



# MIGRATION AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

## Migration and the Future of Work

*International Workshop Co-Convened by Institut Convergences Migrations, CERC Migration at Toronto Metropolitan University, and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)*

**Date:** Wednesday, March 29, 2023

**Time:** 9:30 AM to 6:00 PM EDT

**Location:** Campus Condorcet, Centre des Colloques, auditorium 150

The future of work will be shaped by a range of technological, political, and social changes that are already creating both threats and opportunities for recent and established migrants and their labour-market trajectories. Advanced digital technologies have shifted how global talent is recruited, selected, and managed and have led to the creation of new opportunities for migrants (e.g., providing support in the workplace, matching job seekers to employment opportunities, and creating new ways of defining, assessing, and developing skills). At the same time, such technologies may create and exacerbate precarious and atypical working conditions, including those presented by digital platforms on the gig-work economy (e.g., Uber and Taskrabbit). The picture is quite complex, as recent research has shown that non-standard jobs in the platform economy may provide a point of entry for new immigrants and that immigrant earnings gaps among non-standard or contingent workers are smaller than those among workers in standard jobs. Whether these jobs are a bridge to upward mobility, however, is a question that needs to be answered with further analysis.

This workshop will examine the many intersections between advanced digital technologies and the labour-market integration of migrants. Presenters will interrogate the role of advanced digital technologies in different immigration-cycle stages, from recruitment and employment to post-migration integration and skills recognition.

## PROGRAM

**9:30–10:30 AM EDT**

**Roundtable: The Governance of Labour Migration and Advanced Digital Technologies: Challenges and Opportunities**

Anna Triandafyllidou, Toronto Metropolitan University and fellow at ICM

Jean-Christophe Dumont, OECD

Niels Van Doorn, University of Amsterdam

Felicitas Hillmann, Technische Universität Berlin

**10:30–11:00 AM EDT**

**Coffee break**

**11:00 AM–1:00 PM EDT**

**Panel I: Digital Nomads and Placeless Work**  
**Chair and Panel Keynote Introduction**  
**Felicitas Hillmann, Technische Universität Berlin**

*First pleasure, then work? Digital nomads, location independence, and the changing meaning of work* | **Mari Toivanen**, University of Helsinki

*Good jobs or bad? Immigrant workers in the gig economy* |  
**Cathy Yang Liu and Rory Renzy**, Georgia State University

*Travel bloggers as digital nomads: What could this privileged form of migration mean for the future of work?* | **Nina Willment**, University of York

*Relative downward mobility among digital nomads from developing countries* | **Shahanaz Parven**, University of Palermo

**1:00–2:30 PM EDT**

**Lunch**

**2:30–5:00 PM EDT**

**Panel II: Migrant Workers in the Gig Economy**  
**Chair and Panel Keynote Introduction**  
**Niels van Doorn, University of Amsterdam**

*Not all platform work is equal: Migrants' experiences of self-determination in relational and non-relational gig work* | **Laura Lam** and **Anna Triandafyllidou**, CERC Migration, Toronto Metropolitan University

*Visa categories in platform labour: The working-holiday visas fuelling Berlin's gig economy* | **Barbara Orth**, Freie Universität Berlin

*Riding in the dark: The algorithmic-bureaucratic precarization of migrant food-delivery workers in Italy* | **Gianluca Iazzolino**, University of Manchester; **Eleonora Celoria**, University of Torino; **Amarilli Varesio**, University of Milano-Bicocca

*The case of Venezuelan migrants working for delivery platforms in Colombia and Peru* | **Stephanie López Villamil**, Equilibrium, Centro para el Desarrollo Económico

*The silence(s) of migration in Sweden's policy on the gig/platform economy* | **Natasha A. Webster**, Örebro University and **Qian Zhang**, Stockholm University

