# Audio file

[Researcher in Focus - Dr Stella Morgana.mp3](https://theuniversityofliverpool-my.sharepoint.com/personal/ndjones_liverpool_ac_uk/Documents/Transcribed%20Files/Researcher%20in%20Focus%20-%20Dr%20Stella%20Morgana.mp3)

# Transcript

NJ

So welcome everybody to the latest Researcher in Focus podcast from the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences here at the University of Liverpool. My name is Nick Jones. I'm part of the Research and Impact Team and today I'm joined by Doctor Stella Morgana, British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Politics and today Stella will be talking to us about her research investigating labour and the gig economy, and especially how that manifests itself in Iran. So Stella, thank you so much for joining me today. I wonder if you could just by way of a quick introduction, give us a little rundown of your academic background and career so far, and what brought you to the University of Liverpool?

SM

Thank you. Thank you for inviting me. I'm really glad to be here to share my experience and discuss my research with you. What brought me to live in Liverpool. That's a good question. I think I seriously my synchronicity took me to this inspiring city and also stimulating institution. I joined the University of Liverpool thanks to my British Academy Postdoctoral Fellowship in September 2022 with a project on platform labour and gig workers in Iran. But, well, let me tell you a story about that. It all started with a tweet. So on Twitter, it was early summer 2021 when I read that the Department of Politics was looking for potential applicants to the British Academy postdocs for our scheme. So I sent my proposal. Along with my abstract and everything to my current mentor, Doctor Hannis Bauman, and from there? Uh, I am. I went through a few stages, some internal review within the University of Liverpool, before actually submitting my application to the British Academy, which is in like in two stages, right? But what you asked me also about my academic background, my career development. Before my current fellowship, I held research and teaching positions at Leiden University at the University of Amsterdam and before that during my doctoral studies, I was also visiting research at SOAS, University of London and at Tarbiat Modares in Caravan. So in Iran, but in the two years before moving to Liverpool for my British Academy Fellowship, I had the really my pleasure, I have to say to be a lecturer in Middle East, history and politics at the University of Amsterdam, where I also designed courses such as climate change in the Middle East. I had the opportunity also to to teach and design a course on a module on the politics of labour and inequality in the Middle East and North Africa. So labour politics has been at the core of my research since my doctorate years. So doing my PhD at Leiden University in the Netherlands I explored the roll of workers between the 1979 revolution in Iraq and the 2009 green movement in Iran. So I conducted extensive field work in Tehran in Esfahan but also in other smaller cities city one and there I have the chance to research workers, agency workers impacts on social and political in China. But like I have another detail that I would love to share just to give those who are listening to us maybe some hope that you're never too old actually to learn and to to start a new path or a new career because prior to joining the world of academia, between my degree in Islamic studies, which was in Italy, and then Miami in Middle Eastern studies, I worked for 9 years as a freelance journalist, as an editor, a web manager, and then I followed what my dream was. So of my dream of being a researcher. And so I started focusing on the. Political role of work, and particularly in the Middle East, but then. In particular in in Iran.

NJ

Fantastic. And as a gentleman of a certain age, it's very reassuring to know that this hope and I could still follow my dream if only I could decide what that was. So it's great that that also shows us the power of social media and the fact that it was a tweet that you saw that helped bring you to the University of Liverpool. So, reassuring as a person who also looks after a Twitter account for the university. It's good to know that sometimes it works. So thank you for that. How did you come to focus on this particular aspect of research and the world of work and labour politics and the concept of the digital gig economy? Was there any particular experiences or papers or projects or academics that help push you in that direction and shaped your work?

SM

Well, the world of work, labour, politics and workers represented, I think, a key land to understand reality. So my interest started while I was studying the 1979 Iranian Revolution and its history. Workers in Iran joined the revolutionary body only after students, intellectuals, merchants, clerics, when they took to the streets, they actually managed to paralyse the state apparatus. They economically blocked the system, they hindered any further action from the monarchy, so their role, I mean workers, the role of workers were fundamental to the success of the Iranian revolution. So first economically and then and then politically the gig economy and digital labour platforms are only recent research interests, as somehow they are manifestation of the same dynamics and holding in the factories. But within the context of the gig economy. There's much more to research and explore. As for example, the dynamics of precarity and exploitation. Because they go. These dynamics go hand in hand with new opportunities and challenges such as governance, legal issues, job opportunities or new forms. Of organisations both both, I would say from a bottom up and top down perspective. So I was inspired by the work from the work. I'm mainly scholar. This, but I think that there is so much to write about the Middle East. So I think that the best is yet to come here and there are a few young researchers who are actually studying this new trajectories.

