EMPOWERING REFUGEES IN THE DIGITAL ECONOMY: HUMAN RIGHTS PERSPECTIVES ON ONLINE LABOR MARKETS[11]

ABILITAREA REFUGIAȚILOR ÎN ECONOMIA DIGITALĂ: PERSPECTIVE ALE DREPTURILOR OMULUI ASUPRA MUNCII ONLINE

Mariana ROSCA
PhD
ORCID ID: 0000-0002-9731-7594
Email: roshcam@yahoo.com
Transilvania University of Brasov, Romania

CZU: 342.734:004-054.73 **DOI:** https://doi.org/10.59295/ssdoed2025.18

Summary: *This paper explores the transformative potential of the digital economy and the parallel rise of digital labor, emphasizing their implications for labor market dynamics and social inclusion. In an era marked by technological innovation and recurring global crises, digitalization has become an essential driver of economic competitiveness, institutional restructuring, and labor mobility. While these developments offer new opportunities for addressing skills shortages and enabling flexible forms of employment, they also raise critical concerns regarding equity and access, particularly for marginalized populations such as refugees. Refugees often face legal, institutional, and social barriers to formal employment, yet digital labor present novel avenues for their economic participation and empowerment. This article critically examines how digitalization can serve as mechanisms for inclusion, while also highlighting the human rights challenges that must be addressed to ensure that digital labor markets are equitable and accessible. By focusing on the intersection of digital labor and refugee rights, the article offers a rights-based framework for building inclusive digital economies that foster resilience, opportunity, and social justice.*

[11] This article has been elaborated with the financial support of the research project „@ Work: Resilient societies in the wake of persistent crises. A case study of Ukrainian women refugees` digital work", grant nr. 760132/18.09.2023", PNRR. Finanțat de Uniunea Europeană – UrmătoareaGenerațieUE. https://mfe.gov.ro/pnrr/, https://www.facebook.com/PNRROficial/

Keywords: *refugees, digital economy, human rights, decent work.*

Rezumat*: Această lucrare explorează potențialul transformator al economiei digitale și ascensiunea paralelă a forței de muncă digitale, subliniind implicațiile acestora pentru dinamica pieței muncii și incluziunea socială. Într-o eră marcată de inovația tehnologică și crize globale recurente, digitalizarea a devenit un factor esențial al competitivității economice, restructurării instituționale și mobilității forței de muncă. Deși aceste evoluții oferă noi oportunități pentru abordarea deficitului de competențe și pentru a permite forme flexibile de angajare, ele ridică, de asemenea, preocupări critice cu privire la echitate și acces, în special pentru populațiile marginalizate, cum ar fi refugiații. Refugiații se confruntă adesea cu bariere legale, instituționale și sociale în calea ocupării formale a forței de muncă, însă, forța de muncă digitală prezintă noi căi pentru participarea și emanciparea lor economică. Acest articol examinează critic modul în care digitalizarea poate servi drept mecanism de incluziune, subliniind, totodată, provocările legate de drepturile omului care trebuie abordate pentru a se asigura că piețele digitale ale muncii sunt echitabile și accesibile. Concentrându-se pe intersecția dintre forța de muncă digitală și drepturile refugiaților, articolul oferă un cadru bazat pe drepturi pentru construirea unor economii digitale incluzive care să promoveze reziliența, oportunitățile și justiția socială.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *refugiați, economie digitală, drepturile omului, muncă decentă.*

Introduction

The global economy, along with individual national markets, is undergoing profound and continuous transformations. These changes are driven by rapid technological advancements, shifting socioeconomic trends, and cyclical global crises. Events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and armed conflicts have exposed the vulnerabilities in traditional systems while simultaneously accelerating the expansion of digital infrastructure and digital economic models. These dynamics have created complex challenges that demand innovative, adaptable, and resilient solutions.

In this context, digitalization and technological integration have transitioned from being a strategic advantage to an essential prerequisite for economic competitiveness and sustainability. Countries and businesses alike are increasingly investing in digital capabilities to secure their positions in a rapidly evolving and interconnected global market. The digital economy, characterized by the centrality of data, automation, and digital platforms, has become the core engine of growth, innovation, and global economic restructuring. It not only redefines the production

and consumption of goods and services but it also transforms the value creation, labor mobilization, and institutional development.

Parallel to this digital shift is the rise of digital labor, referring to the forms of work enabled or mediated by digital technologies. This transformation is not merely technical, but structural, leading to new labor dynamics, reshaping skills requirements, and reinforcing global interdependencies. According to the World Economic Forum [1] and other leading authorities, digital labor has become indispensable in addressing emerging gaps in national and international labor markets, where demand is increasingly focused on skilled, adaptable, and digitally literate workers.