**5:00–6:00 PM EDT**

**Reception**

## ABSTRACTS

### Panel I: Digital Nomads and Placeless Work

Technological change especially affects labour markets and social policies regarding the way we “do” work. But our knowledge on the consequences of digitalization and new technologies for mobile labour and migrants’ lives is still limited. A major cleavage seems to arise between those workers that are able to organize their working schedule with high degrees of spatial and temporal freedom and those workers, whose work is neatly tied to place and strict working hours. It comes as no surprise, that the category of the “digital nomad” has attracted much attention over the past decade and that most of the literature is inspired by some sort of ‘positive thinking’ on the restructuring of global and international labour markets. Accordingly, topoi of lifestyle and community are frequently attributed to this fraction of the working force. Many studies concentrate on the perspective of the studied group itself and does focus on the work-related practicalities and on the places where digital nomads live. Less attention is given to the (more invisible) harsh realities that are behind the demonstrated fancy lifestyle: loneliness of many individuals, missing transnational social security schemes and difficult pathways of return to the labour markets in the country of origin. Our panel looks on those self-perceptions (Toivanen, Helsinki) and on new definitions of digital nomadism (Nina Willment, University of York, United Kingdom), on the numbers concerning welfare and social security (Cathy Yang Liu and Rory Renzy, Georgia State University) and on how global economic and spatial hierarchies have become part of the making of digital nomadism (Shahanaz Parven, University of Palermo). Our panel discusses these tensions between perceived freedom and real societal challenges critically.

#### ***First pleasure, then work? Digital nomads, location independence, and the changing meaning of work | Mari Toivanen, University of Helsinki***

Today’s lifestyle mobilities have resulted from past decades’ global developments, namely digitalization, economic accumulation, more generalized freedom of movement for some individuals, and the rise of knowledge-based economies and the gig economy (Cohen et al. 2015; Benson & Osbaldiston 2016; Thompson 2021). This presentation deals with digital nomads’ understandings of work. It focuses on the modes and meanings of work as narrated by nomads who work in a location-independent manner. How do self-identified digital nomads arrange work-related practicalities? What negotiations or compromises has the move toward location-independent work required? How do nomads narrate the meaning of work, particularly in relation to their mobile lifestyle choice? This presentation’s research was conducted within an Academy of Finland project called Digital Nomadism: Lifestyle Mobilities, Nation-State and the Mobile Subject (2020–2025). The analyzed data are drawn from multi-site ethnographic fieldwork, specifically qualitative interviews with 70 digital nomads in Thailand (2019), Spain (2021–2022), Estonia (2022), Bulgaria (2022), and Mauritius (2023), as well as observations from co-working spaces, informal get-togethers, and digital-nomad conferences. The findings presented will shed light on mobile individuals’ agency in navigating labour markets in search of location-independent work and, more broadly, the changing meanings of work in the post-COVID-19 context.

#### ***Good jobs or bad? Immigrant workers in the gig economy | Cathy Yang Liu and Rory Renzy, Georgia State University***

The new work arrangements enabled by online platforms—collectively known as “gig work”—have seen substantive growth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Various estimates have suggested that a significant number of workers are participating in the gig economy, with minority and immigrant workers disproportionately represented (e.g., Pew Research Center, 2021). Job quality, meanwhile, is a multidimensional concept that goes beyond earnings. Kalleberg (2011) discussed polarized and precarious employment in the framework of good jobs and bad, an analysis that has included a worker’s control over their schedule and the nature of the work they undertake as well as its duration, stability, safety, associated benefits and insurance, and the career advancement opportunities it offers. Rooted in

this context, this presentation seeks to measure the quality of gig work for immigrant workers, how this quality differs from that experienced by native-born workers, and how it varies among immigrant workers themselves. This presentation will reference the 2022 survey conducted by the Entrepreneurship in the Population project, which is overseen by NORC at the University of Chicago and the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation. The project's survey drew on a nationally representative sample of over 30,000 US workers, and it contains relevant questions on workers' engagement in the gig economy as primary or secondary jobs, their reasons for gigging, and the characteristics of job quality that inform this presentation's research question. The presenters have used descriptive and regression analyses to examine the quality of gig work for immigrant workers.