NJ

Good. And of course you will be adding to that body of research and work as well yourself. The kind of digital gig economy in Iran is something that we don't really hear about when we hear about that country over here in the UK. Could you tell me a little bit what the status of it is. And how is that? I think you've got a project, the gig economy of Iran versus the means of production on, in in process as well. So how does that all feed in?

SM

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I just started. Well, I thought it's in September, October 2022, and I'm in the first phase of this project. But I I think I I would love to start with saying that if one is a country where the authoritarianism of the Islamic Republic cohabitate with an immense huge intellectual, technological and social labour of progress and loss that permeates the social body. So the gig economy in Iran is a tech bubble of online shopping, food delivery, taxi services, care work, which is opening new spaces of employment, participation for young Iranians, I mean. Half of the the 8 million population is under 30, so this is relevant to my project. This is I I think. Uh, innovative with it in itself, right. So my thought of investigate how humans are selling their labour through digital platforms relate to the means of production in a Marxist using a Marxist expression. But there are, I mean we can move forward from these rigid categories and start trying to understand. What the past, past, uh, lenses of understanding can teach us, because the the reality is are already going so much forward. And in Iran in particular, there are two types of startups that I'm going to research first there are the web uh, web-based platforms uh, which require workers to sell their labour. The labour fully aligned, for example, and can be performed from anywhere. I mean high tech software, software creation or video editing or marketing team. And then there's a second kind of, let's say, location-based platforms. They combine market placement online and other activities in the the physical world, for example, food delivery or taxi services or care work. If you want, there are a few example, uh, a few examples digit colour. It's kind of Iranian an Iranian twin of Amazon controlling about 85% of Iran's online retail markets. And then there is a local version of PayPal. Called Zarin Paul, for example, or zarrat, which is for travellers or taxi fan, which is similar to Groupon, or SNAP, which is a local version of similar to Uber for taxis, where more than. Uh, 600,000 registered drivers account across the country, so my projects in particular tackles how those workers, so the gig workers exercise their agency in a context where hybrid capitalism. And labour inequalities or labour disparities, or even exploitation or forms of charities as the gig economy, one also has expanded massively in the last 10 years in Iran, but also in other states. In the Middle East, gig workers a store. Is, I think, a a truly crucial they are relevance to understand the evolving dynamics of political, but also economic participation from a bottom up perspective, not only in Iran or in the region, but more broadly, I mean globally. So I would say that the gig economy involves the exchange of labour via digital platforms with you know this class or of a short-term contract independent workers, but also it opens a new spaces are both employment and but also participation for the youth increasing for its kind of loosening of state control over young people’s lives and it is quite relevant also now, so my project is, I'd love to see my project as one of the first most scholarly attempts to explore the relation relations between humans selling their labour through digital platforms, but also the new means of production in Iran beyond the the the factory environment. So there's a working class, I think. So my project aims to understand what impact the the gig economy has in shaping labour, but also political participation in Iran and the final objective would be to, to, to understand and to tackle what what extent, precarity and exploitation influence economic and political transformations.

NJ

OK. Very, very, very interesting. Yes, I noticed you talked there about Iran specific apps, you know the counterparts to what we know over here. And are they all local or do they do things like, I don't know, these mentioned Uber or deliver Uber or have you, do they have presences? Or is it all specific local apps.

SM

It it's so it's all specific. Yeah, it's all local because the foreign companies are not allowed in that sense to start business businesses in Iran. So that's why they're all local. But beyond the the the state intervention. I would say that it's, there's so much bottom up progress in in one that allows all this ups and startups to to fly virtually in the country, even though there is I mean cohabitating where the Islamic Republic.