During this transition, however, important questions around equity, access, and rights come froward. Refugees, who frequently face legal, institutional, and social barriers to formal employment, represent an underemployed yet capable segment of the global workforce. The digital economy, and online labor platforms in particular, offer potential pathways for refugees´ inclusion, especially during periods of crisis when traditional employment structures may be disrupted. Digital tools can enable displaced individuals to maintain access to income, upskill, and participate in global talent pools regardless of their physical location.

Yet, the opportunities of digital inclusion for refugees must be balanced against the risks of exclusion, exploitation, and deepening inequalities. Without adequate legal protections, inclusive frameworks, and supportive policies, digital platforms may replicate or even intensify the structural disadvantages already faced by displaced populations.

This article explores the emergence and evolution of the digital economy and digital labor, focusing specifically on the implications for refugee labor market integration. It critically examines how digital platforms can serve as tools of empowerment for refugees, while also highlighting the human rights considerations necessary to ensure equitable, meaningful, and dignified participation in the digital age.

Emergence of the digital economy and digital labour

In recent years, the global economy, along with national macroeconomic and microeconomic systems, is undergoing a profound shift in its priorities and strategic approaches. Whereas industrial production and management of material resources were the primary drivers of economic growth in the 20th century, but the consumer demand and service-oriented models dominated the early 21st century. However, the present era is increasingly defined by the digital economy as a central engine of growth, innovation and development.

Today, economic competitiveness is largely assessed through the lens of digital advancement. Most contemporary solutions are evaluated based on their functionality, relevance and uptake of the digital economy, underlying the extent to which digitalization penetrates every aspect of economic and social life. In effect, the global economy has evolved into a predominantly digital economy, where innovation, data, and technological infrastructures set the foundations of both national economic strategies and global market integration.

According to the World Economic Forum, contemporary economies must prioritize adaptability and transformative capacity in order to effectively respond to emerging global economic and geopolitical challenges. Traditional economic models are increasingly less effective, as their capacity to deliver sustainable benefits diminishes in the face of rapid change. In this line, the recent studies underline the growing importance of the digitalization, projecting that approximately 70% of global value creation over the next decades will be driven by digital products and digital services [1]. An additional confirmation of this trend brings Xia, who argues that "the digital economy is recognized as a primary driver of economic growth and development in many advanced countries and is continually expanding due to its significant impact on economic and business activities" [2]. Due to the increasing importance of digital economy for the national and global markets, it is necessary to have a look back to its origins and evolution.

Therefore, the setting and uptake of the digital economy is many times conceptualized in terms of four distinct waves, each representing a progressive step in the integration and influence of digital technologies within the broader economic landscape. According to Wladawsky-Berger these stages provide a useful framework for understanding the deepening role of digitalization in shaping economic development [3] and consecutively of digital labour as well. Each of the four waves (with slight variations across different interpretations) is defined by the emergence of specific technological processes or innovations that have significantly influenced the broader trajectory of digitalization. Therefore, the first wave is characterized by the establishment of foundational infrastructure that enabled widespread access to internet and the dissemination of information. The second wave reflects the increased engagement of society in generating, sharing, and structuring data, marking a shift toward participatory digital ecosystems. The third wave is distinguished by the proliferation of messaging applications and social media platforms,

which transformed communication dynamics and expanded the scope of digital interactions. Finally, the fourth wave brings neural networks and information exchange grounded in neurotechnological principles. This phase is further marked by the rapid expansion of the Internet of Things (IoT), the exponential growth of big data, and the accelerated development of Artificial Intelligence technologies [3]. Consequently, all these waves share a common characteristic: the transformative change that is multidimensional and transversal in nature and exerts a broad impact across all segments of society. Rong put it in a nutshell arguing that "the shift from the industrial economy to a digital economy brings tremendous changes in terms of new production factors, new organizations, new models, and new contexts…" [4]. These developments have also significantly impacted the labor market, driving the appearance and increased demand for digital labor to address evolving skill requirements and mitigate persistent labor shortages. Besides these changes, the digital economy brings many benefits, such as the development of entirely new solutions, the modernization of traditional approaches, and the strategic application of digital technologies. These technologies not only streamline and automate processes but also serve as catalysts for innovation, now a critical determinant of competitiveness at both the national level as well as within individual enterprises, within the global economy. Therefore, the digital economy represents the present and the future of economic growth. Nevertheless, Amuso et al. argue that the "new technological developments bring a number of benefits but also concerns. Given the potential of these new forms of employment, the first necessary action would be to gather sufficient information to develop adequate policy recommendations. Coordinated national and cross-national surveys could help to fill some of the existing gaps. The second step would be to develop a stronger public-private partnership between the government, the OECD, ILO, and existing professional associations to increase the monitoring of working conditions in digital platforms. Since work is usually outsourced, a broader form of coordination between multiple entities becomes indispensable to gather the necessary information and develop adequate proposals to protect workers. The establishment of ad hoc bodies and monitoring activities should inform such policy recommendations aiming at ensuring adequate pay and the protection of basic labour rights. Finally, despite the increasing speed of digital innovation, governments should invest in education and life programmes to fully reap the benefits of the digital economy"[5]. A similar concern belongs to Xia et al. who pointed out that "the digital economy

