people (specifically gendered subjects) to explore and identify emerging themes, and not to generalize.

4 While the definition of "gig work" is being stretched here to include the use of non-specialized or centralized mobile applications and what are often considered to be social media tools for personal connectivity, this stretching is intentional, as it is a way to examine how workers (re)imagine and use technology in a variety of ways in their daily personal and work lives.

new skills and stay alert to market trends. In some instances, women gig workers shared that they were offered an opportunity to collaborate with commercial food companies and feature their work on these companies' platforms. These platforms included applications such as Mumm or Talabat, which are owned by private companies and offered the women gig workers standardized delivery and marketing services in return for profit share. Alongside these delivery applications were cloud kitchen companies, such as the Food Lab and Kitchenco, that hire their own chefs to produce various food items and deliver them to customers via online orders. These food tech companies rely on digital tools and data to enhance and measure their purpose, productivity and performance. In contrast, for many of the women gig workers who were interviewed, their physical effort, senses, intuition and emotions when utilizing these tools in their work and daily life is more important than their specific knowledge of technology. By examining the intersections of technology with bodies and emotions, this paper shifts policy conversations to include the non-material and relational factors that (re)define and influence women gig workers' purpose, productivity and performance in the emerging digital economy.

## Purpose

My goal was for people to open my box of baked goods and be reminded of the smell of home, of what their mum or grandma baked.

— Hala<sup>5</sup>

Starting an online business, whether it be small or large in scale, involves strategic steps such as developing a business plan, budgeting and planning finances, researching market trends and creating marketing strategies. For many of the women gig workers interviewed for this paper, the idea of starting a business from home was intimidating at first, but they were able to overcome their fears, worries and hesitations through family and community support. Although all of them were motivated to make extra income for themselves or contribute to their household income and provide for their families, they shared that their main motive was to feel a sense of purpose and utilize their passion for and interest in cooking. Once these women gig workers decided to launch their projects, they were adamant about using their own hands, the existing cooking tools in their respective households and their personal mobile phones. They felt that cooking and preparing food with their own hands made the food tastier and more authentic. Practically, this approach also enabled them to cut costs and spend less money on advanced cooking tools or machinery. Even their use of their personal mobile phones to connect to the internet and post online content was a strategy for the women to save on direct costs and, in turn, increase their profit margins.

The act of cooking is typically gendered and domesticated and is often a form of unpaid social reproductive labour that is performed by women in the household and invisibilized from policy research. Home-based gig work is an interesting environment for examining how women gig workers are transforming their daily activities into paid labour and their home into a site of productivity. The act of centring their bodies in their work activities is a feasible, practical and accessible means for the women

---

5 Hala launched her online food vending work in 2016. The author interviewed her in a local café on November 14, 2022.

gig workers to independently launch their food projects from within their respective households. Relying on their bodies to do the work also gave them the confidence that they could expand their activities and grow their business by dedicating time to their work. For instance, Hala shared that “for me, baking is also my time because it’s my passion. I find comfort in baking. Yes, it’s a job that I do but still it’s part of my personal time.” As this comment reflects, home-based gendered gig work can also complicate how work is defined by blurring the boundaries between work and non-work activities, especially within the household. Therefore, integrating workers’ emotions and bodies in the analysis of gig work creates opportunities for policy research to explore the purpose of work beyond direct individual material gains to include workers’ personal motivations, passions and interests.

## Productivity

My work is not just about selling desserts: what I love about this work is that I make things with my own hands.

— Nuha<sup>6</sup>

Regardless of differences in age, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, the women gig workers who participated in this research were all adamant about doing their work themselves, including tracking inventory, going to the market and choosing ingredients, and preparing, cooking and packaging their food. They used the word *maghood* to describe the effort they exert, an Arabic word that is derived from the term *gohd*, which refers to the idea that one must continue to exert effort on an ongoing basis and to keep trying and constantly pursue improvement. Samar<sup>7</sup> said that “I do everything, so that’s a lot of *maghood* [effort]. But I got used to this. I am like a machine now, although I still get exhausted. People’s feedback is always good, so this has made me love what I’m doing, even though it is a lot of *maghood*.”

The physical and mental labour that the women gig workers exert in their daily work activities demonstrates their primary reliance on their bodies, in spite of the tools and resources available for them to use. For many of the women, this is not a matter of saving on costs of production, but rather a strategy for them to guarantee that their food is prepared in the most authentic way possible and catered to their customers’ needs. All the women gig workers expressed that they were able to make the tastiest and healthiest food by following their senses, right from the moment they were picking the ingredients to the moment they were plating and packaging the food. For example, Naglaa<sup>8</sup> shared that “when I am making an order, I have to really focus and pay attention with all my senses to make sure I offer my customers high-quality food.” Also, many of the gig workers pointed to their heads, referring to their memories, when they were asked where they store recipes and their knowledge of cooking. Their work activities do not primarily

---

6 Nuha launched her online food vending work in 2017. The author interviewed her in her home on November 7, 2022.

7 Samar launched her online food vending work in 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, after losing her full-time job. The author interviewed Samar at a local community centre on November 9, 2022.