NJ

Great. Thank you so much. Precarity or the gig economy, as, as we call it now, has been with this for a long time. I think in lots of different ways. I'm thinking about particularly someone who's grown up in Liverpool hearing stories about, you know, dock workers and and people like that or labourers who would go and queue up on a daily basis and not necessarily know whether they're gonna get a day's work out of it or it might be very short term. How's the arrival of digital technologies and these various task specific apps changed the nature of security, do you think?

SM

Thanks for this question. Uh, well, uh, I would say let's start with by defining what digital platforms do and this doesn't relate to only to Iran. I mean more broadly because digital platforms actually mediate work. Meaning that they allow the creation of a digital context in which those who buy labour power. What are actually able to connect with those who sell their labour? So here I'm referring to the so-called 2 sided market, right? So for example, Ubers platform or Snap as it is called in Iran, a similar version. Is used for. They're both useful to put in contact or to connect people who want a taxi ride with other people who are willing to provide taxi rides. But the main point here is, digital platforms within the context of the gig economy are transforming the words of labour globally. Well, of course it would be more accurate to say gig economies, but it's because there are different versions of that. But I think there is a global gig economy or there are global factors. So how does the gig economy transform, how is the gig economy transforming the world of labour? So of course. Because the, UM, this digital platforms connect workers and clients who lack either proximity or synchronicity. So what I mean is that they are not in the same place and at the same time. So this has an impact on precarity as there is no shared, for example, workplace or continuity that makes more difficult for workers to organise, for example, and that's a global factor. But there's another issue here how to platform might work, so how to measure work? This is a problem. This has been a problem of management and of employers. Right. How to measure work within factories? For example, workers were paid for, for their their time in in the workplace. So managers buy most of workers time. Uh, but in the digital economy. So in the new uh forms of gig economy or gig economies, all these issues become obviously more difficult to tackle and. Measuring tasks, measuring time and efficient work. Let's say efficient work for managers or employers, and it's hard. To tackle plus, it is important to add one last element to to answer your question, because not all workers want to work as efficiently as possible, especially when they are either poorly paid or they are precarious in terms of contracts, right?

NJ

Well, yeah, that's a very good point if why should they put in exactly everything when they perhaps feel they're not getting it back? You you mentioned briefly there the the topic of workers organising and potentially unionised, unionisation. What's the state of that in Iran? How are they viewed? Because I know over here lots of like companies will go out of their way to try and stop their workers organising. Is it a similar thing over there? Is there a different attitude?

SM

Yes, absolutely. Uh, well, and Iran workers don't have the official right to unionise. There's only one legal trade union which is state affiliated in Iran but and then officially all workers should be affiliated to the so-called panic or God, which is the the House of the worker. But and which is also connected to a political party or a political organisation in Iran, because parties are not fully legal or they don't fully overlap with the political system there, but the right to unionise is a crucial element in Iran, but workers have been have been protesting in Iran since the revolution, actually, and they've been trying to find different and various trajectory follow various trajectories of resistance. In particular for talking about the gig economy and digital economy. It's so it is still so hard to tackle because they are divided so. It's they they basically this follows the rule, uh, divide and rule. So precarity adds a further element to this difficulty of unionised in the country.

NJ

OK. That's interesting to know, but it's not that different over there than maybe in some ways in terms of how people get access to organisation kind of touching on that. But looking at it maybe from the other side and this is less this is not just an Iranian question, this is one which you know I think affects all of us in terms of do you think the people who use these apps, the customers, people who use the the the food delivery and the Uber type things. They'll often be from the same similar kind of working-class background as the people who are providing that service, but do you think they are perhaps not as aware perhaps of the structures and practises that happen behind these apps?

SM

Thanks for this question. This is still relevant. I I really don't know if they come from the same working-class background. I don’t think so, but in particular anyone class wise background in terms of background, I think that there are so many new middle class impoverished I would say middle class young people working in and the gig economy. And within the context of digital platforms. But answering the second question that you you asked me the one about the the customers and then be unaware of these structures and practises behind these tools. I would say absolutely. Yes, I mean that's why research, I think it's is really, uh, crucial fundamental to bridge the gap between the university and the broader public. Because, uh, I mean, as our digital societies are evolving, labour dynamics as well as hegemonic relations or and worker struggles, they should be brought to the mainstream debate so to expose mechanisms of exploitation and power relations are behind the headlines and also beyond this shallow narratives of the gig economy just bringing new job opportunities and so on.

