Digital Work in the Planetary Market

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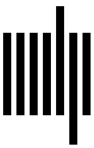

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9 In Search of Stability at a Time of Upheaval: Digital Freelancing in Venezuela

Hannah Johnston

"You know, I want to make a suggestion," Enrique said at the end of our interview. As an Argentine national and aspiring platform worker who had relocated to Uruguay earlier in 2020 in search of greater economic stability, Enrique told me that many of his clients were also from Argentina. They paid him in Argentine pesos, but he needed and preferred clients who paid in dollars; the relative stability of the US dollar—especially compared with Argentina's currency, which had an inflation rate of over 53 percent in 2019 (Mander 2020)—made it easier to save money for the medium and long term.

Enrique continued: "If you can interview some people of Venezuela, maybe? They have many more issues than people in Argentina and their rates are very, very low. . . . I think they have really a lot of issues, you know? I always wonder how things are going over there because they have a very difficult situation, you know, in the market. Even here on Workana, you know? If I take this job for $10, they can maybe do it for $1."

As it happened, I had already observed the phenomenon Enrique mentioned: the growing number of Venezuelan workers on digital labor platforms who were willing to work for very low wages. In fact, I had begun a small research project to determine whether the number of Venezuelan platform workers was indeed increasing and, if so, to better understand why this influx was taking place. Specifically, I was interested in whether and how planetary labor markets were helping individuals to navigate the collapse of the domestic economy and the corresponding hyperinflation of the bolívar, Venezuela's national currency. My findings from this project suggested that a growing number of Venezuelans are on digital labor platforms and, drawing on a series of qualitative interviews, that platforms are being used as a survival strategy by individuals seeking to weather the country's economic instability.

I began conducting interviews in 2019 with workers throughout Latin America to better understand their experiences of working remotely. Research conducted in Eastern Europe suggests that although cloud workers are technically capable of working for a global clientele in planetary labor markets, regional markets are known to

develop, particularly when there are distinct linguistic needs (Aleksynska, Bastrakova, and Kharchenko 2018). This sparked my curiosity about Spanish-language platforms and the experiences of Spanish speakers on global platforms. Over the course of interviewing workers like Enrique, I learned of other labor market dynamics that impacted workers from the region: I was repeatedly told of increased competition among Spanish-speaking workers due to an influx of Venezuelans on a variety of digital platforms. In the words of Martin, a voice-over actor from Mexico, "It is sad because you can observe the other applicants when you are applying for a job offer and 50 percent of them are Venezuelans. And that 50 percent of Venezuelans ask [for] 10 times less money in order to get the job." Comments like these propelled me to learn more about the specific experiences of Venezuelans working on digital labor platforms. Why were they turning to digital platforms? What unique challenges and opportunities do these types of jobs present to them? And how do such experiences complement or contrast with the lives and careers they had envisioned for themselves?

Following the economic collapse of the country and hyperinflation that has affected the country since 2016 (Graham-Harrison, Torres, and Daniels 2019), a growing number of Venezuelans have turned to the planetary labor market to meet their material needs. Digital labor platforms are frequently associated with disruptions because of their capacity to reshape local industries, but within the Venezuelan context it is the disruption of local economic production that has pushed workers online. Platforms have provided stability for individuals amid the economic collapse; as their proponents have argued, digital labor platforms have provided Venezuelan workers with new income streams, flexible work arrangements, and opportunities for entrepreneurship (Manyika et al. 2016). At the same time, however, the relative success of Venezuelans stems from the decline of economic and employment opportunities available in the territory they inhabit.

Drawing on 12 qualitative interviews with Venezuelan platform workers, this chapter examines how digital platforms (such as Workana and Upwork), also referred to as profession-based freelancing platforms (Howcroft and Bergvall-Kåreborn 2018), are being used as a lifeline for workers in a time of economic turmoil. The chapter reveals a harsh irony about the role that such platforms play: They provide people with a means to meet their financial obligations and to put food on the table, and are thus viewed favorably by their users. However, the gravitation of users to this method of working is driven not by individuals' desire to pursue online entrepreneurship opportunities, flexibility, or any of the narratives typically espoused by promoters of platform work but by the absence of viable employment alternatives and the failure of the Venezuelan state to mitigate the economic crisis and hyperinflation.