8 Naglaa launched her online food vending work in 2016. The author interviewed her in her employer’s workplace, where she currently works as a cook, on October 25, 2022.

rely on specific guidelines, recipes or techniques, but are instead a combination of their memorized knowledge, experiential learning and sensory experiences.

Productivity and efficiency are understood and defined in various ways, especially in the context of a growing digital economy that champions the use of technological tools and machinery designed to reduce waste and save time and costs, thereby increasing return on investments. Cloud kitchens such as the Food Lab and Kitchenco invest in high-tech tools and software that enable them to infiltrate the market by ensuring mass production of food orders, standardized recipes, wide-scale online marketing campaigns and fast delivery services. Alternatively, the women gig workers interviewed for this paper viewed productivity and efficiency in terms of their ability to cater to their customers' needs and to offer them a personalized service without relying on technical support from machinery and advanced tools. In addition, their understanding of productivity was not just confined to work activities, but also included their ability to multi-task and balance work and household duties, save on childcare costs and be flexible and efficient with how time and space are being used. For these reasons, many of the women gig workers chose to work from home and to combine their work and non-work activities. Therefore, integrating workers' emotions and bodies in the analysis of gig work creates opportunities for policy research to explore the productivity of work beyond output and sales to include workers' sense of flexibility, autonomy and balance.

## Performance

I feel like tomorrow will always be better. My Facebook page is growing, more people follow me [and] I have more customers, so every day I feel like my work is growing.

— Fatma <sup>9</sup>

“The eye eats before the mouth” was a phrase all women gig workers shared in their interviews, describing how the senses are central to the food they are producing and even how they market their products online. For many of the women gig workers, what indicated their success was not only the profits they made, but also their ability to build a good reputation among their customers, which is why they all invested in making their food orders smell, look and taste good. The Arabic saying *teslam eedik*, which broadly translates in English to “bless your hands,” is used to show appreciation and gratitude for the food they make. This validation is one of the key motivations for the women to continue working. For example, Samar shared that “my customers feel that I cook good-quality and authentic food, unlike commercial or street food. Many of them are experienced cooks, so when they tell me *teslam eedik*, it means a lot to me and keeps me going.” Customers' feedback is not only an appreciation of the food they eat, but also an acknowledgement of the labour and effort that the women put into their work. For example, one of the workers, Abeer,<sup>10</sup> said that “when a customer tells me *teslam eedik*, or that I honoured them in front of their guests and that the food was amazing, it makes me feel content and confident in my work.” In addition to these words being a form of validation and

---

<sup>9</sup> Fatma launched her online food vending work in 2019. The author interviewed Fatma in her home on December 12, 2022.

<sup>10</sup> Abeer launched her online food vending work in 2016. The author interviewed Abeer in a local café on December 20, 2022.



motivation, they also translated into material gains for these women workers since they were able to build strong reputations and expand their customer bases.

In the growing digital economy, there are platforms and software that measure performance according to various metrics such as efficiency, market expansion, profits and other quantifiable standards. For instance, food applications such as Mumm and Talabat ask for customer feedback and feature this feedback publicly on their platforms in the form of standard ratings and figures. Alternatively, home-based women gig workers did not measure their performance based on non-personalized customer input and data tracking, but instead via a relational, interpersonal and dynamic process that included personal touch points, direct engagements with customers and soliciting validation. The experiences of gig workers highlight how tracking and improving their work performance also enabled them to expand their social networks and increase their confidence in their work within and beyond the household. Therefore, integrating workers' emotions and bodies in the analysis of gig work creates opportunities for policy research to explore the performance of work beyond measurable metrics and quantifiable indicators or milestones to include more diverse meanings of workers' professional growth, efficiency and success.

## Recommendations

This paper presents a case study example of how a micro-level analysis of gig work is significant in understanding the intersections of technology, gender and labour and in highlighting the experiences of gig workers who are often invisibilized or marginalized in global research and policy discourses. Integrating workers' emotions and bodies in the analysis of gig work creates opportunities for policy research to explore purpose, productivity and performance of work beyond material and structural factors to include non-material and relational issues. The GELL model is therefore useful in shifting the ways in which policy research is conducted and paves the way for community-centred and bottom-up policy solutions in the emerging gig economy.

