



WOMEN WORKERS IN THE GIG ECONOMY IN INDIA

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Institute of Social Studies Trust

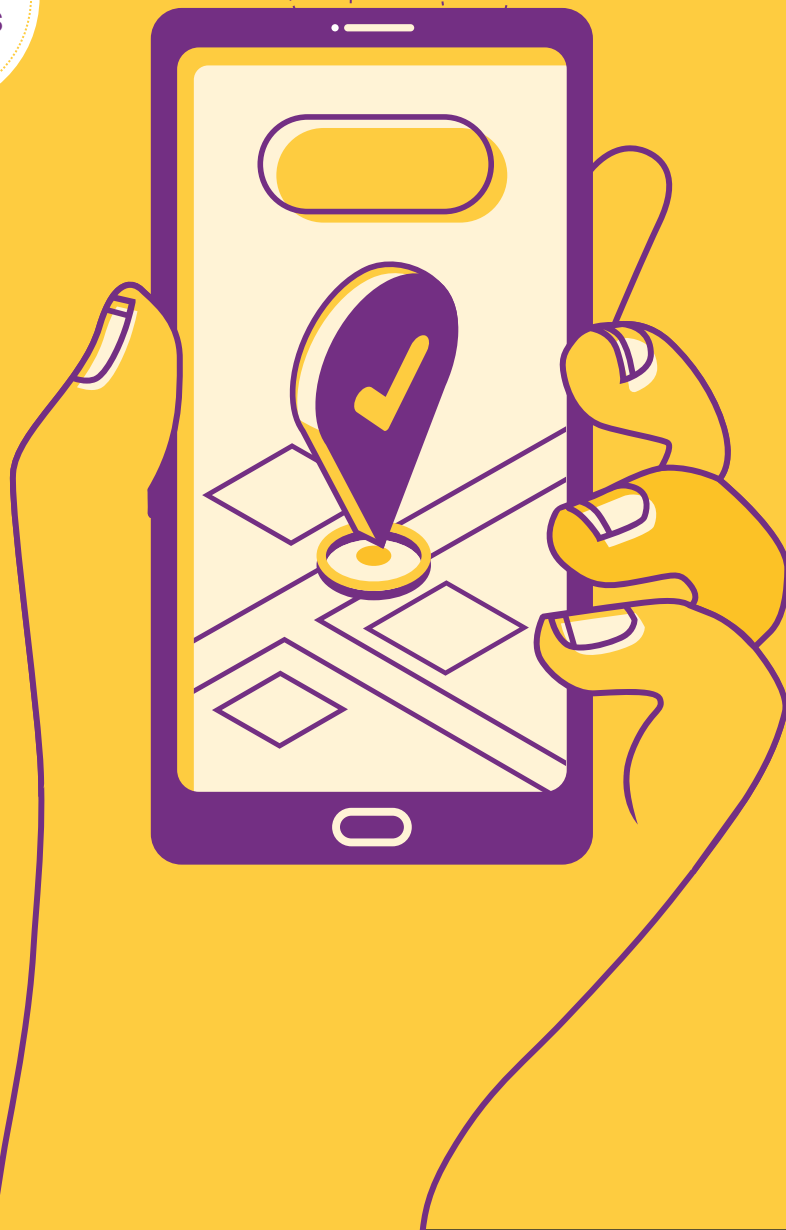


**Food
Delivery**

**Cab
Service**

**Domestic
Work**

**Beauty
Services**



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Key Words: Women workers, women in informal economy, informal economy, gig economy, platform economy



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

While post-Fordism and neo-liberalism changed the way labour was viewed, technology and wide spread digitization has built upon the same principles, giving way to a new form of work – the Gig Economy. Over the last decade, ‘on-demand’ work guided by app-based platforms such as Uber, Ola, Urban Company, Zomato, etc. have become fairly common in urban India. These platforms have built upon the existing large informal economy fuelled by growing digitization and affordability of gadgets such as smartphones. Gig economy thrives upon the idea of ‘flexibility’, allowing people to work as ‘independent contractors’ who have the ‘choice’ of working when they want to, how they want to and where they want to.

There is a paucity of literature globally around gendered experiences of women workers in the gig economy and this research, **An Exploratory study on Women workers in the Gig economy in India**, aims to contribute towards populating the same. The study has taken a multidimensional approach to critically analyze women workers’ engagement within the gig economy, particularly in the platform economy in India. The study looks at women workers in the four work sectors where they were found to be mostly engaged in viz. domestic work, beauty work, cab driving and food delivery in three urban cities namely Delhi-NCR, Bengaluru and Mumbai. The report also explores a larger question of changing modalities of gig platforms in India in the context of its increasingly informalized economy, its gendered structures and practices and working conditions, by juxtaposing these ideas with worker rights. The study takes the lens of gender and labour on a gig platform and explores this framework through various aspects of gig economy shaping up in India. For this purpose, in-depth interviews were conducted with a wide range of actors in the ‘gig universe’ viz. women workers, platform representatives, government officials, skill development institutes and trade union members, across the four sectors. An in-depth literature review was also undertaken to illustrate and critically analyse the existing labour practices within the gig economy in India and globally, and repercussions of the same on labour relationships in the gig and larger informal economy.

The report highlights the precarious nature of gig work and dismantles the idea of ‘flexibility’ which has often been touted as the reason for popularity of the gig economy for workers across the globe and especially considered suitable for women workers. Workers continue to be deprived of any social or legal protection in these new work arrangements. Trade unions and scholars argue that it is difficult to unionize against an employer which is governed by algorithms and technology. Besides, owing to their inability to understand the play of the algorithms, most women grappled by the ability to earn more in the incentive-model because of their care responsibilities, gender norms and safety and security concerns. Women’s ability to acquire new skills or upgrade their skills was also restricted owing to these determinants. In fact, given the same reasons, trade unions found it difficult to mobilize few women on the various platforms as they were mostly found to be highly masculine in nature. Shockingly, unions led or formed by women workers were non-existent, even in highly feminized sectors such as domestic and beauty work. In most cases, women tended to negotiate on one-to-one basis with the platforms and companies and rarely approached any trade union; informal networks such as Whatsapp groups were the only forms of network building and peer support that women workers had access to. Further, women workers also complained that in mixed unions, the men were hesitant in involving them and as a result, women’s voices were woefully under-represented in the gig economy of India.

The study also found that the gig economy in India is not one-size-fits-all. The popular 'on-demand' models exist alongside a 'hybrid' model, which borrows from both the traditional as well as platform economy. While, freelancing model was preferred by most women workers, domestic workers, who were the most vulnerable group, preferred a regular income model. Interestingly, in a hybrid model, those working as full time workers receive social security such as provident fund, health insurance and in some cases maternity benefits. The study also found that within these, NGO backed platforms extend social security benefits and allow women flexibility in terms of timings to manage their care responsibilities. There was also evidence of innovative strategies adopted by women-centric companies in skilling and retaining women in the workforce.

The report also highlights that the gig economy is under-regulated in India which allows for further exploitation of gig and platform workers. The fact that they are defined by platforms as 'independent contractors' or 'partners' and not as 'workers', devalues their labour and keeps them outside the gambit of any protective measure such as pension, maternity benefits, insurance, etc. It was only recently that the Code on Social Security 2020 included gig workers in its ambit which was the first legal recognition of gig workers as a category of workers. While the code allows room for making social security contributions for workers, it is criticized for the overlapping definitions of workers and ambiguity related to how the code will be implemented in actuality. From women's perspective, the code does not include domestic workers, a sector in which large numbers of poor women work. Such overlapping of roles is one of the concerns related to how the code will be implemented and this would impact the lives of many such workers.

Discussions around maternity leave even within the code and at the level of the platforms and companies are minimal. While, sexual harassment at workplace and safety concerns are explained during training, there is still a lot of hesitation amongst women to complain about the same and hence, most continue to face harassment on their jobs. Crucially, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act does not include 'independent contractors' or gig workers in its purview of the law, thus leaving them with no legal protection against sexual harassment. This non-inclusion leaves a large number of women gig workers in a vulnerable position, especially when safety and security is an important determinant which governs their entry and exit into the workforce.

Based on the findings, the research team has provided some overall recommendations in order to make the gig economy a lucrative and inclusive opportunity for women workers in India. The emerging new economy is vast and full of potential but continues to suffer due to the lack of protective measures for workers and the recommendations put forward herewith aim towards both policy-building as well as correcting market responses in order to make it a worker-friendly model.

1

INTRODUCTION



In recent years, the advancements in the field of information and communication technology (ICTD) have further casualized the market with digitally driven platforms of work. While labour has been devalued through neoliberal economic restructuring, the 'sharing economy' defined by companies born from information technology platforms have changed the landscape of labour. The result of this by-product of neo-liberalisation is that the speed, scope, and scale have changed considerably, with jobs lasting as little as a few minutes. This new industry has exacerbated neoliberalism's industrial relations to the point where a new term, the 'Gig Economy', has evolved to describe that workers now have 'gigs' instead of jobs (Zwick, 2018; Bracha and Burke, 2018; Yaraghi and Ravi, 2017). The sharing or the gig economy is largely an urban phenomenon; it is fast becoming a primary means through which urban residents access desired goods and services transforming urban economies (Davidson and Infranca, 2016). In the neo-liberal framework, gig economy has opened up new forms of work aided by technology – ability to earn well, built on the promise of 'flexibility'.

Heeks (2017) emphasizes that the online labour platforms can have digitization of organization of work or work itself or both. These varying structures add to the dubiety and ambiguity in the taxonomy of online labour (Tran and Sokas, 2017). Broadly, gig work can be understood in two types of works – Crowd work and On-demand application-based work (Cardon and Casilli, 2015). As cited in De Stefano (2016), crowd work is where a number of tasks are performed online, connecting individuals and firms. AMT, Crowdfunder and Clickworker are some of the prominent crowdsourcing platforms that engage online labour for performing micro tasks, and such labour is known as freelancers (IWWAGE, 2020) On the other hand, the on-demand work refers to transactions of 'daily traditional activities' managed through the application, where the companies play a role in deciding the working conditions.

The platforms act as intermediaries between the client & customers to request a particular task or 'gig' which is performed by the worker, termed as independent contractors/partners/professionals, as opposed to employees, by these companies. The platform charges a commission once the assigned task is completed by the worker. As such, gig economy represents rapidly growing labour platforms which connect 'workers' with 'requesters' to facilitate on-demand work that continues to develop and flourish globally. In short, gig economy pertains to labour market activities which are coordinated via digital platforms. (IWWAGE 2020, pg.8) The platform does not own the means of production, but rather creates the means of connection. The strength of the platform economy lies in its ability to eliminate trade barriers by using increased information sharing between different players and circulation of data to its advantage. This creates a much more open economic system, with much greater participation of its users.(Chan,et al, 2018) The shift from Fordism where the focus was on "mass production and mass consumption" (Markantonatou, 2007) to the post Fordism period which encourages the flexibility of work and dilution of employer-employee relationship to contractual self-employed work conditions (Zwick, 2018), has been the most profitable for the companies and least for the workers (Heeks, 2017). Gig platforms such as Uber use algorithm-based mechanisms accumulate large data sets of workers and clients which are in fact inaccessible to the workers. Thus, while the service providers are changing their profit earning strategies as per the market demand, for workers it increases precarity and uncertainty (Zwick, 2018; Jarrahi et al. 2019). Heeks (2017) calls this as "structural asymmetry" where the algorithm-dependent platforms have access to all the information related to worker or customer in addition to the power to change or manipulate the systems while workers have the least control.

The proliferation of gig work has been attributed to companies adopting business models that enable them to operate at a much lower cost by not having to pay traditional employee benefits, compensation and insurance. (Hunt and Samman, 2019, p.10) These workers operate in isolation without much interaction with other workers, companies or customers which further invisibilizes the workers making it more challenging for collectivization (De Stefano, 2016). Although, on one hand platform economy is credited for its flexibility, it is often criticized for dehumanizing and 'commodification' of workers wherein the increased informalization of labour dilutes the companies from the statutory obligation of the labour laws, due to the ambiguous denomination used for platform workers (De Stefano, 2016). This alienates the companies from the responsibilities towards a worker. Platform workers are often called 'independent employees' or self-employed, who are often provided either part-time contracts or in most cases no formal contract hence leading to the casualization of labour. This plays a key role in keeping them out of the ambit of labour laws. This 'individualization' of the work puts the onus of decent working conditions, wages, capacity building and safety on the individual worker rather than the company. The ambiguity around the degree of freedom and control that the company exerts over the workers, is loosely used as an exploitative tool (Hunt and Samman, 2019, De Stefano, 2016).