***Travel bloggers as digital nomads: What could this privileged form of migration mean for the future of work? | Nina Willment, University of York, United Kingdom***

Drawing on qualitative research conducted on British travel bloggers prior to the pandemic, this presentation analyzes the creative economy through the eyes of labour (rather than capital) to examine the intersection between advanced digital technologies (namely, those of social media and the creator economy) and the potential challenges and opportunities this emerging sector offers migrants. Drawing on research on labourers whose work has become symbolic of the digital nomad imaginary, this presentation will explore how ideas of nomadism become complicated through the spatialities and mobilities of a privileged group of migrants and how advanced digital technologies may play a role in polarizing what is viewed as positive migration in the future of work. The presentation will also cover the turbulence and uncertainty of nomadic work as a lifestyle choice, highlighting the diverse survival strategies undertaken by creative freelancers, which is evident within a constantly evolving digital economy. The presenter will also raise important policy issues related to themes around the intersection of advanced digital technologies and the labour-market integration of migrants. To conclude, the presenter will emphasize what the case study of travel bloggers can demonstrate about placeless work, particularly in relation to the future of work and mobility.

***Relative downward mobility among digital nomads from developing countries | Shahanaz Parven, University of Palermo***

In the typical understanding of digital nomadism and international migration, workers are more detached from their employers thanks to smart working, and they prefer to relocate to countries where the cost of living is lower and Internet connectivity is higher. This presentation introduces findings from a study that shows a different position – that digital nomadism may lead individuals to travel from countries with very low costs of living to countries with higher costs of living while working for employers who are located in a third category of countries that are even wealthier than the second. A certain proportion of digital nomads comprises skilled workers, such as software engineers and researchers from developing countries, who live in places where the cost of living is very low. Upon receiving an offer from an employer in a wealthy country, such as in the United Kingdom or the United States, such a worker could decide to move to the country of the employer and subject themselves to very high costs of living. In relative terms, this would nullify the increase in income that the worker would have enjoyed if they had remained in their country of origin and had there found a job in the same sector. Instead, they move to countries with costs of living somewhere in the middle.

## **Panel II: Migrant Workers in the Gig Economy**

After several years of venture capital-driven explosive growth, fierce competition, and hyped-up stories about a new entrepreneurial 'future of work' mediated by digital platforms, the dust has begun to settle on the gig economy. Besides market consolidation and generally decreasing wages, as a result of gig companies trying to forge a road to profitability in a challenging investment climate, another prevalent – and

indeed related – development has been the increasing share of migrants in the gig economy's global workforce. Especially with respect to urban food delivery and domestic cleaning markets, gig work by and large is migrant work. Gig economy scholarship has only recently started paying specific attention to the experiences, motivations, and working conditions of migrants, in an attempt to tease out what may explain their ubiquity on certain platforms and what makes their situation different from other gig workers.

However, many pertinent questions remain unanswered. This panel is therefore particularly welcome and urgent, as it presents exciting new research not only on migrant workers' practices and experiences on gig platforms but also on the impact of migration and its governance more broadly. Regarding the former, the panel examines how different types of gig work entail differential evaluations of (and relationships with) the labour performed (Lam and Triandafyllidou), while also highlighting the importance of diaspora networks in shaping both migratory projects and the composition of urban platform workforces (Orth). With respect to the latter, it critically assesses how a confluence of algorithmic and legal regimes enforce the much-discussed precarity experienced by migrant gig workers, connecting everyday work insecurities to national immigration policies (Lazzolini et al.). Moreover, it shows how state policies regarding welfare and work do not only produce exclusions and "silences" (Webster), but also allow for the partial, equally precarious inclusion of migrant gig workers when this serves nation states' economic interest (López Villamil and Serrano). As such, the panel broadens the scope of scholarship on the role of migrant labour in the gig economy, highlighting its geographical variegation as well as its embeddedness in life trajectories, institutional settings and political economies.