- **Diversifying and globalizing research on gig economies:** There is a growing need to challenge how we think about contemporary issues and potential solutions in the digital economy. This shift requires transnational and global solidarities in research and policy making that are not built on universalized notions of work, but instead champion the diversity of workers' experiences across the globe.
- **Thinking about technology through a critical feminist lens:** Disruptive research requires workers' experiences to be centred, especially gendered and racialized people who are usually invisibilized. Critical feminist thought highlights the power hierarchies, imbalances and biases that exist in technology innovations and seeks to envision alternative possibilities for innovative, inclusive and collaborative governance policies that reflect workers' diverse experiences in this digital age.
- **Localizing human-centred research and policy:** Thinking about technology and its impact on people's work and life requires a holistic lens that does not substitute humans with technology, but instead highlights the physical labour behind technology and the emotional, non-material and relational aspects related to people's use of and experiences with technology. Gig workers' experiences and relationships with technology reflect how technology is not a neutral, static object, but a versatile

tool that is experienced and used in a variety of ways and therefore requires localized, innovative and micro-level research and analysis.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my CIGI mentor, Amrita Vasudevan, for her guidance and feedback on this paper. And I would also like to extend my gratitude to my colleague at the Digital Policy Hub, Badriyya Yusuf, for her feedback and support.

---

## About the Author

Laila Mourad is a Ph.D. candidate at York University where she is exploring how home-based labour in the gig economy can inform and shape our understanding of the evolving notions of “work” in the digital economy. She applies an interdisciplinary approach to her research on gender, labour and international development, and examines how existing and emerging technologies transform the ways in which household economies and social relationalities are envisioned, as well as their role in development. She is the co-founder of SWANA Collective, a group that aspires to cultivate alternative decolonial spaces in academia and beyond. During her fellowship with the Digital Policy Hub, Laila examined how existing and emerging technologies transform economic activities.

## Works Cited

- AlAzzawi, Shireen. 2021. “Lives Versus Livelihoods: Who Can Work from Home in MENA?” Sustainable Development Goals and External Shocks in the MENA Region: From Resilience to Change in the Wake of COVID-19 27th Annual Conference Online. <https://erf.org.eg/publications/lives-versus-livelihood-who-can-work-from-home-in-mena-2/>.
- Assaad, Ragui. 2022. “Assessing the Future of Work in Egypt: What We Know so Far.” Presented at the National Forum on the Future of Work in Egypt.
- Assi, Rima and Chiara Marcati. 2020. *Women at work: Job opportunities in the Middle East set to double with the Fourth Industrial Revolution*. McKinsey & Company. [www.mckinsey.com/middle-east/our-insights/women-at-work-in-the-middle-east](http://www.mckinsey.com/middle-east/our-insights/women-at-work-in-the-middle-east).
- Carr, Marilyn, Martha Alter Chen and Jane Tate. 2000. “Globalization and Home-Based Workers.” *Feminist Economics* 6 (3): 123–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/135457000750020164>.
- Grau-Sarabia, Mónica and Mayo Fuster-Morell. 2021. “Gender approaches in the study of the digital economy: a systematic literature review.” *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications* 8 (1): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-021-00875-x>.
- Hassan, Rasha. 2023. “Work Arrangements in the Informal Sector and Gig Economy/ Digital Platform Economy in Egypt.” Economic Research Forum Special Policy Research Report SPRR 2023-4. Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH. <https://erf.org.eg/publications/work-arrangements-in-the-informal-sector-and-gig-economy-digital-platform-economy-in-egypt/>.

- Kamel, Sherif. 2021. "The Potential Impact of Digital Transformation on Egypt." Economic Research Forum Working Paper No. 1488. September. <https://erf.org.eg/publications/the-potential-impact-of-digital-transformation-on-egypt/>.
- Kene-Okafor, Tage. 2022. "The Food Lab, an Egyptian cloud kitchen provider, raises \$4.5M pre-seed for expansion." *TechCrunch* (blog), April 18. <https://techcrunch-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/techcrunch.com/2022/04/18/the-food-lab-an-egyptian-cloud-kitchen-provider-raises-4-5m-pre-seed-for-expansion/amp/>.
- Mourad, Laila. 2024. "Gig Economies Living Lab: Bridging Global Divides in Research." Digital Policy Hub Working Paper. [www.cigionline.org/publications/gig-economies-living-lab-bridging-global-divides-in-research/](http://www.cigionline.org/publications/gig-economies-living-lab-bridging-global-divides-in-research/).
- Nasr, Sahar, ed. 2010. *Egyptian Women Workers and Entrepreneurs Maximizing Opportunities in the Economic Sphere*. Report No. 53096. Washington, DC: The World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/404701468233093448/pdf/530960PUB0Egy101Official0Use0Only1.pdf>.
- Olmsted, Jennifer, Rouba Arja and Sarah Copland. 2021. *Propelling Women into Entrepreneurship in the Arab Region: The Role of Information and Communication Technology (ICT)*. United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia. June. E/ESCWA/CL2.GPID/2020/TP.26. [www.unescwa.org/publications/propelling-women-entrepreneurship-arab-region](http://www.unescwa.org/publications/propelling-women-entrepreneurship-arab-region).
- Rizk, Reham and Ali Rashed. 2019. "Trends and Patterns of Women's Entrepreneurship in Egypt." Economic Research Forum Working Paper No. 1369. November. <http://erf.org.eg/publications/trends-and-patterns-of-womens-entrepreneurship-in-egypt/>.