There is an unequal power relation between the worker and company even though they are considered as independent workers. There is a 'digital curtain' between the company and the employees wherein the employer in the platform economy is mostly 'invisible' (e.g.,Uber, Urban Company, etc.) which inhibits possibilities of organizing by the workers. Moreover, given that workers in the platform economies have joined this work to survive and hence prefer to avoid any form of activism (more so in case of women workers) in the fear of their devices being deactivated (Hunt et al , 2019)

Further, the concept of measuring workers' performance through the ratings and reviews by the users which directly impact the wages and other incentives also reflects this unequal power (Steffano, 2016). In addition to that, companies take meticulous steps to conduct worker verification, though for the users these are not as rigorous, therefore putting workers' safety at risk (Kasliwal, 2020). A case study of a company working for domestic workers called the South Side in South Africa highlights the illusion of autonomy that the workers are assumed to have. Detailed personal information on workers is published on the websites, giving the customers more power to make an informed choice but not vice versa (Tandem research, 2020). In fact, cancellation of a booking by the worker would often lead to poorer worker ratings as retaliation by the client or punishments by the companies (Ticona and Mateescu, 2018).

Flexibility is a cardinal factor within the platform economy where workers can have flexible working hours, have autonomy to decide their work time, hence making the jobs more accessible especially for those who are engaged in other activities (Hunt, 2016; De Stefano, 2016). Such platforms also attract women in particular, giving them the choice of balance between unpaid and paid work (Hunt 2016; De Stefano, 2016; Kasliwal, 2020). In fact, a recent IWWAGE study with beauty workers from Urban Company (a popular service app), *“85 per cent respondents were satisfied with flexible timings, and considered it the most attractive feature of gig work, along with the earning potential. Gig economy offered these women the flexibility to manage their work-life balance, and provided an important opportunity for income and gainful employment in ‘alternative work’ arrangements.”* (IWWAGE, 2020, pp. 4-5).

Peets (2019) categorizes this as ‘flexibility for worker’, where companies restructure the work as per the workers’ needs; and ‘flexibility by worker’ which emphasizes on company’s policies to control the flexibility of the worker such as companies keeping the wage systems flexible hence, adding precarity to the worker’s earnings (Peets, 2019) and many times the workers are even unaware of the changes in the policies by the company (Aneja and Shridhar, 2019). Consequently, George and Chattopadhyay (2015, p.5) share their concerns around the emphasis of ‘flexibility’ by stating that *“when the work arrangement is not freely chosen, but rather is forced on to workers, then it is less likely to be valued by workers”* (Ellingson, Gruys & Sackett, 1998). Unfortunately, we do not have good data on the extent to which non-standard work arrangements are voluntary in countries around the world. It is highly likely that the large numbers of individuals in informal jobs around the world, especially those that involve jobs that offer little legal and social protection are not likely to be in jobs of their choice (ILO, 2012).

The vulnerability of workers, especially women, calls out to an urgent need for gender focused policies by the companies as well as the government. With the passing of the California Bill on gig workers known as AB5, which restricts the companies to treat workers as ‘independent contractors’ instead of full employees, the regulation of gig work has gained global attention (“Bill Text – AB-5”, 2019; Jones, 2019). In 2018, the European Commission recognized that social security benefits such as maternity leave and other benefits should be provided to the gig workers and similarly, in the US the government has recommended recognition of gig workers as a separate category or workers (Chen and Djankov, 2018). Canada, on the other hand, has adopted a policy where the gig workers are identified as ‘dependent workers’ acknowledging the dependence of workers on the companies. The only caveat is that in this case it is in line with the right to unionize and protection under minimum wages. How a government defines a worker determines the benefits and social protection they are entitled to. The recent judgment of the UK Supreme Court to recognize platform workers as ‘workers’ is indeed a shot in the arm for labour rights. Hence, such denominations are essential for inclusive labour laws (Cherry & Aloisi, 2016). In the Indian context, regulation for gig workers is in its infancy and social security measure are scarce and varied (Kasliwal, 2020; Ramchandani and Raman, 2019).

These issues were magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic, which struck worldwide, impacting a large section of informal workers around the globe, especially women. According to Gayatri Vasudevan, Chairperson of LabourNet, a social enterprise that works on enabling livelihoods: *“Sectors most affected in the pandemic crisis-- restaurants, retail, beauty, tourism, education, domestic work, and carework for the young and elderly--have high female employment. Domestic workers were most impacted during the lockdown as they were asked to come even when the COVID-19 cases were surging due to fear of not being paid”* (Ghosh and Bilkhu, 2020; Deepika, 2020). Companies such as Ola and Uber announced precautionary policies and steps but because of poor implementation, workers were still exposed to the virus (Korreck, 2020). In spite of services such as food delivery being included in the ‘essential services category’ during the pandemic and the subsequent national lockdown in India, there were numerous incidences of food delivery workers being harassed by the police across cities (Kauntia, 2020). Post lockdown, one finds momentum in collectivization of gig workers unions in India, especially against platforms for reducing their incentives, rising fuel hikes and high costs of operation, interest on loans, etc. resulting in massive drop of earnings.

The Gig (Platform) Economy in India

The gig economy has found exponential growth in India over the last decade. Some of the enabling factors for this growth are: constant supply of low-end workers from rural to urban centers owing to decline in agriculture, along with low barriers of entry into the platforms; proliferation of mobile with internet connectivity, increasing last mile access for platform workers to reach customers (India is the world's biggest two-wheeler market) and increasing supply of venture capital to support the market. (Fairwork India Report, 2020) In the last five years, one has seen a proliferation of app-based technology and as a result one sees much academic interest over the last decade and especially in the global South in recent years given that this is a new and emerging nature of labour and there is almost no information collected about it, and that it lacks the 'traditional' frameworks employed for labour based on the whims of technology.

The platform or gig economy has paved its way into the traditional labor market creating a pro-consumer work environment but with shrinking labour rights. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016) notes the existence and the growing trend of the gig workforce but finds that, under its current methods, it is incredibly difficult to count how many people are employed as gig workers. These workers may fall under different categories such as part-time, self-employed, multiple jobs, or in some cases, may not be counted as part of the workforce at all (Zwick 2018). Though the estimates of gig workers are a strenuous task, given the difficulty in reaching out to the workers due to their invisibility and high reliance on companies for the data, in the U.S around 55million people were estimated to be the part of platform economy in 2017¹. As for gig workers in India, according to the NITI Aayog since 2014, aggregators such as Ola and Uber have created around one million and 2.2 million jobs. The latest data from Fairwork India 2020 Report estimates around 3.03 million platform workers and employees are employed across 11 most popular platforms in India. There is however, no gender disaggregated data for the same. As per the Employment Outlook Report HY 2018-2019 by Teamlease Services, there are around 68,000 women working, across roles in the delivery industry owing to lower attrition rates, better ratings for delivery women and improved productivity at warehouses. That's led to greater demand for women at delivery hubs and fulfillment centres. (Kar, 2019).

Box: 1

The scope of the gig economy in India is huge:

- BetterPlace, a platform for blue-collar worker: The gig economy accounts for more than 1.4 million jobs in India, which mostly includes delivery staff, drivers, beauticians and maintenance workers.
- Accenture Platform Readiness Index shows that India, along with the United States and China, is expected to lead the platform economy by 2020. (Mathur 2016) This can be evidenced by the growth of on-demand digital service provider platforms in the country as in the last five years itself, 300+ new on-demand platforms have been set up in India. (IWWAGE 2020)
- TeamLease: approximately 56% of new employment in India is generated by the gig economy, which is inclusive of both the blue-collar and white-collar manpower. (2019)



¹ See the page by ILO - https://www.ilo.org/washington/WCMS_642303/lang--en/index.htm

- PayPal report Report (2018), one in every four freelancers is from India. Dominating the software ecosystem too, India accounts for 50% of the global freelancers, a majority of who are under the age of 40.
- In total, around 1.3 million Indians migrated to five cities—Bengaluru, Delhi, Hyderabad, Mumbai and Chennai—in the six months leading to 31st March, TeamLease said, registering a 60% growth in migration compared to the six-month period ending on 30th September.
- Largely, the gig workers in India are found to be working with large-scale aggregators: Cab-driving, food delivery and service provision.

Women, Work and Platform Economy

The 2030 Sustainable Development Goals is focused on the issue empowerment of all or “leave no one behind” and gender equality and women’s empowerment (Goal 5) is one of the many focus areas of the 17 SDGs. Notwithstanding, there are multiple layers of challenges in the path of empowering women economically with equal opportunities and decent working conditions and hence women’s representation remains still stunted (ILO, 2016). Statistically, a decline of around 2.8% in the female labour force participation (LFPR) has been observed around the globe from the year 1995 to 2015 (ILO, 2016). Though specifically in India, for the year 2018 - 2019 it was noted to be 18.1% women for women as compared to 55.6% men (PLFS data, 2019). Within that, the female labour force participation in the informal sector has seen a decline of 13% from 2011-12 to 2017-18 (PLFS, 2019). At just 24%, according to the Economic Survey 2017-18, India’s rate is among the lowest in South Asia. Having said so, it is also important to acknowledge that women’s economic contribution is often under-represented and not accounted for in the official statistics due to the inadequacy of survey methods used (Hirway, 2012).

Consequently, it is important to highlight that the recent COVID-19 pandemic has caused unprecedented challenges especially for women workers in informal sector given the existing gender inequality, which may further decrease female LFPR in India (Shah, 2020; Sivaraman, 2020). Bhandare (2020) mentions that data shows that eight months after the [COVID-19 pandemic] lockdown was imposed, 13% fewer women than a year ago were employed or looking for jobs, compared to 2% fewer men. Urban women experienced the deepest losses. Besides care responsibilities, women’s access to decent paid work is also a question of entitlement - women have always been roughly 20 percentage points less likely to be employed than men who were employed pre-lockdown (Deshpande, 2020) and *“whenever the unemployment rate is high, men get prioritized [for jobs] as they are seen as breadwinners and women as homemakers. In times of economic prosperity, women are hired last, and during a crisis they are fired first and are the last to be hired”* (Vibhuti Patel quoted in Kumar 2020). Hence precarity has been continuous for women’s employment, which has only worsened since the pandemic started.

The gender gap is attributed to the fact that women’s work is often governed by the unavailability of decent work (Zaidi et al, 2017), socio-cultural norms around women’s mobility, changing household income because of or unequal distribution of household responsibilities (Chaudhary and Verick, Rangarajan et al, 2015; ILO, 2016a). As such, the primary responsibility of providing care, managing the household, cooking, cleaning, attending the sick, children and elderly - tasks which are often unrecognized as economically viable labour are socially considered as women’s responsibilities due to the gender norms (Zaidi et al, 2017; ILO, 2016a; Hunt et al, 2019). Worldwide, the contribution of women in unpaid care burden is overwhelmingly higher as compared to men, especially where care facilities by state or other institutions are not affordable or unavailable (ILO, 2018). As per a report by McKinsey, globally around 68% women are involved in household chores (and 32% for men), care work and other unpaid work whereas in India the percentage of women’s unpaid labour share is 87% as against 13% of that of men

(McKinsey, 2015). Women in India spend up to 352 minutes per day on domestic work which is 57% more than men (52 minutes) and at least 40% more than the women in China (234 minutes) and South Africa (250 minutes) (OECD, 2017). Therefore, women are likely to spend more time and resources on unrecognized labour especially with fewer opportunities for paid work or increasing their hours of work (Zaidi et al, 2017; ILO, 2016a; Hunt et al, 2019). The latest Pan India Time Use Survey (TUS) (2019) data gathered by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) also confirms this unequal burden of care responsibilities. On an average, women in India spend 19.5% of their time engaged in either unpaid domestic work or unpaid care – giving services while men spend just 2.5% of a 24-hour period on these activities. In every other group of activities – from employment and learning to socializing, leisure, and self-care activities like sleeping and eating – men spend a higher share of their daily time than women.

With the burden of household chores, women tend to opt for work opportunities that give them a certain amount of freedom and flexibility to balance their paid and unpaid work; for instance, they tend to choose work that keeps them closer to their household (Messenger, 2018; Zaidi and Chigateri, 2017). As Kabeer (2012) mentions, women's ability to negotiate with self and society often depend on the type of work and work arrangement. The platform economy thus, seems like a good opportunity for women who are burdened with responsibilities of household work, providing them with autonomy and flexibility to manage between paid and unpaid work. Online platforms do not demand specific working hours and often no or lesser mobility restrictions as against the traditional workplaces with fixed working hours, (Tandon and Rathi, 2018; Kasliwal, 2020; Messenger, 2018; World Bank, 2019). Though this argument is used by many proponents of the gig or platform economy, it can be counterproductive. Such arguments reinforce the practice of gendered familial responsibilities within and outside the household instead of challenging it, thus further enhancing the 'double burden' on women (Tandon and Rathi, 2018; Kasliwal, 2020). Balancing between unpaid and paid work, negatively impacts women's physical and mental well being and leaves little or no room for rest and leisure (Zaidi et al, 2017).



Further, owing to the 'flexibility' and the informal nature of the work often involved, there has been an influx of women in these casual domains of work or 'feminization of casual work' as Govind Kelkar explains it, which have inferior working conditions and wages (Liang et al, 2018), as well as additional burden with disproportionate unpaid labour work. However even on these platforms, most women are found working on jobs that considered as feminine such as cleaning, care taking (Hunt and Samman, 2019) or beauty and wellness sectors (Rawal and Pal, 2019; Chaudhary, 2020). It is important to highlight that the verticals that women prefer to work in also constitute only a small percentage of available jobs. Of the 21 lakhs plus jobs created in 2019, jobs in the beauty industry constituted only 1.17% whereas jobs in cleaning and schools constituted 11.88% and 2.33% respectively (BetterPlace, 2019). It would suffice to say that the limited representation of women in the gig economy is indicative of a larger trend in the Indian labour market of declining female participation in the workforce, further entrenched by limited access and opportunities.