Global Trends and the Rise of Platform Work in Venezuela

Anyone interested in the growth of digital labor platforms is aware of the dearth of reliable or comparable data on the number of platform workers and their general demographic and economic characteristics (O'Farrell and Montagnier 2020). While the digital nature of labor platforms would make it relatively easy for platform firms to produce these types of statistics, they have been reticent in doing so. Market share has a direct impact on a platform's ability to realize network effects (i.e., its ability to meet and match the needs of customers) and thus on its overall valuation (Bergvall-Kåreborn and Howcroft 2014; Srnicek 2016). Revealing information about rates of use could therefore place a platform at a competitive disadvantage. Absent data derived from the platforms themselves, researchers and governments have turned to other mechanisms to obtain this information.

Governments and researchers have sought firstly to collect information about platform labor market participation from workers directly. In a limited number of countries, questions have been introduced on labor force surveys (O'Farrell and Montagnier 2020; Piasna 2020). More often, independent researchers have administered their own surveys by recruiting workers on or off digital labor platforms. While it is impossible to obtain a representative sample with this approach (because of the absence of general population statistics), such efforts can shed light on overall online labor market trends, particularly when studies are repeated at regular intervals. An additional approach, scraping digital labor platform websites for data with the purpose of counting the number of workers and tasks available, has also been used (Kässi and Lehdonvirta 2018). Overall, most of these independent studies have been conducted in the Global North or have focused on English-language platforms. This suggests that the data is unlikely to capture the breadth of activity in Latin America, West Africa, or Asia. Even so, research that has been global in scope points to a sharp rise in the number of Venezuelan platform workers in recent years.

One key indicator that points to a dramatic rise in the number of Venezuelan platform workers is provided by the Online Labour Index (OLI), a project of the Oxford Internet Institute, which scrapes data from a selection of major English-language platforms globally. The project's worker data is derived daily from Guru, Fiverr, Freelancer .com, and PeoplePerHour, with the dataset going back to June 2017 (Kässi and Lehdonvirta 2018). Data on available jobs is then aggregated and classified thematically by the type of task (for example, creative and multimedia or writing and translation). The number of workers on the platforms is also captured, as is information about their country of residence and skill set. Although an imperfect proxy (the data does

not include, for example, time worked on the platform), the project has documented increases in the number of people working on these platforms since it began in 2017 (Stephany et al. 2020). While the project probably undercounts Venezuelan platform workers because it does not include any Spanish-speaking platforms, it nonetheless documents a significant increase in the number of workers from Venezuela. While there is an overall upward trend in Venezuelan workers since the project began in 2017, this increase is most apparent in late 2019 and 2020 (figure 9.1).

Other studies have also reported a growing number of Venezuelan workers engaged in cloud work. For example, the International Labour Organization's (ILO's) global microworker survey (which predates the OLI and has been conducted twice, first in 2015 and then in 2017) also notes an increase in the number of Venezuelans active on select platforms, though their dataset is significantly smaller (Berg et al. 2018).

Florian Schmidt, in a study about generating training data for self-driving cars, found a remarkable incidence of Venezuelans working online in 2018. Focusing on a subset of platforms that specialize in artificial intelligence (AI) training data, he reports that these platforms now amass workforces of hundreds of thousands and that on some the workforce is nearly 75 percent Venezuelan (Schmidt 2019; see also chapter 8 in this volume). Compared to the platforms included in the OLI or surveyed by the ILO, which predominantly facilitate direct client-worker relationships, the specialized AI