NJ

OK. Fascinating. Well, I'm, I'm glad it was a topic of interest because it's it's something that we often think about here, you know, in terms of it's just so easy. It's just a little thing on your phone, but then there's there’s a human being on the other side of that having to do what you've asked them to do, in some ways. In our blog, the Researcher in Focus Blog, you mentioned that one of your overarching research interests is around labour and labour equalities in the Middle East. And I know you've touched on it a little bit here, but. I wonder is there any kind of regional-specific elements to that discussion that perhaps we might not be aware of.

SM

Studying labour and inequality and inequality in the Middle East is a challenge that gave me actually so much joy and inspiration, especially in the diverse class environments I taught this course and and as you correctly suggested there are some regional specific historical and political element. But I will. I would not speak, for example, of exceptionalism, exceptionalism of the region of the Middle East. So to tackle these elements, I think it's useful to start from one key insight, er, the key concept is to look at, I think is social contracts meaning can social contract. So I think that the plural using the plural is much more accurate here, because the Middle East is the most unequal region in the world. So in terms of an equal income concentration, an equal uh wealth distribution income and taxes. Household income. So those broken social contracts are to be linked to other key elements such as politics or political instability unrests. Uh protests. What I'm trying to say here is that labour and class are two very useful lands to understand the region and sort of a paradigm of political not totally economic opposition to the state. So these are there are different dimensions. To answer your questions. There. So there is a regional dimension, so a regional element, meaning that enormous inequality there is enormous inequality and the inequalities between countries in the Middle East and North Africa, so particularly between all rich. And population rich countries. But there is also a domestic level to take into account. So large inequality within countries which we probably underestimate given the limited access to per fiscal, the proper data about me lease. There's another peculiar aspect, uh, which is the lack of uh, domestic and regional transparency on income and wealth. In English. There is another particular element which is a lack of regional coordination, meaning that mechanisms of regional redistribution or regional investment are not very clear, not well coordinated, but we we have to consider another crucial aspect that we forgot and which is connected to the global which connects the Middle East to the global arena. I mean that should not be forgotten and is that that since the 90s the Middle East, East and North Africa, all the countries, almost all the countries experienced the classic neoliberal reforms or privatisation deregulation or reforms all these reforms in order to deal with the challenge of globalisation. So neoliberalism, as a form of economic policy we know is generally described or by free trade or characterised by free trade, market liberalisation, deregulation or this thing privatisation. Reducing the notion of neoliberalism to a narrow understanding of the free market policies would be in the Middle East, in particular, to neglect, similar to the rhetoric come good on good governance to neglect the implicit political character that’s brought Middle Eastern people to the streets, for example, so, in the Middle East in terms of the politics of Labour and the politics of inequalities, privatisation, for example, have played a crucial role. It became a new source of patronage to reinforce and and, for example, extend the links between the political and economic elites. I mean politics and economy and the economy, they, they they need scholarship. They should need scholarship bit more often, because we need to understand how class has been overlooked and how we can we we use the class as a good means of understanding to to to, to read new realities.

NJ

OK. So would you say this like kind of neoliberal programme that's happening there, do you think it's going as well as it is over here in terms of often it's a race to the bottom, sometimes in terms of the quality that it provides to people at the expense of, like you say, the ennoblement, if you like, of the the political and economic.

SM

Absolutely. Absolutely. I mean, neoliberalism is not just something on paper. It's clear not only an economic project, there's a political project and. It undermines the political power of lower classes because it is targeted to specific elites most of the times, and privatisation is not just opening up new opportunities, but it also creates uh or enlarges uh big inequalities and talking about the lower classes.

NJ

Thank you. Basic stuff. Thank you so much. And now here at the university you teach seminars on international relations and have supervised dissertations with specific focus on the Middle East and North Africa. Is this particularly strong area of study here at Liverpool, do you think?