Location-based platforms in India such as Uber, Zomato, Swiggy or Ola, which are traditionally considered men's jobs (owing to the requirement of driving a vehicle and interacting with strangers), have started actively hiring women for broader gender representation challenging the socio-cultural barriers (Ghosh, 2019, Kar 2019). However, with women's entry in non-traditional work forms, the gender inequalities have seen an extension into these new domains. The gender pay gap continues to resonate in the gig economy. In the UK, Balaram et al. (2017) found that 75% of female gig workers earned less than £11,500 per annum, compared with 61% of all workers. In the US, gig work constituted a lower share of total earnings for women than for men (16%, versus 23% for men) (Farrell and Greig, 2016). A study in the US that analyzed data from more than a million drivers on the Uber platform found

a 7% earnings gap between men and women drivers (Cook et al, 2018). These findings found resonance in a study conducted in India TeamLease Services on Indian gig workers, which found that women delivery workers in India are paid around 10% less than men (Kasliwal, 2020; Kar 2019). This is mainly connected to women's inability to earn more by taking advantage of the surge pricing, schemes and incentives, being more cautious drivers as compared to men, etc. All of these are further affected by their unpaid work responsibilities, social norms around mobility, competition at work, attitudes and perceptions about their work, access to training, etc.

In the gig economy, work is only possible if one has access to mobile phones compatible with their applications (mostly smartphones). While the growth of the gig economy is fuelled by widespread mobile penetration and internet connectivity, it is important to acknowledge the gender digital divide that exists in India. According to The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020 by GSM Association, the digital gender divide in India is 20% in ownership of mobile phones while the gender gap in access to the internet is even more alarming with a 50% gap (Rountree, 2020). In times when the economy is increasingly dependent on digital platforms, these statistics are quite alarming and shed light on the prominence of addressing these existing gaps to achieve the goals of Digital India. The report further highlights that 37% men have access to smart phones as compared to 14% women which means that this restricts women's ability to enter the gig economy, adding to the loss of economic activity for women (Mangat, 2020). Lack of access to digital technology and the absence of digital literacy skill exaggerate the gender divide further in developing countries like India (Subramanian, 2017). Chakroborty (2020, p.21) points out that 'the ICT sector is predominantly urban-based; it is dominated by men and it provided employment to only a few women.' Being an urban economy, the platform economy as an employment option is only available to a few women in urban centers. (IWWAGE, 2020)

While access to technology is crucial, it is also important to highlight that within the gig economy, the workers do not 'own' the technology which governs their work and as such have no power over the invisible algorithms that dictate their ability to earn. While algorithmic management techniques tend to offer workers high levels of flexibility, autonomy, task variety and complexity, these mechanisms of control can also result in low pay, social isolation, working unsocial and irregular hours, overwork, sleep deprivation and exhaustion. (Wood et al, 2018). This lack of control over technology is further fuelled by platform-based ranking and ratings which are based on subjective views of the customers, which has direct implications to your jobs. For example, Uber 'deactivates' the accounts of drivers with not enough ranking and ratings. As a result, this non-ability to be the holders of technology has implications on the way workers can push back against the machinations of these platforms. This powerlessness becomes more acute in case of women workers owing to the disadvantageous positions that they hold as compared to men, both socially and economically.

The intersectionality of class, caste, age and gender plays an important role in the worker's experience. Although there is a general assumption of invisibility of social identities of workers on digital platforms, much of these hierarchies based on class, caste, race, religion and age are practiced and reinforced in a tech driven approach (Raval and Pal, 2019; Hunt, 2017). For instance, in case of domestic workers, detailed demographic profiles apart from their qualification, can be viewed by the users such as their age, religion, caste including their profile pictures (Hunt, 2017; Tandem Research, 2020). An Indian based study observed how the company's selection criteria included women younger than 45 years and discouraged people with disability, hence adding to the existing stereotypes and discrimination (Chaudhary, 2020). Another challenge for women's entry into platform work is the digital gender divide, since these platforms are steered by technology. The patriarchal notions of controlling women's freedom along with the lack of literacy and unaffordability of devices restrict women's access to technology, thus widening the gap (Mawii, 2019; Hunt and Samman, 2019). To address this issue, companies have used phone messaging or calls to connect with their workers (Hunt, 2017).

There is evidence that supports the fact that overall, women earn less than men through gig work. In the UK, Balaram et al. (2017) found that 75% of female gig workers earned less than £11,500 per annum, compared with 61% of all workers; while Lapanjuuri et al. (2018) found that 49% of female gig workers had earned less than £250 in the previous year, compared with 35% of men. In the US, gig work constituted a lower share of total earnings for women than for men (16%, versus 23% for men) (Farrell and Greig, 2016).

The grievance redressal systems, in cases where it even exists, it is the the companies that hold the power to take the final decision without any legal obligation (Kasliwal, 2020). This lack of accountability and redressal systems raises questions on the safety of workers, particularly women workers who are more vulnerable to cyber harassment and stalking (Mawii, 2019). Women workers providing services through online platforms are susceptible to sexual harassment though it is also to be noted that, some startups in India have created their own mechanisms for safety (Raval and Pal, 2019); such as Maids Company (now defunct), a domestic service company, conducted verification of clients and had a gender sensitive redressal system (Tankha, 2020).

Purpose and Scope of the Study

In the last few years there has been globally a growing body of literature around the gig economy. While most of the existing literature is heavily 'uberised', focusing mainly on the struggles of the male workers working in the gig economy, it has only been in recent times that academicians and researchers have begun to study gendered experiences of the gig economy in India. As such, one now finds scholars beginning to study the gender narrative within the gig economy. This study attempts to add to the growing knowledge of this nascent field and aims to aid in strengthening women's voices within the gig economy at the worker and the policy levels. This study hopes to add value by unpacking the complex intertwining of gender and other social identities within platform economy. In this study, we shall be referring to the gig workers as workers even if the companies and platforms prefer to term them as independent contractors or partners with the aim of aiding processes of change which would reflect a more equal working condition for gig workers in the country.

It has only been in recent times that academicians and researchers have begun to study gendered experiences of gig economy globally and in India (Hunt and Samman, 2019; IWWAGE 2020). While various new research studies have focused to study the gendered experiences by focussing on one particular platform or a sector, the scope of this study was to explore the women workers within the larger gig economy, specifically looking at the women workers in the 'on-demand' (platform) economy – who are these women who work in the gig/platform economy; what sectors do they work in and what are their experiences of working in this economy; how do these differ from the traditional forms of informal work; how does this economy respond to women's unpaid work responsibilities; and, what gaps and policy uptake is required so that women workers are able to participate in this new economy on equal terms so that it fulfills the current motto of the Sustainable Development Goals of 'no one is left behind'.

Box: 2

The main research questions for this study are as follows:

- What are the various models of work operating in the gig economy? What is the gendered nature of the work that women perform? and what are their gendered experiences of the work conditions (including wages, leaves, social security, etc.)?
- What is the scope of worker negotiations and bargaining for better working conditions within the gig economy? How does the gig economy respond to women's care and unpaid work responsibilities?
- What are the advantages, (if any), that women workers experience in participating in these new forms of work and the gendered implications of the same for women's work and the gig economy in general?
- In what ways can the state and the market respond in order to make the gig economy an equal space for women workers seeking decent paid work opportunities?

Besides women workers' narratives, the study also aims at understanding perspectives of other important key stakeholders in the gig economy. As such, key informant interviews included the founders and representatives of the start-ups, platforms and companies (as per access), trade union leaders and relevant policy makers.

The report will discuss in detail, generally and across the four sectors, the working conditions, incentives and challenges of mobility and safety at the workplace. Ability to organize is crucial to workers' rights and interests and woefully lacking in the gig economy. Therefore, this report will also discuss the scope and nature of collectivization, especially women's roles and interests in the same, before moving on to discuss the regulatory and social security mechanisms available to gig workers. Women's care and unpaid responsibilities and its impact on their participation in the gig economy will also be addressed throughout the course of the report.

Research Design and Methodology

The difficulty in accessing respondents across the four sectors, a qualitative methodology was best suited for this study's scope and objective. This study included semi-structured, in-depth interviews with the women platform workers, and key informants such as service providers/start-up owners, trainers, trade unions, researchers and policy makers in order to bring to table a holistic perspective of the 'on-demand' economy using a gendered lens. Through this study, we look at three major metropolitan cities of India – Delhi, Mumbai and Bangalore which have seen an exponential increase in platform-based companies and simultaneous increase in migration of workers (S.H and Bansal, 2019). These sites were also selected based on the proliferation of on-demand services found in these cities. The dependence on technology by the middle- and upper-class working professionals has created demand for a larger unskilled working class especially in metropolitan cities (Raval and Pal, 2019) including care work predominantly done by women (Hunt and Machingura, 2016).

Selection of the sectors for this particular study was based on extensive literature review and a mapping exercise based on desk research. We found that in the gig economy, the two 'traditional' sectors of domestic work and beauty work were highly feminized and hence were selected to be studied. The two other sectors of cab-driving and food delivery were selected for being the most popular forms of 'on-demand' platforms in India. These two are also non-traditional sectors that women have only begun to enter over the last few years and the study would like to explore the gendered experiences within these male-dominated sectors. The only criteria for selection of the women workers in the platform economy was that they were either presently active or had recently worked as a gig worker in any one of the sectors included in the study.

The structure of study, including the study sites was decided based on secondary literature and a pre-research consultation workshop held with a small group of experts on 16 August 2019 in New Delhi. The study includes women workers in the platform economy in four sectors: domestic work, beauty work, ride sharing (cab driving) and food-delivery and logistics. Sector-specific interview schedules were used for guiding data collection and these were translated as per need. The data collection in the three cities was conducted between November 2019 – July 2020. The study also includes analysis of secondary literature and a desktop review of websites and other online information of all participating service providers and other important stakeholders in the gig economy.

All research ethics were maintained during the course of the data collection; respondents were informed about the purpose of the research and about the researchers. Due verbal permission was taken before recording the interviews (face-to-face and later telephonically owing to the COVID-19 pandemic). The names of all women workers have been changed for maintaining confidentiality and due permission was taken from rest of the respondents for use of their names in this report.

For the purpose of this research, the team initially started by doing an exhaustive mapping of various available app-based and web-based service providers for each of the four sectors. This document was a live document wherein the team added any new app or website it chanced upon during the course of the study. Thereafter, introductory letters seeking interviews were sent to these service providers. A constant follow-up on each of these contacts was undertaken. A particular contact was removed from the list if there was no contact established in the first place owing to unavailability of contact information, the operations had shut down, decline of invite by the respondent, or no response despite numerous rounds of follow up.

All data was transcribed and translated in English which was checked by the research team for any discrepancy from the original tapes. For analysis of the qualitative data, the research team used NVIVO 12 software. The initial analysis and findings were presented to a small group of experts in the field and the analysis was made more rigorous based on the valuable feedback of the same. The final report was peer-reviewed internally before being published.

Challenges

The research did not restrict itself to one service-provider as has been seen with similar studies (Hunt et al 2019, IWWAGE 2020) as the aim was to have a broad overview of women workers in the platform economy. As a result, gaining access to women respondents was very difficult. The team was unable to establish contact with well-known app-based aggregators such as Uber¹, Ola, Swiggy, Zomato. The first stage in the data collection was to approach service-providers, trainers, etc.; a few of them agreed for their interviews but most drew the line when we asked for permission to speak with their workers. The second point of contact with women workers was done informally by chance meeting or through known users of the service (Urban Company) or through research partners (explained below). There was also resistance from women respondents to share contacts of their fellow colleagues fearing job-loss or other forms of insecurity. Hence, on an average for every 10 potential respondents (across workers and KIs) contacted, access was successful in one particular case. As a result, one finds variations in numbers across the four sectors (see Annexe 1) because of the uneven responses and difficulty in accessing women workers in the platform economy.