***Not all platform work is equal: Migrants' experiences of self-determination in relational and non-relational gig work* | Laura Lam and Anna Triandafyllidou, Toronto Metropolitan University**

This presentation explores how digital platforms affect migrants' settlement experiences, particularly those that involve care- and domestic-work platforms. These platforms often operate in an invisible realm when compared to other popularized platforms that provide offline services, such as ride hailing or food delivery. The former services are also different in character in that they are often ongoing (e.g., regularly caring for a person or cleaning a person's house) and not one-off, instantaneous services, as are the latter. The presenters will argue that the former constitutes relational gig work, while the latter constitutes non-relational gig work. Drawing on 56 qualitative interviews conducted in Canada in 2021 and 2022, this presentation's analysis of relational and non-relational gig work is informed by self-determination theory and the study of motivation and psychological needs. People need to feel autonomy, competence, and connection in order to achieve psychological growth. Migrants are no exception. The presenters will compare relational and non-relational gig work in order to investigate how migrants experience different levels of autonomy (i.e., the feeling of control over their own behaviours and goals), competence (i.e., the ability to master skills and tasks), and connection (i.e., the sense of belonging with other people). This presentation builds on prior findings that not all migrants experience labour platforms the same way, which can have consequences on their settlement experiences.

***Visa categories in platform labour: The working-holiday visas fuelling Berlin's gig economy* | Barbara Orth, Freie Universität Berlin**

According to studies from around the world, place-based platform work is predominantly carried out by migrants and racialized workers. With only one exception, however, platform research has not systematically incorporated the role of visa and immigration regimes in its analyses. This study, therefore, takes the working-holiday visa—a visa category prominent among platform workers in Europe—as a starting point for exploring platform workers' migratory projects. The study draws on 20 narrative interviews conducted in Chile, Argentina, and Germany in 2022. The multi-site research design followed the trajectories of prospective working holidaymakers from their pre-departure plans at home to the realities of subsistence once they arrived in Europe. The interviews shed light on the process of becoming a platform worker and highlight the importance of diaspora networks, without which most of the research participants would not have engaged in platform work. This presentation thus seeks to speak to larger questions related to the accessibility of platform work and whether algorithmic management and automated labour processes really lead to a heterogeneous workforce by eliminating language barriers, as prior research has suggested.

***Riding in the dark: The algorithmic-bureaucratic precarization of migrant food-delivery workers in Italy* | Gianluca Iazzolino, University of Manchester; Eleonora Celoria, University of Torino; Amarilli Varesio, University of Milano-Bicocca**

This presentation advances the concept of algorithmic-bureaucratic precarization to examine the construction of precarity among migrant food-delivery workers in Turin, Italy. Drawing on ethnographic data collected between 2020 and 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the presenters will argue that the commodification of migrant labour in the platform food-delivery sector in Turin, while driven by platform logics, is rooted in and compounded by the contradictions and opacity of Italy's immigration regime. The presenters will build their argument by charting the growing centrality of food-delivery platforms in the political economy of migration and illustrating how migrant food-delivery couriers understand platform opportunities while navigating algorithmic and legal uncertainties. In so doing, the presenters will show how the interactions between shifting migration policies, the information asymmetries of digital platforms, and legal loopholes exacerbate the socio-economic vulnerabilities of migrant workers. The presenters will thus unpack the concept of algorithmic-bureaucratic precarization by describing the entanglements of legal and procedural failures that illegalize migrants and asylum seekers and put them at risk of exploitation. Drawing on the specific case of migrant couriers in Turin, this presentation will contribute to the legal geography literature on precarization by highlighting how the platform economy is reshaping the nexus of neoliberal flexibilization and restrictive migration policies.

***The case of Venezuelan migrants working for delivery platforms in Colombia and Peru* | Stephanie López Villamil, Equilibrium, Centro para el Desarrollo Económico**

Colombia and Peru have received most of the Venezuelans who have emigrated in the past seven years. Colombia is home to more than 2.4 million Venezuelans, while Peru hosts 1.5 million. In both countries, Venezuelans have started to rely on delivery platforms as income-generation options. COVID-19 restrictions came with an increase in the demand for delivery services, and more Venezuelans started offering them, partially because of their economic situations. Moreover, the need for safety and security in the workplace and access to social protection appeared to be priorities extended to migrant workers, even those with an irregular immigration status (Vera Espinoza, et al., 2021). The purpose of this presentation is to provide a general overview of the gig economy via depictions of delivery platforms in Colombia and Peru while considering legislative advancements in regulating the sector, its effects on Venezuelan migrants' precarious socio-economic inclusion despite generous regularization policies, and civil-society and trade-union proposals to provide a social and legal framework that improves protection and access to employment for Venezuelans.