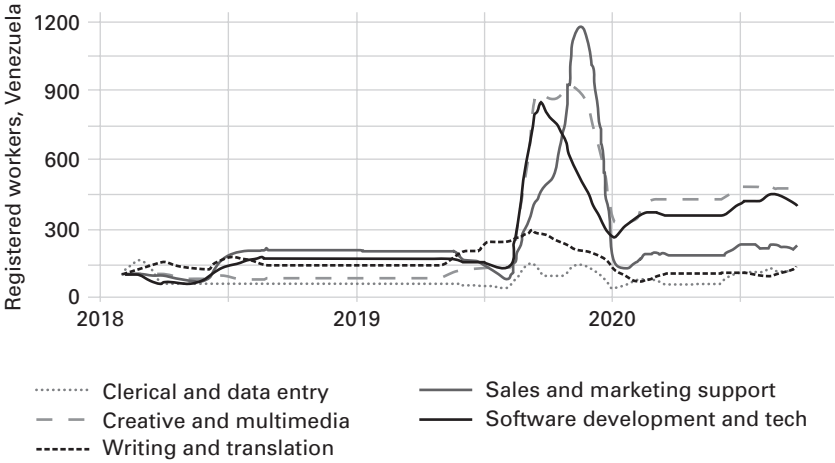

Figure 9.1
Venezuelan platform workers, 30-day moving average. Note: Replication of methods and modification of code reported in Stephany et al. (2020).
Source: Derived from Online Labour Index (ilabour.oii.ox.ac.uk).

training-data platforms examined by Schmidt provide much greater oversight of the workforce. He remarks that these platforms must "invest in new, often AI-enhanced, custom-made production tools that both automatically support and control the workforce, [and] invest in the pre-selection and training of crowdworkers" because of their commitment to providing high levels of data accuracy to clients on an ongoing basis (Schmidt 2019, 4). In other words, for these platforms to maintain their relationships with clients, managing the crowd becomes an integral part of their quality control process. Such jobs may be more stable than those on typical digital work platforms (i.e., those where the platform does not guarantee work quality), which are commonly criticized for their lack of reliable earnings and tasks (De Stefano 2015).

Schmidt's study is an interesting point of contrast for the information presented and discussed in the remainder of this chapter. Schmidt writes that AI firms with high levels of oversight were engaged in developing the necessary infrastructure to accommodate and onboard an inexpensive workforce. AI platforms gained popularity in Venezuela around 2018, a time of economic collapse when the reserve wage for Venezuelan labor was in decline. AI platforms saw these workers, and their corresponding low wages, as an opportunity to capture greater profits. They thus sought to develop and invest in this workforce by creating the necessary infrastructure and supports to be fully functional in countries like Venezuela, which offered an inexpensive workforce. This included, for example, increasing the linguistic capacity of their platforms by "translating the tasks, the training, and the community management into the language of low wage regions on the global market for digital labour" (Schmidt 2019, 14), all of which allowed them to establish a known and reliable workforce.

Unlike the highly standardized data-generative work performed on AI platforms like those studied by Schmidt, digital platforms like Workana, Upwork, and Freelancer.com are less involved in the labor process, and tasks tend to be unique and varied in their requirements and expectations. The work is less repetitive, and the evaluations of work quality tend to be more subjective—particularly for fields like design, a popular specialization of workers in Venezuela. Job terms and evaluation are also determined between the worker and client directly—which is different from Schmidt's finding of AI data-training platforms that intermediate this process and actively manage their crowds.

Because global freelance platforms seek to recruit a global workforce, they may be unwilling or unable to offer translation or customer service support in all of the countries where they are used. Indeed, this is the case in Venezuela. The workers I interviewed had to figure out independently how to navigate job and payment systems on platforms, and they were not offered support or guidance on how to handle the unique geopolitical challenges that they faced as participants in a planetary labor market. The

geopolitical conditions in Venezuela both pushed them to participate in digital labor platforms and created unique barriers to accessing some elements of platform infrastructure. This has caused particular challenges for workers' ability to receive payment following US sanctions against the Venezuelan state.