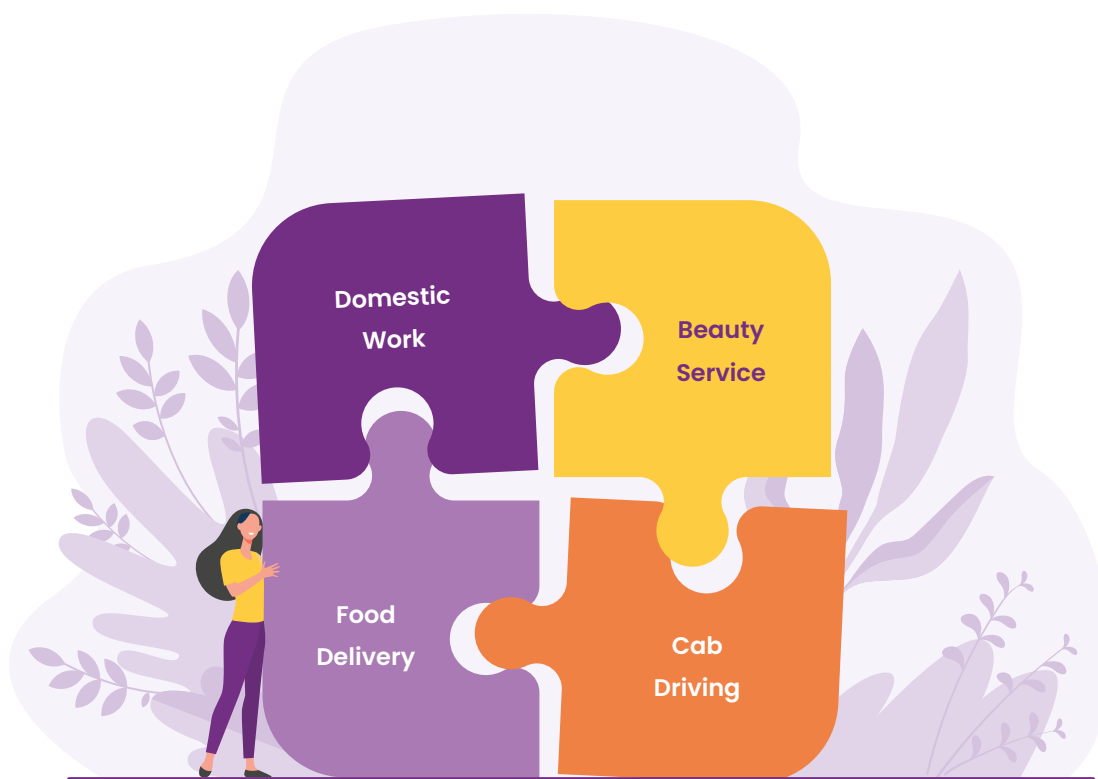
Owing to the access problem, in case of Bangalore and Mumbai, the team changed its strategy to also include grass roots organizations who worked with women informal workers because of two reasons. For this matter, Stree Jagruti Samiti (SJS), Bangalore was also involved in the study to contact and conduct in-depth interviews with women beauty workers and delivery workers. Given their prior experience of collecting data for another research organization, the team at SJS was competent and a one-day training of the interview schedule was held for the same.

A similar approach was also decided for Mumbai, however, the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent National lockdown declared on 25 March 2020 halted any attempt at travel for data collection. As such, the ISST team had to switch to telephonic interviews with service providers and workers wherever access was possible. As a result, the data collection from Mumbai was much limited in comparison to Delhi-NCR and Bangalore. Owing to the pandemic, all data collection between April and July 2020 moved online which also limited contacting women respondents.

Interestingly, in Delhi-NCR, various research studies with women gig workers in domestic work were going on simultaneously and almost all such research teams had already approached the same handful of service providers; some already in a tie-up with a particular study. As a result, while the research team was able to interview service providers, it struggled to get access to any domestic workers in the platform economy.

2

AN OVERVIEW OF WORKER PROFILE AND WORK SECTORS



A total of 31 in-depth interviews were conducted with women workers across all four work sectors. The demographic profile of these workers, as shown in Figure 1, depicts that most respondents fell in the age group of 28 - 37 years. Of these, the majority of the respondents who fell in the age group from 18 to 27 years, were either food delivery workers or cab drivers. In the food delivery sector, the main requirement was that of owning a driving license and we found many young women were students who entered these food platforms to earn a supplementary income. In case of cab driving, young girls were enthused with the idea of learning a new skill which gave them more authority. Azad Foundation's Women on Wheels programme reached out to young women in urban poor households in order to take up driving as a profession. We found most of the women Uber/Ola drivers have trained under the same programme.

Figure 1: Sector wise age of the respondents

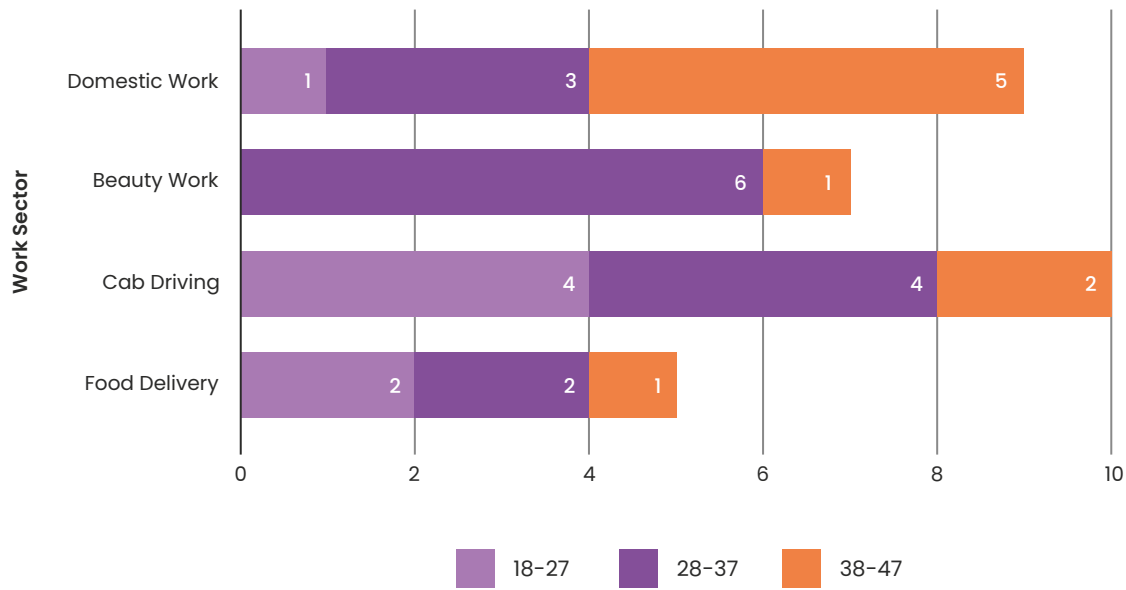


Figure 2: Marital status of the respondents

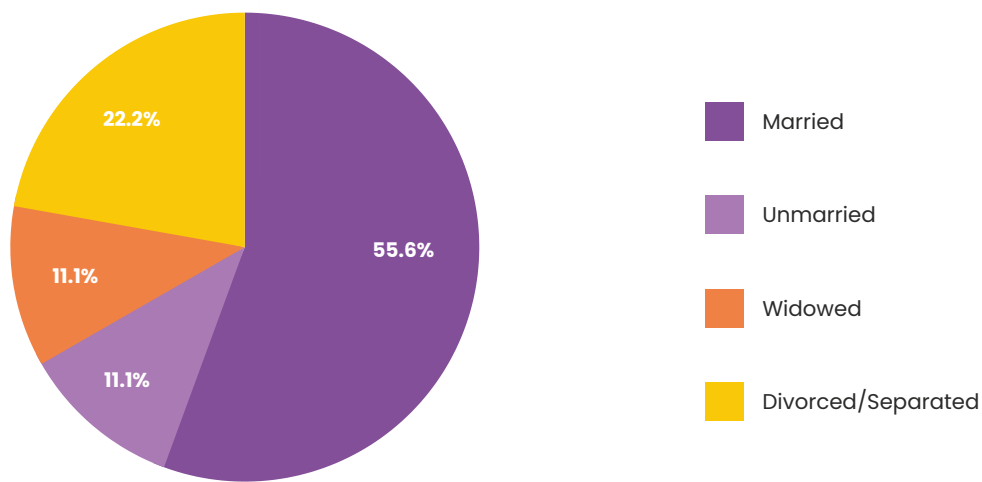
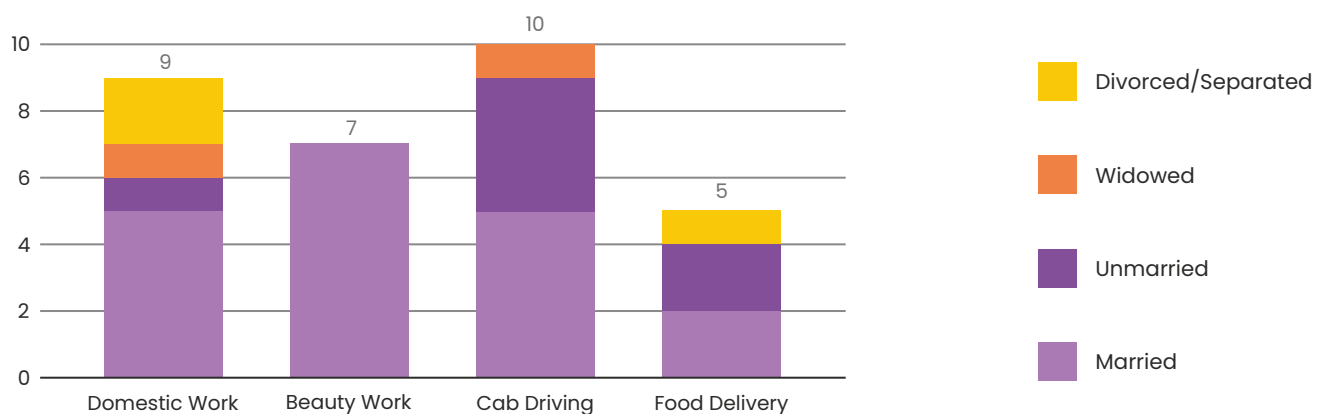


Figure 3: Sector wide marital status of the respondents



As shown in Figure 2, 55.6% respondents from the sample were married among which nearly all unmarried respondents (6 out of 7) were from food delivery platforms or driving cabs. In all four sectors, women with children joined the platform when child care needs were reduced or they were able to find care alternatives for their young children, who were mostly members of the family, neighbours, relatives, etc. In this study, all respondents from the beauty work sector were married while the respondents from the other three sectors were a mix of married, single, widowed and separated/divorced (see Fig.3). Further, the study found that the women often entered domestic work, cab driving and the food delivery partners in the absence of a primary male earning member in the family. Most of the respondents belonged to Hindu community (25 of 31 respondents) and 2 each from Muslim, Sikh and Christian category.

An Overview of the Work Sectors Included in the Study



Domestic Work

The domestic work sector is particularly unrecognized, undervalued and often not considered as part of the economy for which one reasoning is that the nature of domestic work involves household chores and care work which is predominantly considered as women's work (Raghuram, 2001; Matilla, 2011; Chigateri et al. 2016). In ILO policy brief on domestic workers, Budlender (2011) points out that globally the ethnic composition of domestic workers is often those who have been historically discriminated against. In India, around 72% of domestic workers fall in the category of Scheduled Caste, Scheduled tribe, and other backwards castes (Oelz and Rani, 2015). Domestic workers consist of women who are non-literates (ISST,2009; Oelz and Rani. 2015), which resonated with the study's findings. Amongst all the sectors under this study, domestic workers were found to be socio-economically underprivileged and received minimum schooling with most of them having dropped from school to financially contribute to the family. The educational background, early marriages and financial precarity of these women can be linked to their early entry into this sector;

"I started working even before marriage. I was in 7th class, I left my school and then I started working. I am from Ratnagiri." (Mona, Domestic Worker, Interview, April 2020).

Respondents from the sector included both live-in and live-out, as well as part time and full-time workers. Domestic work is generally seen as an unskilled labour and because it is performed in a private space, the economic value of this work reduces even further (Oelz and Rani, 2015).

"When you go and ask for a job, then the madam is like 'okay they want a job, so 10,000...no 8000 is fine' because that's when we are in need right? People don't think that they have so much work at their house...and the money [they are] giving is not equivalent to the work."

(Ila, Domestic Worker, Interview, June 2020).

This devaluation of domestic work affected their power to negotiate their wages. Moreover, lower educational qualification and market skills in addition to poverty, drove women to choose to work as a domestic worker as against one's own interest as was seen in other sectors.

"I studied until class 10 but I did not complete class 10. Why should I lie? Because there were problems at home, I couldn't concentrate on my studies. I was at home and I would do whatever work there was at home. Even outside like nursing, baby care"

(Kavita, Domestic Worker, Interview, May 2020).

Apart from the wage negotiations, lack of awareness resulted in their restricted access to the platforms. Most respondents in this sector were either unaware of the details of the apps/websites they were part of, or did not know how to access these platforms.

Women also looked for domestic work opportunities in the absence of earning members, for instance - separation from husband, death of an earning member or when husband stopped contributing financially to the household (Lekha, Interview, 2020). It was also observed that the women's marital status and care responsibilities impacted the type of domestic work that they would undertake;

"When my kids were younger, I would go in the morning and come back in the evening...ever since they've grown up, I've started to do full time work"

(Surbhi, Domestic Worker, Interview, June 2020).