has significant impacts on various economic, social, and cultural fields, including changes in the way people work and interact with each other, promoting more flexible and remote work arrangements, and increasing global connectivity. Additionally, the digital economy has impacted education, healthcare, entertainment, and other sectors. Advances in technology and electronic communication have driven the global economy towards digitization, and the role of the digital economy in advancing global digitalization is critical. Its impact is expected to continue to increase in the coming years" [2].

Given the accelerating expansion of the digital economy, a parallel rise in the demand for digital labor is necessary and which most probably will increase in the near future. This growing sector will increasingly rely on a workforce that possesses advanced digital skills, adaptability, and technological fluency. However, many economies are already experiencing shortages in qualified digital professionals, posing a significant challenge to sustaining innovation and competitiveness in the global market.

In this context, refugees represent an often-overlooked yet highly valuable human capital resource. Many displaced individuals possess relevant education, work experience, or the capacity to rapidly acquire digital competencies when provided with appropriate training and access means. Leveraging refugee labor to fill digital labor gaps not only addresses market needs but also contributes to the socio-economic inclusion of refugees, aligning with broader human rights and development goals. Organizations such as the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) have emphasized the importance of integrating refugees into labor markets, including through digital and remote work initiatives that bypass traditional employment barriers [6].

Moreover, targeted programs that enhance refugees' digital skills, such as coding bootcamps, online freelancing platforms, and e-learning opportunities, can serve a dual purpose: equipping individuals with the tools needed for economic independence while also supplying national economies with global talent capable of meeting digital workforce demands. However, this approach requires not only investment in digital education and infrastructure but also reforming legal and institutional frameworks that restricts refugee employment and their financial inclusion. By recognizing and supporting the potential of refugees within the digital economy, policymakers and private sector actors can simultaneously address labor shortages and uphold principles of equity, resilience, and inclusion in the digital age.

Refugees in the digital economy and refugees' digital labour

The participation of refugees in the digital economy has emerged as a growing area of scholarly interest, particularly in light of the potential for digital labour to facilitate economic inclusion in contexts where formal employment is restricted or inaccessible. However, research reveals a complex picture marked by both opportunities for empowerment as well as structural barriers.

For example, Hackl and Najdi critically examine the role of the digital economy in Lebanon, questioning its viability as a tool for supporting populations affected by acute economic and humanitarian crises. Their analysis highlights how the intersection of Lebanon's severe economic collapse and restrictive regulatory environment, particularly in relation to digital platforms, skills training programs, and financial systems, and underlines the potential benefits of digital work for Syrian refugees. The authors argue that rather than serving as a vehicle for inclusion, digital labour in this context creates what they call a "digital space of exile." This term captures the paradox in which displaced Syrians remain structurally excluded even within supposedly open and borderless digital economies. Their findings challenge the prevailing narrative that digital platforms are inherently inclusive and demonstrate that the digital economy, when transplanted into fragile and vulnerable contexts, often reproduces or exacerbates existing inequalities [7].

In the Romanian context, Rosca [8] examines the engagement of Ukrainian refugees in digital labour and point out that such opportunities remain limited in this country. This is due, in part, to the underdevelopment of local digital platforms and the nascent stage of the digital economy in Romania, which offers limited functionality and restricted employment opportunities. The lack of robust digital infrastructure and a mature remote work ecosystem restricts the extent to which digital labour can serve as a meaningful avenue for refugee economic integration.

The gendered dimensions of digital entrepreneurship have also attracted some attention. Zalkat [9] explores how digital tools such as social media and internet platforms offer both opportunities and challenges for refugee women seeking to launch entrepreneurial ventures. Her study, based on in-depth interviews, shows that the use of digital tools facilitates market integration, enhances customer engagement, and expands access to commercial networks. However, Zalkat also highlights the burdens associated with digital entrepreneurship, including work–life imbalance and exposure to unethical online behaviour. These

findings emphasize the need for policy frameworks that are sensitive not only to access issues but also to the broader social and psychological impacts of digital labour on refugee women.