***The silence(s) of migration in Sweden's policy for the gig/platform economy* | Natasha A. Webster, Örebro University and Qian Zhang, Stockholm University**

Migrants constitute the majority of vulnerable workers in digitally mediated work, and they face wide-scale labour exploitation and exclusions from existing labour systems of rights. In Nordic countries, it is often assumed the welfare state will regulate the gig economy, but due to ambiguous understandings of what the gig economy is, proposals for interventions are often limited to debates and concerns around topics such as taxation. The Swedish state is shifting to recognize migrants and the gig/platform economy, but their positions in policy arenas remain unknown. Drawing on conceptual approaches of policy silences, which highlight the agentic process of exclusion through the production of strategic quietness/absence, this presentation will examine the ways policy formulation positions digitally mediated work, workers, and work sites, as well migrants, and evaluate the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats posed by these underlying policy debates. The presentation includes a critical review of data drawn from a combination of machine learning, text mining and in-depth content analysis, based on 25 *Swedish Government Official Reports* (SOU series) issued between 2016 and 2022. The presentation will provide insights into the co-production of silences on migrants within state policy formulations, highlighting the tensions within welfare-labour relations.

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Eleonora Celoria** is an Italian lawyer and PhD candidate in Immigration Law at the Law and Institutions Doctoral School of the University of Turin. Her research focuses on administrative detention and its implementation at European borders.

**Felicitas Hillmann**, professor, is head of the networking unit Paradigm Shift at the Institute of Urban and Regional Planning at Technische Universität Berlin. She coordinates a working group on “New technologies, migration and the future of work” and edits the special issue on the topic with the journal *Glocalism*. Her recent publications include “Moving nurses to cities: On how migration industries feed into glocal urban assemblages in the care sector” in *Urban Studies* with Margaret Walton-Roberts and Brenda Yeoh. Her f **lazzolino** coming edited volume with Michael Samers is titled: “Cities, migration, and governance: Beyond scales and levels” (2023).

**Gianluca Iazzolino** is a lecturer on Digital Development at the Global Development Institute, University of Manchester. His research focuses on digital labour, data justice, humanitarianism, and technologies of surveillance between Africa and Europe.

**Laura Lam** is a PhD candidate at the Centre for Industrial Relations and Human Resources, University of Toronto, and researcher at the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration, Toronto Metropolitan University. She holds a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship and an R.F. Harney Graduate Research Fellowship. Laura is also a PhD fellow at the Institute for Gender and the Economy, University of Toronto. Her research interests lie at the nexus of migration, precarious employment, and care, with a focus on the use of app-based digital labour platforms.

**Cathy Yang Liu** is Professor and Chair of the Department of Public Management and Policy at the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University. Her research areas are urban and economic development, the labour market and inequality, and migration and entrepreneurship. She serves as Senior Associate Editor for the *Journal of Urban Affairs* and Associate Editor for *Economic Development Quarterly*, and she edited *Immigrant Entrepreneurship in Cities: Global Perspectives* (Springer, 2021). She holds a PhD in Urban Planning from the University of Southern California and an MA in Public Policy from the University of Chicago.

**Barbara Orth** is a PhD candidate at the Department of Geography at Freie Universität Berlin. Her doctoral research explores how immigration policies and the fast growth of platform-mediated jobs, such as food delivery, ride hailing, and care work, are intertwined. Before joining the university, she conducted research on queer support structures in Berlin’s labour market and labour market access for refugees and asylum seekers. Barbara has several years of professional experience in the non-profit sector working with migrants, and she holds a BA in International Relations from the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom and an MSc in Refugee and Forced Migration Studies from the University of Oxford.

**Shahanaz Parven** is a PhD candidate in Migration Studies at the University of Palermo where she is writing a dissertation on the subject of international migration from Bangladesh to Europe, focusing on the gender aspects of family reunification and irregular migration. Shahanaz has participated in several conferences in Europe and Asia, and speaks Bengali, Russian, Hindi, and Italian.

**Rory Renzy** is a second-year PhD student in Public Policy at the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, Georgia State University. His research interests include labour and social policy, local urban and economic development, political participation, and policy implementation. He is currently Graduate Research Assistant to Cathy Yang Liu. He holds a BA in Political Science and Economics from New College of Florida.