As per the key informant (KI) interviews from all three research sites, a large section of domestic workers migrate from their native states (mostly rural areas to urban cities) in search of work opportunities. In case of domestic workers, *"85-95% of these women come from Jharkhand, Bihar, Orissa and Andhra"* (Amod Kant, DWSSC, Interview, 2020). Those migrating from other states prefer taking up live-in work since *"the benefit of being a live-in worker is that the employer is taking care of all my needs...they're meeting all my needs"* (Kavita, Interview, June 2020). Additionally, the domestic workers are connected to the placement agencies and in the absence of personal network they end up taking live-in work and, in some cases, these placement agencies *"don't take any responsibility, some of them are traffickers"* (Amod Kant, Interview, September 2020).

Live-in respondents in the study reported that living conditions were often compromised – lack of water and hygiene facilities, privacy, freedom of mobility is indicative of the poor working and living conditions of domestic workers (WEIGO, n,d). The intimacy of the worker-employer relationship in this sector makes the demographic profile of the worker more relevant and at the same time leads to loss of jobs based on caste and religion-based discriminations. Women migrating from other states to metropolitan cities are also disadvantaged because of language barriers. In big metropolitans, clients often prefer English speaking domestic workers especially for childcare. As such, lack of language skills results in loss of job opportunities for women in this sector:

“I got two workers from Tamil Nadu, they were babysitters, but weren’t capable of speaking in Hindi and English... I was thinking if they could speak in English, it would be good...because the clients need an English-speaking babysitter...the language was the problem so we weren’t able to place them.”
(KIDWID, Interview, February 2020)

The domestic worker sector stood out in our sample from other three sectors. This was primarily because of the disadvantaged position of domestic workers in the informal economy. The devaluation of work and the social vulnerabilities of the workers in the informal sector has only transcended into the gig platforms with not much change to their earning capacity. The invisibility of the work and difficulty in regulating the work is also seen as a challenge for workers even on gig platforms.

Beauty Workers

The beauty workers came from lower middle-class backgrounds and are privileged as compared to other sectors. Their qualifications ranged from Class 10 to post-graduation, some of whom had prior experience of working as lecturers or in the IT sector. They had either worked in local beauty parlours or had received beauty training from government or private centers. The aspiration of working in the respective sector was seen to be strongest in beauty workers with almost all of them having prior experience of beauty work. The workers expressed their aspiration to work in beauty and cosmetics industry or having their own salon and saw their current work as a progression towards their dreams.

With the increased demand for home-based beauty services and the consequent emergence of online platforms such as Urban Company (earlier known as Urban Clap), the business of the existing parlours was immensely affected with beauticians shifting to these gig platforms. Respondents also shared that poor working conditions at beauty parlours, wherein they often experienced discrimination, exploitation, work politics, longer working hours and delays in wage payments were the reasons to choose independent gig work,



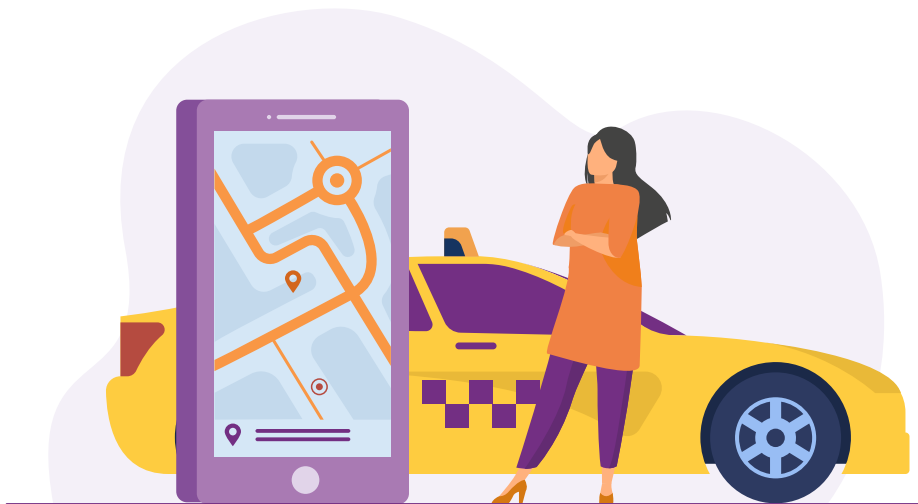
"I was very depressed at the parlour...because there's a lot of politics at the workplace. In an attempt to start from zero, I did the sweeping, swabbing, washing utensils. I did everything. After that I understood the work there. I understood that I had to work hard to get where I wanted."

(Sabika, Interview, May 2020).

The gig platforms tapped on these limitations persisting in the traditional market and offered an alternative space where they could make their own choices regarding timings and work, therefore, an escape from "politics at the workplace" and possible discrimination. Although, we will explore latent challenges related to this flexibility further in the study.

Cab Driving

As opposed to feminization of the beauty and domestic work, one finds few women working as cab drivers, given the perceived notion of driving being a 'masculine' skill'. A UK based study found that gig platforms are developed around the work mostly done by men which further restricts women's entry. The study finds an overwhelming percentage of women in domestic work (more than 80%) and only 5% or 6% women in delivery and cab platforms such as Uber (Balaram et al, 2017).



Women in this sector were found to be either second generation migrants or had migrated on marriage. The work trajectory of the respondents reflected that most of them were engaged in varying sectors and later approached by the company's recruitment team (as most cab driving companies have mobilizing and recruitment teams). In both cases, driving was not the first priority; instead the economic vulnerability pushed these women to explore the sector.

The norms around "masculinity" of the work and the risks associated with driving created internal as well as external barriers to pursue driving as career. Hence, support from family was an essential factor observed in this sector which determined if the women could continue to work as cab drivers,

"My mother completely refused to let me do this job. Not for any job, just for this driving job...because she said this field is not right...that's because people say anything to you and get away with it. My mother said it's okay for boys, but you're a girl. After two days my mum came and begged me to leave driving. So, I went and gave the car back. For three months after that I sat at home."

(Ruchi, Cab Driver, Interview, February 2020).

Considering these gender specific challenges, initiatives such as Women on Wheels by Azad Foundation provide trainings on self-defence and empowerment, besides driving skills, thereby providing support to women drivers in negotiating with the possible family and social conflicts and later absorbs them into the labour force through their for-profit organization - Sakha Consulting Wings Pvt Ltd. Many of the respondents who drove for platforms such as Uber and Ola in Delhi had received their training from Sakha.

Women respondents involved in the study were involved in two forms of driving: (i) regular routes involving school drops (ii) platform work with Uber and Ola. These models are explained in greater detail in the next chapter.

Food Delivery Platforms

Women involved in the food delivery sector faced similar challenges such as their counterparts in cab driving. The food delivery work involves a greater degree of mobility and contact with strangers which are not considered as dignified work for women,

"You are doing this 'daridra kelasa' (wretched work). Giving food is not a daridra kelasa, we are giving food to someone they are paying money to, but we are giving food to them. Really, I wept that day. My husband told me to leave the job. Why should I leave the job."

(Kaveri, Food Delivery, Interview, June 2020)



While the food delivery platforms do not impart any skill training directly, we found companies like Even Cargo and Heydeedee, helped women gain driving skills and either employed them directly with them or helped them find jobs with various food delivery and logistical platforms. Overall, the delivery work sector is dominated by men, and as such women's issues have been neglected. This also results in higher attrition rate for women.

Each sector mentioned above has its own historical progression from which it has developed into its current state. These progressions and demography of the women workers involved in these sectors are essential to locate their position in the gig economy and determine their experience as workers. A combination of factors – models of work, skills, education, access and awareness, working conditions determine women's entry, retention and exit from these platforms. In the next chapter, we will aim to discuss these contributing factors in more detail. We will also attempt mapping the various models of work that the study was able to access in order to provide a snapshot on what exists and where are women positioned in the platform economy.

3

MAPPING THE PLATFORM ECONOMY IN THE STUDY

The multiplicity of gig models in India including the traditional gig platforms as well as emerging models makes it a complex and diversified pool of platforms. In Table 1 below, we chart the characteristics of the platforms and companies that were part of the study. The table thus provides a snapshot of the commonalities, differences and the overlapping characteristics between the various platforms which indicates the complex and diverse nature of the new economy.

Table 1: Mapping the characteristics of platforms in the study

	Domestic Work	Beauty Service	Cab Driving	Food Delivery
Components				
Models	Functions like job portal (service providing platforms)	Hybrid model and gig model (Urban Company)	Hybrid model and gig model (Uber)	Gig model (Service providing platforms)
Geographical presence	Delhi NCR, Mumbai. (Ad is extended to other cities)	Urban Company (Pan India)	Uber (Pan India) Others – multi cities	Pan India
Gender of workers	Women in direct domestic work and housekeeping. Men in professional services (hotels, guest houses)	Women	Mixed gender + women specific platforms Expanding to Uber with tie ups	Mixed (more men)
Recruitment	Field recruitment or advertisement, govt. training centres; Documents – Adhar mandatory. Provision to build CV, online profile, personal network	Advertisements, references, word of mouth. government training institutes, personal network	Hybrid - Tie up with NGOs Azad Foundation (Sakha), SHGs, field recruitment, Gig - (Uber) word of mouth, reference, personal network	Direct recruitment, personal network

	Domestic Work	Beauty Service	Cab Driving	Food Delivery
Training	Focused on soft skills; training on interview skills (My	Skill training and soft skills, safety awareness	-Tie up with NGOs Neev Foundation (TaxShe) -Women specific Hybrid platforms – holistic training Gig- soft skills, navigation, app.	Limited to app training
Customer r/s	For booking, beginning arrangement, replacement and complaints	Limited to service and complaints.	Hybrid – Yearly/monthly tie ups Gig – limited to the service, complaints.	Limited to service and complaints.
Social security	No	Gig platform –No Hybrid model – Fixed salary workers carry some benefits – PF, health insurances	Women centred platforms (TaxShe and Sakha) –insurance Others (including Hybrid and gig platforms)– no	No

Looking at the table, it is evident that organization of domestic work platforms is yet to expand and formalize as against other sectors. Currently, the domestic workers platforms function as an extension of the traditional placement agencies which used to function as a mediator between job providers and seekers. Hence, the unregularized nature of placement agencies is also reflected in the newer digital platforms of domestic work which function with limited interference between the worker and employer. In some cases, the platforms work similar to job portals where the profiles of workers (work experience and qualifications) are posted on the app or website. The customers can then access these profiles and choose the worker as per their preference. However, the extent of interference in terms of recruitment, training or worker safety and work conditions varied across the four sectors.

As for beauty service, cab driving, and food delivery sectors, the platforms are more digitally organized. While most of the gig workers were registered on the company websites or apps, we found the hybrid models of work mainly in the beauty and cab driving sectors. Both gig and hybrid models will be discussed further in this chapter.

Within these hybrid models there is another subtype of platforms which are women specific platforms (customers, workers or both) such as Tax She, Beauty Glad, Koala Kabs and Sakha. However, to sustain the company and for better earning opportunities, some of these companies are tying up with bigger platforms. For example, Koala Kabs has been a woman centric cab service company – both from driver and the customer perspective, which restricted its clientship to only women and children. However, they have now expanded their clientele to mixed gender, by tying up with ride-sharing platforms such as Uber. This allows their drivers to earn more during off duty hours².

² Ola launched an exclusive women's fleet for women only passengers called Ola Pink in 2014 in Delhi post the rape of a woman passenger in an Uber ride. However, it was discontinued owing to high fares as compared to the usual cab rates

The women-centered companies such as TaxShe or Sakha are more gender sensitive with respect to addressing issues pertaining to women such as safety and care responsibilities. In non-gender specific platforms, these issues are neglected and instead intensify gender inequalities. For instance, in domestic work sector which is traditionally a female dominated domain, the platforms are non-gender specific but women are observed to be involved in low-paying domestic work in private households while men are working in higher-paying, more professional spaces such as hotels or guest houses (KIDWIB, Interview, 2019). The customers' preference to the gender of domestic work also varied. Household customers perceived women workers as safer and preferred to hire them as compared to men but at the same time the unpaid work responsibilities on women, led to certain customers in rejecting female workers,

“Certain home don't want (female domestic workers) because of absenteeism issues. The female employees in comparison take a good number of offs in a month.”

(KIDWIB, Interview, January 2020)

The platforms use varying modus operandi to recruit the workers such as using external hiring portals, through government supported training institutes, field recruitment (visiting slums/settlements to advertise and hire), word of mouth and incentivising references. Common in all four sectors was the trusted personal networks of women workers through which many women entered the platform. Kost et al. (2019) in their critical analysis of the “boundary less career options” and freedom to choose career progression that gig platforms offer, identify these parallel networks of workers formed beyond the digital circle even when the structuring of the platforms often reinforces isolation of workers. Similar to the ideas explored by Kost et al., we observe in this study that with the growing online platforms, these networks are beneficial in identifying lucrative platforms for their career. Many of the respondents from our sample entered the platform through such personal networks. The platforms too, rely on such networks to recruit new workers by providing incentives to the existing workers for referring. Furthermore, two women specific platforms from the sample – Tax She and Sakha Cabs have tie ups with non-profit organizations for recruitment as well as training or capacity building.