Hyperinflation and Digital Work

Historically, the Venezuelan economy has been underpinned by rents derived from the country's large oil reserves; however, this reliance on resource extraction has left the economy susceptible to commodity price vulnerabilities. When the economy has flourished, improving the economic well-being of individual Venezuelans, it has done so by redistributing rents obtained from resource extraction activities (Rosales 2016). Yet this resource-based approach to industrialization and development never translated to a diversification of domestic economic activity. Instead, the state remained extremely dependent on a growth strategy underpinned exclusively by extractive industries (Auty 1986). As a result, the country came to rely on imports for a range of basic and necessary goods from food to medicine (Burki 2017; Purcell 2017). While this posed no issue when crude prices boomed, as such imports could be easily afforded (Bridge 2008), the 2014 collapse of oil prices coupled with recent economic sanctions, including economic sanctions imposed by the US in 2019, have propelled the Venezuelan economy to the brink of collapse.

For decades, and even during times of relative prosperity, Venezuela has struggled to maintain the stability of its currency (Gallegos 2016). While inflation has been a long-standing concern, it reached new heights with the collapse of oil prices. During this time, the government attempted to maintain "unsustainable market controls that . . . include a strict exchange control that eroded the value of the legal tender, the *bolívar*, while driving the country to hyperinflation" (Rosales 2019). One such control is the government-backed, artificially high exchange rate that exists in parallel with the rapidly devalued black-market rate for bolívars (Kiguel, Lizondo, and O'Connell 1997; Di John 2005). While stores of foreign currency held by the Central Bank of Venezuela were initially used to delay the impact felt by a country highly dependent on imports of basic goods (Gallegos 2016), and regular banking transactions in US dollars were previously prohibited, such controls have now largely been dismantled. By 2019, government coffers were so low, the country turned toward de facto dollarization (Bull and Rosales 2020).

Indeed, the collapse of the bolívar spurred vast emigration to other countries that boast more stable economies (Castillo Crasto and Reguant Álvarez 2017). Conditions have become difficult throughout the country for those who remain, including those who previously lived middle-class or even upper-middle-class lives. Devaluation of the

currency has happened at such a rapid rate that holding bolívars for any period of time has become a risky proposition. Money is better spent immediately on any material good because, unlike the bolívar, such goods are more apt to retain their value—even within the short term.

For example, Emilia, a Caracas-based labor lawyer now working at Upwork whom I interviewed in the course of this research, explained that she felt hyperinflation most acutely with the items she purchased regularly; it was with these items that she would be able to see the vast changes in the number of bolívars that she was charged. She stated, "You have to be ahead of what is coming, and you have to be prepared if you want to maintain some sort of living. . . . I spent two or three years giving up things that I like, like going to the movies or eating outside, or meeting with friends in a restaurant or a café or something like that, because you have to keep your money for the really important things. So that was a huge change for me and for many of us that live here." Emilia explained that the cost of both discretionary and routine purchases changed with every trip to the store. This was not the case for rent, mortgages, and, importantly, Emilia's salary, which remained relatively static, leaving her increasingly unable to meet the market price for food and medications.

So while the bolívar has become tremendously devalued, wages have tended to stagnate. As such, even the jobs held by professionals—like lawyers, doctors, and geographers, occupations held by those interviewed as part of this research—no longer provide enough income to put food on the table, let alone to support the standard of living that workers enjoyed a decade ago. For those who have Internet access and computers, obtaining foreign currency has become a key strategy to secure some semblance of security. Some have bought Bitcoin (Cifuentes 2019; Rosales 2019; Bull and Rosales 2020). Others have turned to digital labor markets as a strategy to obtain foreign currency and reduce their exposure to hyperinflation.

The rapid and extreme increase in the number of Venezuelan workers active on platforms during the second half of 2019 (shown in figure 9.1) corresponds with the introduction of expanded US sanctions targeting Venezuela, under Executive Orders 13850 and 13884 (and perhaps others).[1] Among other things, the introduction of these sanctions has made international banking transfers to Venezuela more difficult for those who rely on financial support from abroad in the form of remittances.