In light of this body of research, the digital economy can be seen as a double-edged sword for refugees. On the one hand, digital platforms hold the potential to bypass some of the regulatory and infrastructural limitations that often constrain refugee access to formal employment. For instance, job-matching platforms and freelance websites can connect refugees with remote work opportunities globally, offering a degree of economic autonomy that is otherwise difficult to attain [10]. On the other hand, significant barriers persist. Regulatory exclusions [7] in host countries frequently prevent refugees from registering on digital platforms or accessing the necessary financial infrastructure. In addition, many refugees lack the digital literacy, language proficiency, and technological resources [10, 11], required to engage meaningfully in digital work. Furthermore, inadequate internet access[10], particularly in refugee camps and temporary shelters poses a significant obstacle to participation in online labour markets.

Therefore, while digital labour platforms offer promising avenues for refugee economic empowerment, their effectiveness is heavily dependent on broader structural conditions, including regulatory environments, technological infrastructure, and social inclusion policies. The rights-based, inclusive approach to digital economic policy is therefore essential to ensure that digitalization genuinely supports refugee self-reliance and socioeconomic integration.

Thus, the integration of refugees into the digital economy must be critically examined through a human rights lens, as this process encompasses not only economic participation but also broader issues of inclusion, dignity, and agency. Digital engagement has the potential to empower displaced populations, yet it also presents new challenges that can compromise fundamental rights if not properly addressed. Considering that the right to work is enshrined in key international human rights instruments, including *Article 23* of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights [12] and *Article 6* of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights [13], in digital labor markets, especially those characterized by informality and decentralization, ensuring the protection of these rights becomes particularly problematic for refugees. Many digital platforms operate without consistent regulation or oversight, leading to precarious employment conditions, wage

theft, and a lack of social protection, such as health insurance, maternity leave, or pensions.

For refugee workers, these vulnerabilities are further exacerbated by their often ambiguous legal status, limited bargaining power, and exclusion from national labor protections. Studies of the ILO have documented instances where refugee gig workers are paid below minimum wage, lack access to dispute resolution mechanisms, and are frequently misclassified as independent contractors to circumvent labor standards [14]. Without robust legal frameworks and enforcement mechanisms, the digital economy risks becoming a space of economic exploitation rather than empowerment.

To counteract such challenges, access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) is increasingly acknowledged as a fundamental prerequisite for the realization of civil, political, and socioeconomic rights. The right to communicate, closely tied to the freedoms of expression and access to information, is especially important for refugees as they navigate displacement and attempt to rebuild their lives. Digital tools serve as vital sources, facilitating access to essential services such as education, healthcare, legal assistance, and humanitarian aid. However, the persistence of the digital divide continues to undermine these rights, disproportionately affecting displaced populations and deepening existing inequalities.

Digital inequalities are shaped by a range of factors including geography, gender, age, disability, and legal status. For example, refugees in camps or remote areas often face infrastructural deficits, unreliable connectivity, and unaffordable mobile data. Moreover, digital literacy gaps limit the ability of many refugees to use online platforms safely and effectively. These barriers not only hinder access to critical services but also contribute to broader social and economic exclusion. To address these problems, the international organizations such as UNHCR have called for greater investment in digital inclusion strategies that ensure equitable access to technology for displaced populations. These include community-based digital training, inclusive content in multiple languages, and partnerships with private sector actors to expand connectivity in underserved areas.

Beyond access and protection, the digital economy offers important opportunities for enhancing the agency and autonomy of refugees. Digital platforms can support self-advocacy and participation by allowing refugees to access rights-based information, report abuses, and share

experiences with broader audiences. For example, online rating and review systems can empower refugee workers to hold employers accountable and make informed decisions about job opportunities. Moreover, digital spaces provide avenues for collective organizing and community building. Refugee-led initiatives could create online cooperatives, share resources, and advocate for better labor conditions. Digital storytelling platforms, blogs, and social media have also enabled refugees to challenge dominant narratives, reclaim their voices, and influence policy discourses. Nevertheless, digital empowerment requires intentional design and policy support. Tech developers and platform providers must consider the specific needs and vulnerabilities of refugee users in the development of tools and interfaces. Multistakeholder approaches, engaging refugees, governments, NGOs, and the private sector, are crucial to fostering a rights-respecting digital ecosystem.

Thus, integrating refugees into the digital economy offers significant potential for socioeconomic inclusion and human rights realization. However, this integration must be underpinned by a strong rights-based framework that addresses labor protections, digital access, and meaningful participation. Policymakers and practitioners must not only mitigate the risks of exploitation and exclusion but also actively promote conditions under which refugees can thrive as autonomous and empowered digital citizens.