Training provisions and components were highly dependent on the need and requirement of skill of worker in the market. For beauty workers the skilling includes grooming and beauty training but additionally also focus on soft skills as interaction with the client is essential to increase the client – worker trust, hence increasing client stickiness to the particular platform. Though, some variation of soft skill training, sometimes in addition to technical training was also found in cab-driving and domestic work. Women specific platforms with NGO tie ups provide holistic trainings involving the ideas of empowerment and women's' safety, often not prominent in other platforms.

In terms of social security, almost none of the platforms provide social security benefits such as maternity leave, insurance, Provident Fund etc. to the gig workers due to the precarious nature of their relationship with the providers. This includes well known platforms such as Uber, Ola, Zomato, Swiggy, etc. Whereas, those working as an employee in companies such as TaxShe, Sakha, Beauty Glad benefitted with social security such as Provident Fund, health insurance etc.

Gig and Hybrid Models in Indian Platform Economy

The neo-liberal market trends have increased the “informalization of formal sector”, that is the formal sector companies are hiring workers on a short-term basis with bare minimum social security and increasing precarity (Abraham, 2016, Chen, 2012). The gig economy, in itself, has transformed the market where low skilled or highly skilled individuals can easily enter the workforce but with limited labour rights. The question here is then why are workers entering such a precarious and vulnerable work? What drives them to these platforms? And who is benefitting from these platforms? Though we explore these questions throughout this study, it is important to keep in mind that this transition also points towards the lack of opportunity and option in the existing market especially for the low skilled workers (Korreck, 2020). Hence, this differentiation allows us to look at the nuances of how and why platforms are built in certain ways and how workers are impacted by these models.

In exploring the various questions listed above, in this study, we have categorized two models of work – one is the typical **Gig model** which is application or website based digital platforms that connect the customers and workers as per the market demand and supply. The workers are hired as independent contractors and are often commission-based workers performing a pre-assigned task.

The other kind of model is what we are calling **Hybrid model**. These platforms are application or website-based platforms but do not adhere to the typical characteristics of a gig platform such as contract and commission-based work. They have a mix of characteristics that are either built upon the existing market models or have additionally added new characteristics.

In a typical **gig framework**, the work engagements are short term, there is flexibility in terms of work timings and choice of work and these are facilitated by the platform who hire these workers as independent contractors. In contrast, the hybrid model is a rather dynamic framework where characteristics from different market models have been amalgamated into a new emerging model. These features have been adopted, assimilated and transformed into new sets of models that are unique in their own ways. This is similar to the idea of Hybridity explored by Yuko Aoyama and Balaji Parthasarathy (2019) in the context of the public-private domain of governance. They look at hybridity as a “newly emerging area” as a result of overlapping between the concepts which has the potential to bridge the gaps in the existing structures (Jha, 2019).

For instance, some of the newer platforms in our data have features like rigorous recruitment procedures absorbed from the formal economy, transforming these informal spaces with some aspects of formality. Further, within the hybrid models, there are two kinds of workers – a) full time salaried workers and b) gig workers or freelancers. Hybrid models have assimilated aspects from gig and traditional economy and created a platform that gives workers the agency to choose (in most hybrid platforms) between the two kinds of work they can/want to engage in.

Thus, this hybridity also allows the platforms to address gender specific factors such as unpaid responsibilities and cultural restrictions, which has been crucial in limiting women’s participation in paid work. Though the hybrid models challenge these gaps, the feminization of labour in sectors like domestic work or beauty service has transcended into the gig platforms as well.

Looking at these models as hybrid helps us to locate the transition of the market within each sector and opens the scope to explore the reasons and historical contexts of this transition especially from a worker’s perspective.

Table 2: Comparing Gig and Hybrid Models of Platforms in India

Characteristics	Gig Models	Hybrid Models
Ease of entry/exit	High	Medium
Asset requirement	*Low	**Medium
Flexibility and autonomy	High	Medium
Risk and vulnerability	High	Medium to low
Ability/capacity to earn	High	Limited

*vehicle but alternative choices **bonded contract

In Table 2 above, we broadly explore these two models in the context of defining components of gig economy such as entry/exit into these platforms, asset requirement, flexibility and autonomy, risk and vulnerabilities and capacity to earn. Each component is discussed in detail below-

Ease of entry exit

The ease of entry and exit is a salient feature of the gig economy, making it more accessible to the workers looking for immediate work or financial opportunities. We examine in this study that the ease of entry into platforms are determined by prerequisites such as skills, work experience and material assets or through the recruitment process such as document verification and interview processes. Gig models keep these prerequisites to a minimum and as a result reducing the entry barrier.

These restrictions though are only related to the structural barriers. For women, these barriers are also linked to cultural practices, family support, household responsibilities and care work. The ease of entry and exit of women workers in the study were conditional to the amount of care their children needed. Women had to leave their work due to pregnancy and could re-enter only if they could arrange an alternative care facility or when care requirements of their children were reduced (Sabika, Interview, May 2020).

On the other hand, platforms with hybrid models have comparatively stringent mechanisms for recruitment. For instance, a Delhi based cab hailing platform takes two to three rounds of interviews before hiring the individual while another service provider has a compulsory training period of 6 – 12 months (with less remuneration) before joining as a worker.

Contrary to this finding, domestic workers outside the platform (informal sector) already have lesser restrictions and are able to enter the market with more ease (as is for beauty workers), mainly through personal networks. However, the source of entering the market is often unsafe such as depending on the security guard hence putting them in a vulnerable position (KIDWIM, Interview, May 2020). Hence, recognizing this pattern the hybrid models extend and maintain this ease of entry/exit in their company models as well. For instance, Homedruid creates a list of domestic workers who they only contact when client’s requirement matches their profile. The part time workers are not required to go through interview procedures;

"We have what we call a demo...one of us also goes along with the person...to the customers' place...the cook prepares food and if the customer likes it, then we start...the first day is kind of like an interview and there we start." (KIDWIB, Interview, January 2020)

On the same platform (Homedruid) the full-time salaried workers have a yearly contract with the company and are bound by the clauses, resembling the formal sector. Though, there are variations within these models, largely the hybrid models have introduced more procedures for recruitment. Therefore, in some ways institute more formality and structure to the sector.

Asset requirement

One of the governing ideas of neo-liberalism is to reduce risks and material investments for the business and rather transfer it to different stakeholders, primarily to workers (Zwick, 2017; Doorn and Badger, 2020). Depending on the material assets required for the work, the gig platforms require workers to own such assets prior to their entry or provide the materials on a rental basis such as car or bikes, beauty kit, uniforms etc. Doorn and Badger (2020) noted that the argument of capitalizing resources for individual contractors comes with a hidden cost of maintaining the assets/resources which has to be borne by the worker. The delivery workers in Zomato for instance, had their own vehicle before entering the platform, but the payment for the uniform was taken as a deposit. Whereas in Urban Company, a deposit of approximately Rs. 40,000 is to be paid to the platform in exchange of the beauty kit, though the workers are also given an option to take the kit on loan against an interest amount (Piyali, Interview, April 2020).

On the other hand, in hybrid models (which are mostly small scale) the workers find their deposit and security prices much cheaper as compared to large platforms. Beauty Glad took around Rs. 6,000 as a security deposit for the beauty kit which is returned when the worker leaves the platform (Pratibha, Interview, April 2020).

Hybrid models have worked out unique ways to tap the resources and charge workers a monthly or one time rent to incur their investment cost. As an example - a Bangalore based company provides selected workers (those with driving experience) with bikes for travelling at the payment of Rs. 500 a month for 3 years after which the workers will have the ownership of the bike. As attractive it may seem, this also puts the worker in a vulnerable position, where the worker may have invested some amount to the asset yet does not get the asset ownership beyond the platform, *"but after they gave me the bike, I did not complete 3 years. That's why I gave the bike back to them"* (Karuna, Interview, July 2020). On the other hand, once the worker leaves, the company can incur the asset cost from another worker, which may now become a profit incurring investment (with no actual cost incurred by the company).

Apart from this, as a guaranteed return for their training investment, few platforms that provide intensive training to its workers, sign a bond between the company and worker for a fixed period. In case the worker is unable to complete the bond period, the bond money has to be paid to the company. This again varies as per sector and platform. Lookplex (beauty platform) has a 6-month bond period in which they hold back 15 days' salary, paid after the worker completes the bond period, whereas another cab company takes a Rs. 50,000 cheque as a guarantee,

"I make them sign a contract that if I am going to spend so much money with you, you at least work for 1 and half years with us. After your training it is a signed stamped contract...we also take a security cheque from the girl...I take a 50,000 cheque, which I know will never be in her account...but if you don't complete this I'm going to bounce this cheque. Then it becomes a legal issue for you...you won't get a job anywhere else...even after that we have drop-outs...it has brought down the ratio...a 50 % drop out has dropped down to 15-17 %...the seriousness is there...that I am coming here with my cheque." (KICDIB, Interview, 2019)

Flexibility and autonomy

Gig platforms are embedded with the ideas of work flexibility and autonomy where it is up to the worker to decide how much they want to work and earn. In contrast to the status of employee in traditional work settings, the gig workers are considered as partners indicating the profit sharing between the two parties (Schwellnus et al., 2019).

For instance, Uber uses the concept of "surge pricing" also called dynamic pricing which refers to the changes in the pricing of services as per the market demand, where the drivers too receive the surged price benefits (Schwellnus et al., 2019; Chen and Sheldon, 2015). Simultaneously, the workers have the autonomy to choose how to use their flexibility for example – working on single or multiple platforms, which orders to take or drop etc. Chen and Sheldon (2015) noted that the drivers end up putting in more time and see the surge time as priority, hence increasing the labour supply as per the service demand. Furthermore, competition between workers due to increased labour supply can push compensation down and people may be forced to work longer hours and give up flexibility (Graham and Woodcock, 2018). Beneficial for both parties as it seems conceptually, as noted by Peets (2019), this flexibility often results in the question of "who gains and who loses" and assert that such freedom comes at the cost of restrictions for workers.

Beyond the perceived "flexibility", it is important to keep in mind that mostly, these platforms are gendered in nature. Even when the entry restrictions are lowered, with gig platforms opening up economic opportunities, the existing gendered practices in the traditional markets have only duplicated on these models. The work timings, infrastructure, high demand service hours, unpaid responsibilities are some of the factors that impact the flexibility of women workers, irrespective of whether flexibility is there or not.

The hybrid model platforms have low flexibility in terms of timings and choice of work since platforms also hire salaried workers, who lose the option to negotiate their work timings, durations or services/orders. For example, in Beauty Glad where the workers have the agency to choose between the two models, gig workers can choose the hours they want to spend with the company whereas a full-time worker does not have that flexibility.

Largely both hybrid and gig models lack a gender lens. But the women specific platforms (Koala Kabs, Lookplex, YLG) have set fixed timings (mostly till 6 pm) for their services, for both gig and full-time workers owing to safety concerns. Although, workers sometimes have to work beyond these hours as well. Additionally, these platforms are more empathetic towards women's issues and allow flexibility of work in terms of household responsibilities. Therefore, although structurally hybrid models may not provide as much flexibility and autonomy as gig platforms, hybrid models have managed to address the concerns of women workers in the gig as well as the traditional market to some extent.

Risks and vulnerabilities

In the era of post Fordism, the gig platforms have been able to maximize their profit earning mechanisms by transferring the market risk from companies to workers. The contractual relationship adds to the precarity and job instability for workers. This multi-structural inequality puts workers in a vulnerable position, with worker risks not just confined to the market fluctuations but also extends to the social isolation (Graham, 2017), safety of worker (Kiarie et al., 2020; Kasliwal, 2020) and wage insecurity and so is also observed in this study.

For instance, if we look at job insecurity, most gig modeled platforms did not provide a written contract to its workers, though the respondents did not directly see this as a potential risk to their job security and justified this as a compensation to the flexibility being offered to them. On the other hand, few hybrid model platforms albeit provided contracts, they were often in the form of a bond or incomprehensible due to the language barrier.

Whereas in terms of security of worker, hybrid modeled platforms especially women centred such as TaxShe, Sakha or Lookplex etc. have mechanisms to address the potential risks to their women workers. Hence, the risk factor is more in gig model platforms than hybrid model platforms.

Furthermore, a study on workers on an Indian based platform found that financial vulnerability of the workers is seen as *"hooks in the form of needs and vulnerabilities to optimize for reliable workers and hence, eventually build a predictable reserve force of workers"* (Raval and Pal, 2019). Though in our study, we find that a beauty-based company (Look Plex) with hybrid models was looking for stickiness of the worker rather than a typical gig model notion of service limited relationship. More than the financial vulnerabilities, the professional desire is seen as the stickiness factor:

"We want to understand whether she sees it as a career...it shouldn't be that she has shortage of money and needs to pay rent so that's why she's joining our company...if that's the scene, we tell them that's not a good scene for them...because then she's not a good candidate for us...the prime question is why do you want to join? Why do you want to work?" (KIBW2D, Interview, February 2020)

The vulnerability to these risk factors also varies among the workers. Low skilled workers are often unable to mitigate such risks due to the high supply of such skills in the market, lowering their negotiation power and freedom to choose platforms (Beiber and Mogia 2020). Additionally, for women workers the platform poses additional layers of challenges. In our study, issues pertaining to women such as safety concerns, gender stereotyping, lack of family support and care responsibilities were overwhelmingly cited by the respondents.

