



Development
Progress

Executive Summary

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A good gig?

The rise of on-demand domestic work



On-demand work is not automatically empowering and can shift risk onto domestic workers themselves. We propose urgent action to ensure that the ‘Uberisation’ of domestic work evolves to the benefit of all.

Key messages

- Women make up 80% of the 67 million domestic workers globally. The on-demand economy for domestic work is growing rapidly in developing countries. The potential benefits and risks attached to this burgeoning area of domestic work may affect women disproportionately.
- On-demand platforms offer some benefits to domestic workers, such as choice over working times, tracking of hours worked and wages earned, and potentially better remuneration compared with other forms of domestic work.
- Although some benefits can be identified, overall the on-demand economy threatens domestic workers’ access to decent work. Our research identifies low and insecure incomes, discrimination, further entrenchment of unequal power relations within the traditional domestic work sector, and the erosion of established labour and social protections as key challenges.
- On-demand companies have adapted to developing country contexts, notably by taking steps to engage workers by overcoming digital and financial divides.
- The infancy of the on-demand domestic work economy in developing countries means it is not too late to raise standards. This will involve proactive efforts by companies to ‘design-in’ good practice, as well as by government to ensure an integrated future policy, legal, practice and research agenda.

Findings

There are an estimated 67 million domestic workers globally, 80% of whom are women. Many of them work in low-paid, insecure and exploitative conditions. Technology-focused companies linking households to domestic workers through ‘on-demand’ platforms are attempting to disrupt the traditional sector, claiming to offer rapidly accessible, cheap domestic services to households, and flexible, well-remunerated economic opportunities to domestic workers. While still in its infancy, this ‘Uberisation of domestic work’ is growing rapidly in developing countries – for example, reports suggest that on-demand domestic work companies in India are expanding by up to 60% month-on-month.

Yet there remains a dearth of research on this emerging trend to examine whether or not the above claims are true. This working paper presents a scoping study, and a first step towards addressing that gap. It explores the rise of on-demand domestic work platforms and the experiences of households and domestic workers using them, to identify priorities for future policy, practice and research.

We find that the on-demand economy offers benefits to service purchasers, who cite access to cheap, convenient and reliable domestic services which can help to support work-life balance as key benefits. Some promise to improve conditions in the traditional domestic work sector is also identified. For example, the on-demand economy offers workers some choice over when they work, and platform technology can enable workers to track hours worked and wages earned. Participants also perceived on-demand work to provide better remuneration than other forms of domestic work – particularly live-in domestic worker wages.

Overall, however, on-demand working arrangements risk undermining progress towards the achievement of domestic

work as decent work, particularly in countries with relatively advanced regulatory frameworks. Empirical evidence from South Africa reveals overall low and insecure incomes, discrimination and the erosion of established labour and social protections as a result of the ‘independent contractor’ status of on-demand workers.

In addition, on-demand platforms are designed to facilitate service purchaser choice, trust and service quality assurance. This includes systems to rate and review workers, and the ability to select workers based on demographic characteristics such as age or gender. These systems disproportionately benefit purchasers, and appear to reinforce the unequal power relations and discriminatory structures underpinning the traditional domestic work sector.

Companies have taken innovative steps to overcome gendered digital and financial divides, which have notably focused on engaging workers using a range of context-relevant high- and low-tech methods. However, further concerted effort is required to ensure poor and marginalised groups are not left behind as the on-demand economy becomes further established as a route to economic opportunity in developing countries.

The infancy of on-demand domestic work in developing countries means that it is not too late to raise standards and ensure a fair deal for domestic workers. This will involve governments ensuring policy, legal and regulatory frameworks are fit for purpose. Companies should also act by proactively designing equality, anti-discrimination and safety into platform models. Engaging domestic workers and their collectives as well as service purchasers in active dialogue to ensure the system works for all concerned will be critical for success.

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