While Venezuela has experienced little relief since 2019, the sharp increase in the number of registered platform users in the final quarter of 2019 did decrease in December before beginning to rise steadily again in 2020. One possible explanation could be the annual trends in digital labor markets, which have been shown to wane during the holiday season (Stephany et al. 2020). Alternatively, the decrease could also be

explained by phenomena such as platform upkeep and the removal of worker accounts. It may also reveal logistical difficulties that the sanctions posed to the ability of digital workers to fully participate in these labor markets, as discussed in the next section.

Motivations, Payment Regulations, and Obstacles

The strategy of using digital labor platforms to withstand Venezuela's economic turmoil is—despite the desperation and difficulty of the lives of many with whom I spoke—a privilege. In order to make their way online, workers must have some basic infrastructure—that is, a computer and reliable Internet access. On platforms like Upwork, Workana, and Freelancer.com (the sites where the interviewees for this chapter were recruited), workers frequently have a marketable skill set, including knowledge of English and high levels of computer literacy, that appeals to international purchasers of their services. In my purposive sampling of respondents, which sought to recruit respondents of various experience levels who were providing diverse services such as translation, design, and professional services, all were well educated, having received or being on course to receive at least a bachelor's degree, and more than half had master's or professional degrees.

Nearly all were attracted to digital labor platforms after hearing through their informal networks about online earning opportunities. Most had a friend or a family member who had suggested that such platforms could provide a viable source of income in dollars. For respondents, the decision to enter these labor markets was uniformly and merely a matter of survival. The need for foreign currency had become a frank reality for maintaining stability at a time of economic and political upheaval. When asked why he started working on the platform, Hugo, who was trained as a lawyer and lives in a city two hours west of Caracas, described the situation frankly: "I had been working [locally] but the devaluation [of the bolívar] was so huge that I told myself 'I need to make income in a foreign currency.'" Samuel, a medical doctor from Porlamar, a small city on an island off Venezuela's northern coast, felt similarly. Hyperinflation had eroded his doctor's salary so significantly that at the time of our interview, he was paid the equivalent of US$2 every 15 days. He continued to work as a doctor as his main job but was also working as a freelance medical writer for US-based clients, where he could make upward of an additional $200 a week. His medical job seemed to provide him with a sense of purpose; his platform work, meanwhile, gave him the financial means necessary to continue to provide medical care within his local economy.

Multiple respondents were still engaged in academic study, even though they were unlikely to find jobs in the near future that would compensate them at the levels they were earning online. Isidro, a civil engineering student, was in the tenth year of a degree

that, he noted, typically takes five years to complete. His studies, he explained, were delayed by depression and other personal issues but also by constitutional reforms and job actions that had shut down the university. Working online as an administrative assistant and content moderator helped to cover his tuition and living costs while he worked to complete his academic program. "Imagine this," Isidro explained from his apartment in Caracas, "I make $50 a week. And now imagine a professor that has many years of experience and that dedicates many hours more than what I dedicate to work, that earns $3 a month." Meanwhile, Lucia, who lives in the northwestern state of Zulia and was midway through earning a third master's degree in petroleum geology, started managing social media accounts for foreign companies because she simply did not have enough money to survive. Her credentials had landed her a once-comfortable public sector job supervising drilling engineers in the country's then-booming oil sector. But although she continued to hold this position, she explained, "We haven't gone to the office in the last two years because, due to the sanctions, we don't have any work to do, so we are staying at home and they haven't paid us since." Nonetheless, she continued to pursue ongoing education in her professional field. This differed from Beltran, a medical doctor from San Cristobal near the Colombian border. Beltran was soft-spoken for most of the interview but stressed just before we hung up the call, "What I can earn in one month working on Upwork is more than what my parents can earn [locally] together in Venezuela throughout the whole year. You can make that part of your report because that . . . that is Venezuela." Beltran had abandoned working as a doctor altogether to help support his parents and other dependents.