Ability/capacity to earn

In comparison with traditional employment, an attractive feature of gig work is the possibility to earn as much as the worker puts in their effort and time (Khattoon et al. n. d). For this fluctuating pricing, Uber has been criticized by the driving partners and unions for exploiting the workers. In the initial years of its launch, the company had attractive incentive packages and looking at the scope of earning many drivers invested in vehicles on loan hoping to pay back through increased wages. Once a large pool of workers was connected (or trapped) with the company, they soon changed the incentive model and decreased the minimum fare per kilometer, hence capping the capacity of worker to earn (Dhillon, 2018).

Hence, the workers tend to invest longer hours to earn the minimum remuneration in addition to the controlling mechanisms by companies that pushes the worker to take the additional burden of work and reduces their

motivation (Bester et al. 2020). For instance, Sonali, an Uber driver in Delhi shares, *“because we don’t get the boost, we don’t feel like working...and we call the call-centre...and they say...that money will get deducted as per the trips. We have to do 10-12 trips a day”* (Interview, March 2020).

Workers engaged in these platforms are already financially burdened. With lack of economic opportunities in the traditional sector, the scope of earning is an attractive feature in spite of above-mentioned reasons. This is also because the trajectory of growth (and wages) is time-taking and slower in a traditional work setting, as compared to the gig models where the restrictions on earnings are less. As one of the beauty trainers expressed, *“if we’re going to a salon to work...it has a 10 to 7 p.m. time duration...but for that time duration I have a limited salary...I’m giving my 100 percent, but I still have a limited amount...but with freelancing we can do much more”* (Ojas, Interview, April 2020).

But the unlimited scope of earning is subjective especially for women. As an example, delivery and cab drivers get incentives for working during odd hours, usually at nights, which respondents mentioned as unfair. Such opportunities are difficult for women to utilize since they did not have the “permission” to work late at night or some have young children at home. Such barriers, even with the aforesaid flexibility in the model, have not been holistically beneficial for women.

These five characteristics mentioned above have some common grounding to the gig models when compared with hybrid models. We found some components were tweaked and restructured as per what works for the women workers and the platforms. This hybridity hence, opens up a gateway of negotiating women workers’ rights in the current market and shows a possibility of a digitized market space with gender sensitive policies. These policies and modalities mentioned above impact the working experience of the respondents based on their sector, platforms as well as their social positions which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

4

WORKING CONDITIONS

The platform economy provides a semblance of freedom and flexibility to the workers in choosing their employers and mode of engagement, in deciding their time and place of work, in addition to easy entry and exit. But is that really so? Is the promise for freedom and flexibility a trap to maximize commoditization of labour, shifting the risks and work pressure on workers from the platforms? On speaking to women platform workers, we realized that there are many factors at play that may constrain the promised 'freedom and flexibility' in the platform economy. We examine this by understanding working conditions in terms of work contracts, wages and payments, and other determining factors such as working hours, timings, leaves, child care arrangements, access to clean toilets, incentive and penalty processes, and safety and security mechanisms built in the platform economy.

Entry into the Platform Economy – The Contracts

Our data chiefly talks about two modes of engagement available to the workers depending on their respective sectors and online platforms – 1) the freelancer model or the independent contractor model and 2) the fixed salary model. In the freelance model, the worker is not necessarily committed to a single platform or employer, and the platform earns through commissions (to the tune of 20-30% of the payment) for the services offered by the worker to the client. Thus, higher the demand for the service, the greater the earning for the worker. The second model is the fixed salary model wherein the worker is committed to a single platform, has fixed timings and often a minimum number of tasks to be completed. However, the platform pays a fixed salary and the earnings of the workers are not sensitive to demand fluctuations of the market. The beauty services sector and cab driving offered both modes of engagement, although the more popular one was the freelancer model at least among the beauticians. The larger platforms in these two sectors only offered the freelancer model. The domestic workers mainly functioned through a fixed salary model, and the delivery agents through the freelancer model.

The specific mode of engagement and the terms of employment are mentioned in the contracts from the service providers. Written contracts are gradually becoming a norm, which according to the workers was not the case until a few years ago. The contracts are sometimes in the form of joining letters or e-messages or formal declaration requiring the signature of acceptance by the workers. Contracts are usually in English, and the service provider may not always explain the content of the contract to the workers. Asma, a cab driver recalls that she did receive the contract, *"but we didn't even know what the contents of the contract were. They did not read it to us, it was in English. Had it been in Hindi we would have read it"* (Interview, June 2020). On the other hand, Bhoomi a beauty worker belonging to the fixed salary model seemed well aware of the contents and terms of the contract, *"...in a month we get 4 holidays plus whatever festivals you have – there is health insurance, there is provident fund, all of this is mentioned in my contract...I just felt good that everything is put down on paper so there is a reassurance that whatever is said will be done."* (Interview, April 2020). The platforms in case of domestic workers mainly play the role of intermediaries that match the need of the client with the skills of the worker and encourage written contracts between the worker and the client who is the employer. Online intermediaries in

some cases make contracts mandatory between the domestic worker and the client, and in other cases nudge the client or persuade the clients to do so. The key informants from such intermediary platforms shared that making contracts mandatory often push away clients, forcing them to take a milder approach of encouraging the practice rather than being forceful. The intermediaries in case of the domestic workers played an important role in terms of promoting fair employment practices in the sector. The delivery agents also received a 'short' listing of rules and conditions that the delivery agents were required to follow. In one instance, the delivery agent also mentioned that one of the conditions included that the worker cannot engage in strikes against the platform. Thus, the experiences of the women workers in terms of having a formal contract with the employers varied intra and inter sector. The contracts in some instances were to secure the position of the platform. The precarity in case of delivery agents and in some instances for domestic workers was higher in comparison to beauty workers and cab drivers. If we look at the prevalent reality of precariousness and non-contractual forms of work in the traditional informal economy, gig economy jobs can be seen as workers' entry into standardized forms. In relative terms gig workers might experience less insecurity on platforms compared to traditional offline jobs in the informal sector, but in absolute terms gig work is also insecure and precarious.

Contracts have also been used to devise ways of retaining or counter high attrition rate among workers. An employment bond for instance was used in the beauty sector for the fixed salary model which provided that the worker shall work for a minimum agreed upon period (usually six months) after joining the platform. 15 days or a month's salary was withheld from the worker and released on successfully completing the minimum agreed upon time, failing which the workers had to forsake the withheld salary. The rationale of the company is however to ensure minimum returns on their investment on the worker in terms of training and equipment;

"the only thing is that because we are providing you with so many resources [and training]...we make an agreement that they at least have to work with us for 6 months." (KIBWID, interview, January 2020).

On the other hand, in case of freelancers a security deposit was taken for the training provided and tools lent to the workers. In case of inability on part of the workers to invest in the capital, the equipment or tools were lent to the worker and the workers gradually repaid through an agreed upon monthly wage-cut. Thus, entry into the platform economy through the free-lancer model, especially in the case of beauty workers and cab drivers demands initial capital investments or taking loans from the platform or service provider. The gig or the platform economy is designed in a manner that reduces investment pressures or risks for the platform or service providers but transfers these pressures on to the worker.

The preference for independent contracts or freelancing among the workers is driven by the assumed flexibility it offers and the capacity to earn higher as against fixed salary jobs. However, the independent contracting or freelancing model was the only agreement mode offered by larger platforms such as Uber, Swiggy and Zomato. Independent contracts are pitched as desirable and empowering that enable agency among workers to promote a work-life balance, (Hunt and Samman, 2019). However, this individualization embodied in the freelancer model, as seen in our data, comes with no social security cover including no minimum pay, no health insurance or medical cover, and no pensions. In addition to no social security cover, the burden of risks is shifted from the platform to the individual worker. This is discussed further in the following sections.



Digitization and Digital Gender Divide: A Challenge for Women's Entry into the Gig Economy

On one hand, the cost of smartphones and internet data have decreased in recent years (Rountree, 2020) which has worked as a catalyst in spreading the reach of digital platforms. A key informant recalls, *"back then reaching out to people would be a physical activity...even now it is, but it's much reduced...we used to have physical forms that had to be filled up"* (KIDW2M, Interview, June 2020). With the companies shifting recruitments and operations to the digital platform, more and more people have started adjusting to the trend and *"the enabler has been the mobile phone and internet that is cheaper"* (KIDW2M, Interview, June 2020). Contrary to this, we found that even with the reduced price, respondents struggled to bear the cost of smartphones to join the gig economy, *"I don't have any money, my uncle gave Rs. 5000 (to buy a smartphone). I purchased it for 4,500 rupees"* (Jeena, Interview, August 2020).

Affordability is not the only barrier, the problem here is multifold. Limited education and skill training in technology, disproportionate domestic work (Dewan, 2020), societal restrictions on women's usage of phones (Mangat, 2020) add to the digital gap.

The platforms expect workers to be able to use the application for the least. In most companies such as Urban Company and Uber, even when the interaction between worker and platform is very limited, basic training on application is provided (mostly 1 to 2 hours).

Even then, the respondents expressed discomfort in getting acquainted with the new mode of work and it also impacted their wage-earning capacity, *"It was difficult. The first one week I thought of leaving Zomato. I did not know how to see the location, searching address and going, I did not know. Initially I didn't check the location. Directly remember the address and went"* (Jeena, Interview, August 2020).

The Wages

Platform work is characterized by short term contracts with a target to complete a certain number of gigs per day. The free-lancer is on her own and has to make most of the pre-set piece rates for her services and algorithmic controls by the digital platform on her earnings. The rates of the services offered are decided by the platform based on the market demand, labour supply and the competition, the workers do not have a say in deciding the rates for the services they are to offer. Similarly, the commission charged by the digital platform although agreed upon by the worker at the time of joining may also fluctuate during the course of her relationship with the platform. Thus, the earnings of the worker are highly sensitive to digital platform's policies on pricing and commission, and algorithmic controls over which the worker herself does not exercise any control whatsoever; *"There are days when you don't get work at all, you are sitting idle. Of course, it affects your earnings, sometimes you earn 3000-4000 and other times you do not even earn a rupee. That makes a difference!"* (Piyali, beauty worker, interview, April 2020). A union also highlighted the issue of severe decrease in earning over the years for delivery workers which is based on incentives *"Initially they were paid Rs. 60, about 3-4 years ago per delivery, and now they are paid 15rs and in some places delivery boys get Rs. 12"*. (KIDG2B, interview, January 2020)

Initially with lower competition in the market and lower labour supply the compensation for the workers was attractive. However, overtime with higher availability of workers across sectors and more platforms in the market,

the compensation earned by the workers for the same services has fallen substantially:

“The work I would do 3 years ago, in the past year it has significantly reduced. When I joined, at least three times a week I would take 10k home. It worked like this for 2 years. And I did a lot of work saved a lot of money and invested the money. But the work has slowed a lot in the past year. First the girls were less and Urban Clap (now Urban Company) did not have much of a name. But now they have ads, promotions and people joined.” (Sabika, Beauty Worker, Interview, April 2020)

The business model of digital platforms is dependent on the idea of worker fungibility, whereby the individual workers are considered easily interchangeable and easily dispensable (Flanagan 2019). Work experience in terms of the number of years in service or the skills or knowledge base that the worker may possess about her trade do not hold much bearing on her value in the digital platform economy. Thus, one worker can be easily replaced by another. Worker fungibility is also operational in the beauty and domestic work sector, but since the work is of personal nature requiring care work, the clients taking the service of the workers may come to hold a liking for individual workers. The digital platforms acknowledging this feature of the care sector have allowed for repeat booking of the same individual worker by the client, a feature not available in the cab driving and the food delivery sector. In the case of repeat bookings, especially in the beauty services sector, workers sometimes established individual clientele, by offering services to the clients without paying commission to the platform. This allowed them to make more earnings over and above the services booked through the digital platform. Beauticians have also used the digital platforms to build their own client network and offer home services directly. To tackle this issue, the digital platform ensures that the beauty worker accepts at least a minimum number of bookings through their platform or the workers may face penalties or blocking of accounts. Nonetheless, the workers across the sector have experienced devaluation of their services over time, resulting in greater work pressure or burden to be able to make the same amount of money earned a few years back.