Conclusions

The emergence of the digital economy signifies a transformative shift in global economic development, fundamentally altering production models, labor structures, and mechanisms of social inclusion. While digitalization brings unprecedented opportunities for innovation, efficiency, and flexibility, it also introduces a range of complex challenges, particularly concerning equity, regulation, and labor rights. Digital labor, represents a central feature of this evolving economic landscape, and necessitates not only technological proficiency but also robust institutional frameworks that ensure fair treatment, adequate protections, and inclusive participation.

Within this context, refugees represent a vital yet often overlooked resource in the global digital workforce. Many displaced individuals possess relevant skills or the capacity to acquire them rapidly, provided they are given access to digital tools, training, and supportive policies. When inclusively designed and responsibly governed, digital platforms can offer meaningful pathways to self-reliance, economic integration, and

long-term empowerment, helping refugees transcend geographical and legal limitations that typically restrict their economic opportunities.

However, the current landscape reveals that access alone is insufficient. Structural barriers such as legal exclusion, underdeveloped digital infrastructure, limited digital literacy, and the absence of labor protections continue to impede refugee participation in digital labor markets. Without deliberate interventions, the digital economy risks reinforcing existing inequalities rather than dismantling them.

A rights-based approach is therefore essential. The realization of fundamental rights, including the right to work, the right to communication, and the right to economic inclusion, must be embedded in digital frameworks. Governments, international organizations, platform developers, and civil society actors must collaborate to build digital ecosystems that are accessible, equitable, and attuned to the specific vulnerabilities and aspirations of refugee populations. This involves targeted investments in digital infrastructure, digital education, legal reforms, and effective mechanisms for monitoring and safeguarding labor standards.

In sum, the digital economy holds significant potential to serve as a vehicle not only for economic growth, but also for refugee empowerment, global solidarity, and social justice. To fully realize this potential, inclusive design and policy coherence must be prioritized, ensuring that the digital age does not leave the most vulnerable behind, but instead fosters meaningful opportunities for all.

References:

1. Shaping the future of digital economy and new value creation. Weforum, (2022). Internet source. URL: https://www.weforum.org/centres-and-platforms/shaping-the-future-of-digital-economy-and-new-value-creation
2. XIA, L., BAGHAIE, S., & SAJADI, S. M. (2024). The digital economy: Challenges and opportunities in the new era of technology and electronic communications. *Ain Shams Engineering Journal*, *15*(2), 102411.
3. WLADAWSKY-BERGER, I. (2023). Digital Economy: The Evolution of the Digital Economy. Ubiquity, 2023(March), 1-6.
4. RONG, K. (2022). Research agenda for the digital economy. Journal of Digital Economy, 1(1), 20-31.
5. AMUSO, V., POLETTI, G., & MONTIBELLO, D. (2020). The digital economy: opportunities and challenges. Global Policy, 11(1), 124-127.
6. ILO & UNHCR (2022). Towards Decent Digital Work for Refugees and Host

Communities. Geneva: International Labour Organization and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.
7. HACKL, A., & NAJDI, W. (2024). Online work as humanitarian relief? The promise and limitations of digital livelihoods for Syrian refugees and Lebanese youth during times of crisis. *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, *56*(1), 100-116.
8. ROSCA, M. (2024). The Digital Work Platforms in Romania: An overview of the current state and possible advancements. *Proceedings of the Central and Eastern European eDem and eGov Days 2024*, 216-222.
9. ZALKAT, G. (2024). Towards digital entrepreneurship: Opportunities and challenges for female refugee entrepreneurs in Sweden. *Refugee Entrepreneurship*, 119-139.
10. JADAAN, J. B., & HASAN, Q. A. (2024). The Role of Digital Platforms in the Economic Empowerment Of Migrants and Forced Displaced Persons in the Context of Disasters and Climate Change. *Journal of Lifestyle and SDGs Review*, *4*(4), e04294-e04294.
11. ERINC OZTAS, M. (2024). Migrant Women in the UK's Digital Economy: The Elimination of Labour Market Barriers in the Digital Labour Market. *Social Sciences*, *13*(9), 494.
12. UN. General Assembly. (1949). *Universal declaration of human rights* (Vol. 3381). Department of State, United States of America.
13. RESOLUTION, G. A. (1966). International covenant on economic, social and cultural rights. *General Assembly Resolution A*, *2200*.
14. JOHNSTON, H., & LAND-KAZLAUSKAS, C. (2018). Organizing on-demand: Representation, voice, and collective bargaining in the gig economy.