When it comes to emerging economies, there is a growing debate about the costs and benefits that platforms present vis-à-vis job quality and skills development. There is also significant speculation about how labor platforms might be used in shaping, for better or worse, development agendas. The political and economic situation in Venezuela, as a driver of platform participation, further complicates this debate. Critics frequently take a long view, arguing that digital labor platforms, and particularly microtasking work, can deskill workers or otherwise contribute to underemployment (Berg et al. 2018). Researchers have scrutinized, for example, the unequal access to and distribution of platform work that commonly results in university graduates from the Global South providing low-skilled content moderation services for Western countries, effectively cleaning up the digital trash and cloud waste produced by developed economies (see, for example, Gray and Suri 2019). Such positions, they argue, have limited opportunity for career advancement, skills acquisition, or upward mobility. Similar analyses demand an accounting of the true cost of Western students' hiring university graduates from developing nations to write their university papers and artificially

inflate their grades (Lancaster 2016). While these examples raise important moral questions about the job quality, labor market fairness, and prospects of online work, Heeks et al. (2020) note that digital platforms can also fill labor market voids by providing new, and in some ways, better jobs. This latter optimism may be more aligned with the current role that platforms play for workers in Venezuela: they can provide stability in the presence of market collapse and the tools required to withstand periods of domestic economic turmoil. Nonetheless, these current opportunities lack the career potential that, for many, their previous employment provided.

Yet even in Venezuela, there have been instances, like those observed by Schmidt (2019),[2] where platforms have worked to build infrastructure to onboard Venezuelans to capitalize on workers' desperation and need for income. In such cases, corporate profit motives may create incentives to keep wages low and lead to longer-term underdevelopment. But the short-term changes in the Venezuelan economy have been so extreme that workers have nevertheless been compelled to navigate these systems in whatever manner makes it easiest for them to participate. In doing so, they are attempting to take advantage of the benefits of working online that are otherwise unavailable locally—notably, a stable currency.

There are, however, unique challenges for platform workers in Venezuela. The first is the material challenge of working from a region with an unstable Internet connection and an unreliable energy grid. While energy costs are generally considered affordable, in large part due to government subsidies,[3] there are frequent interruptions to service. The instability of these connections was acutely apparent during interviews with many of the respondents; for example, in the process of coordinating interviews, I was asked about the possibility of conducting midnight Skype meetings or WhatsApp conversations because Internet connections and energy grids were less taxed at these antisocial hours. Uneven access to information and communications services also made large cities like Caracas more reliable than less densely populated regions. Isidro, the civil engineering student, mentioned that one reason he continued to rent an apartment in Caracas rather than living with his family outside of the city was that the Internet connection was more reliable for his online work.

The second principle challenge that Venezuelan platform workers face relates to the ways that geopolitics and international regulations shape workers' everyday experiences of the labor market. US sanctions placed against the Venezuelan government have had consequences for individual workers, constraining their ability to access the money they earn online. The sanctions, as written, are intended to deprive the Maduro regime and its supporters of financial support from abroad. However, payment processors—firms like the US-based PayPal that are used by international platforms like

Upwork and Freelancer.com—are realistically unable to distinguish between supporters of the regime and ordinary citizens. As a result, it has become standard practice at many firms to cease to provide services to subscribers from sanctioned countries. As a result, though Venezuelans remain technically able to access the work opportunities that digital labor platforms provide, it is difficult for them to be paid for their work. In other words, although the planetary labor market is global in scope and participation, the lived experiences of workers in this labor market can differ according to their location. Venezuelans must overcome the additional barriers these sanctions create in order to participate.

Workers have developed a variety of workarounds to address the complications that US sanctions have introduced. The educational levels and occupational histories of some respondents were accomplished enough that they had traveled abroad prior to the current period of hyperinflation and been able to set up overseas bank accounts. Ariel is a trained cartographer who now does design work on Upwork and Fiverr and has a complex business that allows him to sell T-shirts to US consumers using third-party printing services and the Etsy platform—all from his home in Caracas. He explained that he had acquired a foreign bank account during travel to the United States in 2012, when his wages as a geographic information systems specialist were sufficient to fund an international trip. "This account," Ariel explained, "has helped me a lot. It has opened the door to these platforms. It has helped me to charge for my work." A US-based bank account has made it easy for Ariel to obtain a PayPal account that could be verified by a US financial institution; in this way, he was able to avoid being removed from the PayPal platform. He figured that he slipped between the cracks because his bank was based in the US.