**Mari Toivanen** is an Academy of Finland Research Fellow at the Swedish School of Social Science, University of Helsinki (2020–2025). Her research focuses on lifestyle mobilities and location-independent work in the form of digital nomadism. Her publications have appeared in *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, *Ethnicities*, *Social Inclusion*, the *Journal of Genocide Research*, and the *Nordic Journal of Migration Research*. Her award-winning monograph, *The Kobane Generation: Kurdish Diaspora Mobilising in France*, was published in 2021. She has co-edited several volumes and is Co-Editor of the book series *Transnationalism and Diaspora*, which is published by Edinburgh University Press. For more information on her ongoing project, please visit [www.diginomadproject.com](http://www.diginomadproject.com).

**Anna Triandafyllidou** holds the Canada Excellence Research Chair in Migration and Integration, Toronto Metropolitan University. She was previously based at the European University Institute in Italy, where she held a Robert Schuman Chair on Cultural Pluralism in the Global Governance Programme. She is Editor of the *Journal of Immigrant and Refugee Studies*, and her recent publications include *Rethinking Migration and Return in Southeastern Europe: Albanian Mobilities to and from Italy and Greece* (with Eda Gemi; Routledge, 2021) and two edited volumes: *Routledge Handbook on the Governance of Religious Diversity* (with Tina Magazzini; Routledge, 2020) and *Migrants with Irregular Status in Europe* (with Sarah Spencer; Springer Open, 2020).

**Niels van Doorn** is Associate Professor of New Media and Digital Culture in the Department of Media Studies and the Principal Investigator of the ERC-funded Platform Labor research project (2018-2023). He holds a PhD in Communication Science (2010) from the University of Amsterdam. His research is guided by two main questions: how do people sustain themselves and each other in precarious circumstances?; and how does the notion of value come into being at the intersection of political and moral economies? These questions converge in his current Platform Labor research project, which investigates how platforms are changing labour and social reproduction in post-welfare cities.

**Amarilli Varesio** is a PhD candidate in Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Milano-Bicocca. She has worked on internally displaced people in Uganda, and her current research revolves around the social impacts of the social energy market in Africa.

**Stephanie López Villamil** is a Research Associate at Equilibrium, Centro para el Desarrollo Económico. She holds a PhD in Political Studies and International Relations from the National University of Colombia and an MA in Political and Social Sciences from the University of Strasbourg. She is also an alumni of the Forced Population Displacements and the Making of the Modern World program at Brown University's International Advanced Research Institutes in Rhode Island. Stephanie is a member of several networks, including the International Association for the Study of Forced Migration and the International Public Policy Association. She has published papers on the economic integration of Venezuelans and reintegration policies in Colombia, and she counsels the Colombian government on migration policies.

**Natasha A. Webster** is a PhD holder and Senior Lecturer at Örebro University in Sweden. She is also a feminist economic geographer specializing in gender, work, entrepreneurship, and migration. Natasha is Principal Investigator for a FORMAS project in Sweden, researching the gig economy and migrants in Sweden, and she is also an Associate Editor of *Emotion, Space and Society* and Editorial Board Member of *Digital Geography and Society*.

**Nina Willment** is a Research Associate for XR Stories at the University of York in the United Kingdom. She co-leads a research project exploring how advanced digital technologies, such as virtual production, impact the labour markets of the film and TV industries. Nina holds a PhD from Royal Holloway, University of London, where her thesis examined how emerging digital innovations in the creator economy have disrupted the labour practices and workspaces of individuals such as travel bloggers. She was previously a visiting scholar at the University of Melbourne and has worked with the UK government to examine the future of work.

**Qian Zhang**, PhD and researcher, at Stockholm University, is a human geographer specializing in migration, environmental politics and critical geography. Her recent research interests focus on understanding the digital geographies of our rapidly changing social and economic life mediated through



platformization. She has worked closely with Webster in the FORMAS project exploring the relationship between the gig economy and migrants. She will lead a new project on exploring (migrants') digital practices in rural Sweden and what these mean for social equalities (VR, 2022-05314).

**Workshop is presented by:**

