

Article 1

The gig economy is not just a buzz-term, but a phenomenon that has empowered and opened up a wealth of opportunity to workers while simultaneously enabling businesses to cut costs by hiring independent, short-term contractors. Nonetheless, it isn't short of detractors – though too often criticism stems from a profound misunderstanding of the nature of platform technologies like Uber, TaskRabbit or Deliveroo.



Deliveroo rider CREDIT: MIKAEL BUCK/ DELIVEROO

The RSA now estimates there are 1.1m gig workers in Britain – nearly as many as in the NHS. Promisingly, in view of campaigns like the Telegraph's Women Mean Business which highlight the myriad strengths female employees and leaders can bring to business, female part-time self-employment increased from 439,000 to 812,000 between 2001 and 2016.

As [REDACTED] has highlighted, two million women are expected to become their own boss by the start of 2019. For those who have felt shut out by traditional workplace inflexibility, freedom over hours and greater control over earnings have been impossible to resist. Gig is the future, and women are leading the charge.

However workplace gender stereotypes, even in the gig era, remain worryingly intransigent. UK paternity leave rates are stubbornly low – suggesting the burden of childcare falls too heavily on mothers. Misleading statistics around the gender pay gap (now negligible among the 22-39s) and the #PayMeToo campaign can also perpetuate a victimhood paradigm.

In the competitive world of online labour, meanwhile, hiring and wages are determined on the basis of little information about each worker. It leads to preconceptions about “appropriate” jobs for women, their productivity, and their willingness to bargain.



The gig economy should offer women the flexibility they desire at work CREDIT: GETTY/GETTY

Stanford research has identified a 7 per cent gender earnings gap among Uber drivers in the US, driven by preferences over when and where to work, driving speed, and experience on the platform. But

these factors come down to choice: a crucial pillar of the feminist movement. Motherhood, other lifestyle preferences, even their chosen field of expertise may mean that women work fewer hours than men.

Lack of confidence also remains a persistent barrier to women in the workplace. In the traditional labour market, it can manifest itself in women failing to ask for a pay rise or promotion. In the gig economy, women set their own rates lower than their male competitors – all the more troubling given work is project or contract-based and each job comes with a new round of negotiations.

Where latent discrimination persists in the gig economy, it falls to experts, politicians and the media to boost awareness. More female role models – particularly in male-dominated industries – will do wonders to challenge preconceptions and tackle the confidence gap. Responsibility must lie with the individual to ensure they are positioning themselves in the best way possible to market, though groups like Enterprise Nation and IPSE can offer much-needed support.



Claire used a website called "task rabbit" to look for casual work, doing odd jobs like deliveries and cleaning, which she began after being made redundant CREDIT: GEOFF PUGH/TMG

And the tide is turning: while women freelancers tend to operate in industries that are typically lower paid, this hasn't stopped their wages exceeding those of men in Washington, Minneapolis, Atlanta, New York and Los Angeles. An agile workforce helps retain women in the workplace, which is good for business, the economy and society as a whole. It can keep their skills fresh – acting as a smooth transition back into the traditional workplace.


Critics of the gig economy argue work is exploitative and fear an impending race to the bottom in terms of pay and conditions. But this is an innovation even Luddites would rally behind: rather than threaten jobs, it provides opportunity that was unimaginable a decade ago.

In response to outcry over workers' rights, the government could be tempted to shoehorn 20th century regulation previously applied to the traditional workplace. Not only does this risk hampering the benefits platforms like Deliveroo can generate, but it sidelines the wishes of many of those working in the gig economy. Extensive polling of male and female Uber drivers, for example, found that five out of six say they prefer the flexibility of being self-employed to the possibility of employee perks.

Further, politicians must resist the urge to alter the gig landscape in an attempt to put women on an even footing. Already, self-employed women are offered Maternity Allowance up to 39 weeks after delivery, mirroring Statutory Maternity Pay and over the next 12 months, politicians will walk the tightrope between worker rights and actively supporting platforms to scale.

If British women are opting for self-employment in droves, we must make it as straightforward as possible for them to do so. Holding platforms back is in no one's interest. The gig economy isn't a zero-sum game: if stifled, workers and companies alike will lose out.

Women Mean Business | Read about our campaign

<p>One day summit celebrating women in the workplace - join us</p> 	<p>BORN EQUAL. TREATED UNEQUALLY</p> <p>How Britain's economy, culture and politics are blighted by gender disparity</p>  <p>200 leaders sign letter to boost female entrepreneurship in Britain</p> 
<p>VIDEO</p> <p>'Women should feel as comfortable, confident and inspired as men'</p> 	<p>How the funding gap is preventing millions of women from starting their own business</p>  <p>WILLIAM HAGUE</p> <p>Here's what men need to do to tackle gender inequality and injustice</p> 