SM

Ohh, the University of Liverpool has a leading experts on the Middle East. I think that especially. In the last few years, efforts are being put in place to foster interdisciplinary work collaboration initiatives between different departments and their sense. Although there is no specific research group focused on the Middle East and North African region. In particular, but the the interdisciplinary focus of the politics department, the department I'm affiliated to and also the School of Histories, Languages and Cultures. I think that. All these research environments and these specific focus, they make the the the perfect, they make it the perfect reason for moment, for me and for a project like mine, a project that proposes a new study of human relations. So seeking A dialogue between labour discussion, policies in class-based analysis. I mean my British Academy Fellowship is providing me with the opportunity to work with leading scholars on the Middle East that are are working actually while working on the Middle East in particular. For example, Hannes Baumann is working on Middle East political economy, Oscar, Zinio, Lulu. She's working on the Middle East. Civil society or Professor Alex Balch is working on unfree labour, so for me the University of Liverpool is an excellent context to work and to thrive in an open dialogue with political science scholars. But yeah, that that there's so much to do, and I'm sure that all the there are the seeds to to to create new opportunities and to to to deepen the study on on the Middle East in particular.

NJ

Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. You know, you know without over-labouring the points, but the breadth of topics studied here this was their name of that interdisciplinary, so much from my position, because I get to meet so many of you academics that there's so much going on, so many interesting things. There's so many people working with each other on lots of different topics as well. Earlier on you used a phrase of, you know, labour and labour politics as a lens through which to look at the Middle East. But when you were a lecturer in political science and Middle East and studies at the University of Amsterdam, you talked, of course, there among some things on climate change and environmental politics in the Middle East as one of, if not the most pressing topics that we have to think about in our generation, I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about how climate change and its environmental impacts are viewed and experienced in the region? Show us through that lens what's going on there?

SM

Ohh, I think that the environmental dynamics in the Middle East, uh, both reflective, but also constitutive or broader, uh global political, economic and environmental forces. So all these environmental dynamics and climate change I think are being integral to the power politics in and also of the people living in the Middle East. So. Put this differently, understanding environmental change, I think, and natural resources management in the Middle East from a local perspective is essential to understanding the huge amount of political and social economic hopes illusions. Also, problems of the local people, I mean in the Middle East, I mean both in in their on the ground kind of manifestations but also in the ways they are integrated in broader global systems. What I mean here is that climate change goes beyond the Orientalist narrative and vision of the West as the arid lands, as the desert and the narratives of emergence of crisis, there is a crisis, but knowledge production matters. I mean the problematic ways that, that various Anglo European Europeans and Western actors, from travellers to colonial bureaucrats to artists, but also scientists, actors perceived and also represented the the, the Middle East and North Africa environment over the the the last several centuries primarily as, uh degradated desert waste land, you know, ruined by local land use or practises I I think that this narrow environmental narrative, although I mean, I strongly undermine uh, undermined now by contemporary new researchers. But I think this narrow narrative is somehow problematic. And instead of correct the climate change the ecology as the colonisers did. I think that we we we we may want to focus on local initiatives that are trying to tackle broader of mismanagement, for example, of lack of resources, but also of wrong investments. Because doing for example, the the French mandate but also in in some countries but also in the following years. There were many inappropriate projects across the region that and also financed by also Western countries that have failed to achieve their goals to restore the green desert. You know what I mean here because they they actually they have succeeded in depriving various local groups instead of empowering, empowering them.

NJ

And is that you think from a kind of imposition of externally kind of this is what we think the region wants rather than speaking to the people who live and work there and finding out what they actually do need?

SM

Yeah, yeah, absolutely, absolutely. We have to decolonize also the our, our approach and our perspective when studying other regions. And also this idea that we. He look at them. So this kind of dichotomy I I think is poisoning a good approach to research, but there are amazing attempts to decolonize our curricula, even at the University of Liverpool we we are really and fiercely working towards. Giving more nuanced understanding. Political yes, ecological and local initiatives in many sense.

NJ

Yeah, great. Thank you. Now, you mentioned this at the top of the recording, that prior to joining the world of academia, you worked in various sort of fields including as an editor, website manager, journalist. Do you think these experiences outside the world of universities has helped you when you did eventually come over to the dark side, so to speak.