For people like Susana from Caracas who do not have foreign accounts, sometimes using the accounts of friends located elsewhere is a feasible solution. Susana had been working on platforms for several years, but, because of the sanctions, she had to devise a new way to access the money she was making. She asked a friend living abroad for assistance. "I asked him a favor, 'Could you open a PayPal account for me?' because in Venezuela they're blocked. He was happy about it so he always receives my money. Actually, the account is more mine than his because he never uses it. . . . He only opened it for me." Susana's system had worked for some time, but she explained that she was now in the middle of a dispute with Upwork, the main platform she works on. Upwork had recently flagged her account because the contact details of her worker profile on the platform differed from the contact information on the PayPal account, which, indeed, was in the name of her friend. At the time of the interview, she was under a two-day suspension and was in communication with the platform to try to figure out the best

way forward. As a top-rated worker, she wanted to maintain her profile and account—but also wanted to be paid for the work she completed. She was not quite sure what to do.

For those who earn and keep most of their earnings outside the country, the second challenge comes with transferring currency into the country. With increased dollarization, this is becoming less of an issue. Isidro, the civil engineering student, told me: "Five years ago, the word *dollar* was like a taboo . . . something mystical. Like, you said, 'I have $5' and people used to get scared. Right? That was because the change to dollars wasn't [embraced by the Venezuelan government until recently]. Now, the government is taking measures to make sure that everyone is paying taxes in dollars. . . . Now, businesses are charging you in dollars directly." While none of the respondents I interviewed paid taxes on the income they earned on platforms, the increased use of dollars has made it easier to spend the money they make online. However, such purchases are typically made on the black or gray market, in the form of direct financial transfers between individuals. These remain completely outside of the view of the state and are nearly always digital.

Additionally, and nonetheless, there are still some items that people will purchase in the national currency, and for which they will sometimes need to convert dollars to bolívars. Emilia, the labor lawyer, explained that when she started working online, she was able to set up a Payoneer account.[4] Two months later, sanctions were introduced and she lost her ability to use this account. She was hesitant to share the full details of how she ultimately managed to secure access to a PayPal account but said that she prefers to keep all her money in the United States. When Emilia needs bolívars, she explained, "I do a transfer to someone that has a PayPal account but has the bolívars here." She can then collect the bolívars through this informal transfer network without ever having to deal with a Venezuelan financial institution.

Long-standing parallel official and unofficial exchange rates have fostered these types of informal financial arrangements for years (Gallegos 2016). Indeed, Emilia and others noted that such arrangements are commonplace. Now, even though the government has embraced dollarization, US policy still makes international transfers difficult (Kurmanaev and Herrera 2020). Emilia told me, "We can't [go to a bank and ask for US dollars to be exchanged] because there's some executive order from the US government. Before the sanctions, there was a possibility to do the transfer directly from your Payoneer account to your bank account here in Venezuela, so it was easier, but right now, we can't do that." Instead, she goes to her friend—a reliable one she trusts—but she still spends the money quickly. "It is a matter of hours that you have because you can't afford to keep the bolívars in your bank account. They lose value in a matter of minutes sometimes. It's a little traumatic [and has been] for the past three or four years."