SM

Well, absolutely. Yes. Yeah, yeah. As I, as I wrote in my blog, I think that research has a special power right of combining and knowledge, knowledge production, connection. I mean human connection, but also discovery. So I think that's my different. My experiences and my diverse kind of academic, but also work experiences and background allowed me to sharpen my focus, but also they gave me the chance to appreciate, you know, different processes of knowledge production and along different lines and in diverse very diverse conduct as you were called before. Starting to track, let's say the academic or research part, I work as an editor. I was a website manager, but also as a freelance journalist for almost all these jobs. For almost 10 years. So 2010 and 2007, from 2007 to 2016. And in those years. I mean, I I lived in Tehran. I travelled and lived long stays, also in Beirut and in Istanbul I learned to be flexible. I learned to be tolerant. But I think more importantly, I challenge my own limits. My own unconscious bias. So. I I think that that probably one of the reasons why now turning, uh diversity into real inclusion at the university or in my work in my research, really is fundamental. I mean, these embodies my my core values. I think as a scholar, as an educator, as a researcher, I mean I I'm. I'm strongly committed to EDI in the sense that I I really would love to to create a truly inclusive research work and learning environment and to to decolonize what we we research what we study from different perspectives. I I really would love to create a space where all identities and perspectives and the way we look at the word. I just included, I just appreciate it or or or simply I mean some in in some cases even acknowledged.

NJ

Wonderful. Thank you. For everything comes together in the end to get you where you need to be. Now. I'm from the research and impact office. So it would be remiss of me not to end with the impact type question. So what do you think would be the single most significant change you'd like to see out there in the real world as a result of your research?

SM

Uh, I think that my current research direct somehow directly speaks to one of the key issues of our present that we discussed largely discussed today. Digital societies. I mean, we are living in a digital society and there are several additional societies around the globe, so understanding the social political impact of the key economy and platform work in Iran in the Middle East and and more broadly in the global south, think that this will provide us with a more nuanced understanding of the broader implications of digital developments on our global societies. So questions of, for example, digital opportunities, inequalities, as we we talked before that all these issues are directly connected. I like to think of my work and my research as a as a as is more yet valuable contribution to advance the knowledge on these things by exploring exactly those links between the investments on digital infrastructures that are through online platforms are amazing, but also the rising job insecurity and labour uncertainty that we're living at the moment, but which is massive everywhere and globally and in this direction, talking about impact and bringing my work into something more tangible, let's say I'm also organising a workshop in June 2023, so now I'm the gig economy and platform workers in the Middle East at the University of Liverpool, and so I'm trying to to to do is thought, understanding and to map out how many scholars are working on these issues and more broadly, I I really hope to to. I recently applied to a big a big grant to organise a global conference at the the University of Liverpool, fingers crossed, on the gig economy and platform workers. In the global South. So what's the future of global digital work, understood from a global south perspective? What are the the social political consequences of the economic transformations or, but also the the the disruptions occurring to traditional sectors such as domestic work, accommodation, taxi services. All these services that we use on a daily basis. So by reflecting on these questions, I I I really. So you start bringing bridging the gap between research, I mean, this ivory, ivory tower academia and the the, the, the broader public. And so that, I mean, from the particular experience that we want, then I'm I'm aiming to move to the Middle East and then to the global south, let's see what happens.

NJ

And then the world. Yeah, I mean. Absolutely. I've seen where you're coming from. And this whole digital revolution, if you like, is, you know, relatively recent 25/30 years since it's taken over, so fast moving changes so much and completely all consuming, you know, so many people's lives are are now fully embedded in the digital. So yes, to do that work of of bringing the digital and our real-life experiences and interactions with it with some clarity, it would be great stuff. Thank you so much. Doctor. Stella Morgana, thank you so much for joining us today. It's been an absolute pleasure. Good luck with your grant. I look forward to your workshops and your conferences coming up, so we'll keep an eye out for them. And thank you so much again for joining us.

SM

Thank you.

NJ

And next month, if you keep an eye out for Doctor Mary Booth from the Centre for the Study of International Slavery, who I'm hoping will be joining us for our next research in focus. Until then, thank you very much and goodbye.