Conclusion

In Venezuela, digital platforms can offer some workers—notably those with the resources, skills, and capital to effectively market themselves—an avenue to withstand the economic disruptions that have plagued the country. The growth of platform work in Venezuela highlights two important takeaways for the study of platform work: First, it serves as an example of the uneven geographic distribution of cloud work in the planetary labor market and lays bare some of the ways in which planetary labor markets are entwined with local economies. In this case, the influx of Venezuelan platform workers began because of a faltering national economy and the decline of viable local employment options; such trends continue. Second, this case highlights how even workers in a global labor market—who can, in theory, work from anywhere—still encounter obstacles that constrain their ability to fully participate. Venezuelan workers' challenges derive from cross-jurisdictional regulation and geopolitics, particularly US sanctions against the Maduro regime. Indeed, workers experience planetary labor markets differently depending on their location, and workers in Venezuela face unique challenges.

Although digital freelancing appears to be disembedded from any singular economy, it informs and is informed by the regions where the work is performed. It is only because of the Venezuelan economic collapse, which pulled an increasing number of workers to sign up as a survival strategy, that digital labor platform work has grown there so dramatically in recent years. What is more, the collapse of the domestic currency has made Venezuelans a comparatively cheap workforce relative to others who might be working in the planetary market; this is particularly true in the context of Latin America.

While global cloud work platforms like Upwork, Workana, and Freelancer.com have provided many Venezuelan workers with a lifeline, the largest global platforms are neither built for nor designed to accommodate any particular workforce—especially not to accommodate one affected by a series of complex US sanctions levied against the Maduro regime. Amid international rules and regulations prohibiting US persons from engaging in transactions with and supporting the Maduro government, many individuals working from Venezuela are encountering obstacles in their attempts to receive payment for their online work. They have thus had to develop alternative and informal financial workarounds to access their platform earnings. While digital labor platforms are often accused of circumventing established laws and regulations—a trend that is most frequently cited with regard to labor and employment law (see, for example, Cherry 2015; Rogers 2016)—in this case it is individual workers who are evading established rules. Whether workers have US bank accounts or navigate informal transfers on the black market through social networks, in this context their actions are better understood as an example of

"reworking." Re-working, as an expression of worker agency, comprises efforts to redistribute resources to improve workers' material conditions and in some cases, as in Venezuela's, to pursue survival (Anwar and Graham 2019).

At the same time, the very existence of rules and regulations prohibiting financial transfers to Venezuela suggests that there are avenues for regulating the platform economy that have not yet been explored. This is notable because the vast majority of transactions and exchanges that take place on digital labor platforms remain wholly unregulated and, in the eyes of some, unregulatable (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018). Indeed, the cross-jurisdictional nature of online labor platforms has raised questions about how regulatory enforcement would take place; many of these work transactions occur between actors operating in different countries with distinct legal frameworks. While this case shows that individual workers have developed workarounds to the regulation brought on by sanctions (in this case, workarounds including gray-market financial transfers), the process through which the sanctions have been operationalized suggests that it may be possible to use payment processors as a site for regulatory intervention and enforcement. With sufficient political will, payment processing could, for example, be reserved for platforms that promote equitable working conditions such as minimum wage payments or dispute resolution mechanisms; such an intervention could thus be used to improve working conditions on platforms more generally.

Notes

1. In 2014 and 2015, Venezuela experienced a significant bout of political turmoil as thousands took to the street in anti-government protests. The Venezuelan government, led by Nicolás Maduro, responded forcefully to this unrest. This, in turn, triggered US sanctions (asset blocking and visa restrictions) of select Venezuelan nationals who were accused of human rights violations, antidemocratic actions, and corruption. The Maduro regime has remained in power but has since become the target of a much broader array of sanctions that have targeted the economy more generally (Congressional Research Service 2020).

2. Notably, even platforms discussed by Schmidt (2019), which sought to onboard Venezuelan workers specifically, have more recently faced challenges related to US-imposed sanctions, discussed in the following paragraphs. See also chapter 8 in this volume.

3. Interestingly, these subsidies have also helped to make Bitcoin mining more accessible (Cifuentes 2019).

4. Payoneer, like PayPal, is an international digital financial services company that is frequently used by platform workers. Often, it is an intermediary step as workers seek to move money they have made from their platform worker account to their domestic bank account, although money can also be retained within a Payoneer account.

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