In addition to worker fungibility, short and fragmented shifts also ensure that there is no career progression, and no increases in wages based on worker experiences:

“New joinee gets 15 rupees per order and the old ones will get 30 Rs. per order...and now the old ones will not get any orders...because they have to pay 30 Rs. for the old ones...the same job will be done by the guy who is doing 15 Rs. per order...in Swiggy will get only 15 Rs. but in Shadowflex ...you will get 30 Rs. per order...in Shadowflex you will get no incentive scheme or other options...just 30 Rs. per order.” (Key informant for the food delivery sector. KIDG1B, interview, January 2020)

As mentioned earlier, the entrance into the platform economy demands investments on part of the individual worker. Some initial investments are substantial that require monthly repayment or EMIs such as buying smartphones, vehicle on credit, and security deposits. Other investments take the shape of regular expenditures such as buying products from the digital platform to offer services to the customers, fuel for the vehicle, maintenance of the vehicle and other work-related tools and equipment. Thus, the actual earning of the individual worker post these regular deductions is far less than what it seems. Sometimes, repayment of loans on a monthly basis becomes burdensome and acts as a debt trap. Sector wise maximum earnings in a good month for a freelance beauty worker would be in the range of 30-40 thousand, while the salaried worker earned up to 20 thousand, a woman food delivery agent may earn about 12-15 thousand rupees a month, a full-time domestic

worker could earn about 15 thousand, and 8-10 thousand for 8 hours work depending on the city, in the case of a freelance woman cab driver a good month's salary lied in the range of 15-20 thousand, slightly more than the fixed salaried cab drivers. *"It's barely anything; even a hotel's security guard earns more than us. We are in need. We cannot sell the car or keep in around our house. If we sell it there's no one to buy. If we keep it, we have to pay the EMI."* (KIDG1B, interview, January 2020)

The platform economy does offer transparency to the workers which is reflected in the workers' awareness of the wage calculation process. While beauty and domestic workers' wages were based on the skills and services offered as well the time involved, in case of the delivery agents and cab drivers, it was mainly dependent on the time spent and the number of trips or deliveries made. Still, this transparency did not allow any control over the algorithmic processes. The platform economy is designed as a one-way street, or a platform/employer driven model whereby workers can continue to associate until they find it lucrative and exit if they are not happy with the terms. Hence the platform economy prioritizes 'exit' of workers over 'dialogue' with the workers. However, even exiting may not be an easy option for many as a result of initial investments made by the worker at the time of entering the platform economy, the taste of initial high returns and lack of better alternatives in the labour market matching their skills and experience. Some delivery workers and cab drivers who had higher career aspirations viewed their current work as bridge work to eventually move on to a better job. However, in case of beauty workers, their aspirations lay within the sector and they continued to look for opportunities within the digital economy and beyond.

Other Working Conditions

a) Work hours, work timings and leaves

With the assumed flexibility for workers in the platform economy, it was expected that women workers will have a choice in working hours and timings to create a better balance between unpaid activities and paid work. However, our observations with respect to beauty workers, cab drivers, and delivery agents show a pattern of long working hours for most of the workers, which was driven by pressure to earn a bit better by completing as many gig assignments as possible. This was especially the case with workers for whom work in the platform economy was primary work. In contrast, the domestic workers had fixed places of work, timings and work hours and were not found to be in a rush to do more gig assignments, as was the case in the other three sectors. Some women cab drivers reported longest hours of work in comparison to other sectors under study - of over 16 hours per day. A cab driver for instance said, *'I drive for 16 hours. The other day I drove really far off, it was almost 24 hours of driving up and down...'* (Muskan, Cab Driver, Interview, March 2020). Although, women cab drivers who worked with women-oriented agencies had fixed working hours ranging from 8 to 12 hours with lunch breaks in between. *'6 pm is the sign off time, 5.30 to be precise'* (Key informant interview KICDID). *'here the work is 'time-to-time'. There is a fixed schedule. 6am-6pm'* (Manmeet, Cab Driver, November 2019). Cab drivers and delivery agents unlike beauty workers also did night shifts. A delivery agent notes, *'I worked till 12 in the night, rode on the forest route but I did not face any problem till now. In the Railway gate near Kalamandira at 1 o'clock in the night I delivered [...] in Zomato there are no timings.'* The delivery agents selected time shifts that suited them, however most of them indicated that they worked for 12 hours.

Beauty workers in contrast did not do late night shifts as the nature of their job did not require them to. Usually, the last booking taken for beauty workers was at around 6-7 p.m. Security and safety of beauty workers was also a deciding factor in avoiding late evening work assignments. An owner of a smaller platform for beauty workers said, *'10 am is the reporting time, first slot is from 10-10.30 and the last booking is from 5.30-6. And if the beautician reaches the client's house at 6, it is expected that at least by 8, she will be done'* (Key informant interview, KIBWID). A beauty worker, sharing her experience of taking the last bookings of the day, said, *'Earlier on Urbanclap (now Urban Company) it was from morning 8 to evening 6.30. But now they have opened it up from*

7 am until evening 7 pm. Women (the customers) come from work and think “oh now I have time, I can do manicure, pedicure, facial, waxing [...] if none of the four of us pick up the call, they’ll call all 4 of us...they will definitely force one of us..’ (Piyali, Beauty Worker, April 2020). In this statement, the beauty worker also notes the conflict between the preferred timings of working women who are their customers and the own work timings of beauty workers. Depending on the platform and the demand for work, the beauty workers also put in 10–12 hours of work per day.



A minimum of two leaves per month was the standard for domestic workers, although some domestic workers were able to negotiate for four leaves in a month. The beauty workers and the cab drivers were also allowed one leave per week, however, due to high demand for beauty services on weekends, the beauty workers in most instances were not allowed leaves on Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. *‘In a week, one holiday. Friday/Saturday/Sunday you cannot take an off, even if you want. If you take an off even then you will get a call for work...and they will ask you why you’ve taken an off. Yes, If the kids are sick then you tell them that...but once they said no problem give them medicine and put the kid to sleep and then go to work’* (Piyali, Beauty Worker, April 2020).

The ILO Conventions 1 and 30 have generally set the standard at 48 hours of work per week, with a maximum of 8 hours per day. ‘Excessively long hours of work’ are thus defined as those exceeding 48 hours per week, or 8 hours of work per day (ILO). We see that the respondents in this study across the four sectors worked longer hours to earn their living, often exceeding 48 hours or 8 hours per day standard. These long hours for paid work is particularly worrisome in case of women workers as they are also primarily responsible for unpaid care work and household activities, consequently deepening their time poverty, *‘The women face a lot of problems...their husbands are financially dependent on them...so they don’t work...the entire family’s burden is thrust on their shoulders...they have to take care of the children and have household responsibilities...then they have to drive the car for 4–5 hours. Then they go back home and again they have to feed their kids...then go back to work...they face a lot of problems’* (Key informant, cab driving, KICD3D). Such long working hours of paid work together with primary responsibility for unpaid work would undoubtedly have adverse effects on women worker’s levels of physical and mental fatigue, health and well-being.

b) The Carrot and Stick Mechanisms

The platform economy used the dual approach of incentives and penalties to keep the workforce productive and disciplined respectively. There is everydayness in this approach, whereby every single task had the potential of inviting either an incentive or a penalty, keeping the workers under continued stress and control. The incentives may include these and other forms of benefits – a) monetary benefits for targets met, high customer rating, overtime, work in rush hours, yearly or biannual bonuses, getting new recruits for the platform, platform assisted tipping by customers and drawing customers to use extra services from the platform, b) there are also benefits or rewards in kind, such as awarding a foreign trip for the best performers, c) benefits such as reputational awards by the customers in the form of service rating and rating the professionalism of the worker. The most prominent incentives however are in the form of monetary payments for desirable results and compliance. As noted earlier the monetary incentives have tapered down for all sectors over the last four–five years:

“They were also having this thing where if you keep your annual targets, they give you a foreign trip...in my team there were 2-3 girls who got the foreign trip. There were some targets for the year, around 14 lakhs-15 lakhs per year, easily we were achieving per month 1.5...” (Karuna, Beauty Worker, Interview, July 2020)

“Incentive Rs. 500 they will give, per order Rs. 20, for 20 orders customers will give Rs. 5. Total it will come total 500 and Zomato Incentive Rs. 500...Now they are giving incentive to women Rs. 500, before they used to give 30 orders and Rs. 550 incentives.” Jeena, Food Delivery, Interview, August 2020)

“I also refer many people, if we refer the people company will give some amount but it will depend on our work, they do. Who we refer that person, if he works for at least 3 months, then the company will give me ‘refer’ bonus.” (Kaveri, Food Delivery, Interview, August 2020)

“We used to get a boost...like if the trip is 100 rupees...then we’d get a 150 Rs boost...it is an incentive...we’d get a per trip boost and we would meet our target..now Uber has taken out the boost and put the per day incentive...if we do 10 trips, we get 400.” (Ruchi, Cab Driver, Interview, February 2020)

“Now recently in January, Uber discontinued the boost for women drivers.” (KICD3D, Interview, June 2020)

The other side of the coin is **penalties**. While incentives motivate workers to boost their performance and productivity, penalties served the purpose of maintaining minimum standards of service or disciplining the workers. The penalties usually took the form of wage cuts for not complying with various rules set by the digital platform. These rules pertained to punctuality, uninformed leaves, customer rating falling below a certain level set by the platform, refusal to accept a booking or task, incomplete tasks or non-completion of minimum number of daily bookings.

“You have to reach to your car 10 minutes before 6...otherwise you are marked late and if you’re late for 4 days, then you lose one day’s money [...] if we ask and take leave, only one day money gets cut, but if we don’t then 2 days money gets cut [...] before 5, if there’s any work or any ride, you have to do it...otherwise the money gets cut and they will see it as a half day.” (Asma, cab driver, interview, June 2020)

Further, when the incentives were not received as expected or setting too high a rating target was also perceived as a form of penalty. The commissions charged by the digital platform ranged between 20 to 30 percent and also exerted immense burden on the workers:



“If it goes to 4.6 (rating) then they block you...first the minimum rating was 4.5... then they made it 4.6... if you get blocked then you do not get work...then you have to go to the office and request... and if they ask you why it was your fault...then we explain to them, try to reason with them but then they say all girls work, you’re not special [...]If we go to a client...and we are 10 minutes late...then we get a penalty... we get a money cut [...] if you tell the client that you don’t have a particular product and that they can try another product... and the client says we’re not cancelling the service, you only cancel it... if we cancel it, we lose money and we get a penalty too. If you reach late—then 10 rupees gets cut... and if the booking has happened and then we refuse the work and we’ve to cancel it... the commission that we paid initially gets cut and then additionally 300-400 more gets cut... so in total at least 700-800 gets cut.” (Piyali, beauty worker, interview, April 2020)

c) Access to clean toilets

Women workers in the platform economy, especially in the case of cab drivers and food delivery agents, had to depend on public toilets to relieve themselves. Asma, a cab driver with Koala Cabs, shares her experience that *“washrooms in schools, and even the public ones on the road are pretty clean. Initially, there used to be issues, but not anymore in Delhi and Noida. But in Gurgaon there is not one toilet.”* Muskan a cab driver with Uber notes that accessing toilets especially at night time is worrisome, *“I get scared, although there are toilets at petrol pumps”*. TaxShe, in Bangalore has tied up with schools to allow their women drivers to use toilets in the school premises. Women drivers from TaxShe also use toilets at hospitals conveniently. TaxShe’s customers have also been advised to allow their women drivers to use toilets at customer’s home. Similarly, Zomato in Bangalore has requested restaurants to allow women food delivery agents to use toilets at the restaurant premises. Women workers under Zomato in Delhi also find it convenient to use toilets at shopping malls and petrol pumps. Thus, the cab drivers and food delivery agents majorly depend on the public infrastructure to access toilets, in some cases the platforms have intervened and created an enabling environment for the women workers.

The beauty workers and the domestic workers have shared varying experiences of access to toilets as their worksite is other people’s homes. The customers may or may not allow the workers to use washrooms at their place. Sabika, a beauty worker in Delhi opines,

“With the washroom, there is a lot of issue. Men can pee anywhere. At least now there are public washrooms, earlier there was nothing. I cannot go to the municipality toilets, I would pass out, I do not risk it. You can ask the client if you can use their washroom...some let you...some refuse, so you have to control, some ask you to go to the guard room...guards, domestic helps, all of them go there...so it’s disgusting...I would control and come back home.” (Interview, April 2020)

In the usage of toilets, as declared by the beauty worker in the above quote, we can infer biases at various levels. Among these, are biases or discriminatory behaviour of the customer that the beauty worker is herself subjected to, and on the other hand we see the beauty worker herself displaying class and caste-based biases against other workers, like the guard or domestic workers – who are socially regarded lower in rank. Likewise, the domestic workers had to make do with the biases of their customers. A domestic worker in Mumbai compared her experience of living with two different customers, while she was gravely discriminated by one customer, the other customer treated her as an equal member of the family:

*"We are not educated, so we are taking whatever work we get, this is okay, but we don't get respect...we're not treated in a humane manner...in some houses, we do get respect...but in some ...we're treated differently...given different utensils...we can't sit on the bed...I have a sofa and dining table in my house and when I go to someone's house to work...I have to sit on the floor. But there are a few who treat us well. In my last job, there was a girl who was 9/10 years old...there they made me sleep on the bed with the child and I did sit with them on the dining table to eat. They told me to make myself comfortable. But in some homes, you get treated so badly...you don't feel like working."
(Ila, Interview, July 2020)*

Although this statement of the domestic worker is not directly related to access to toilets, it was to reflect upon the biases and discriminatory attitudes that the customers may hold against the workers making access to essential utilities such as toilets, water, or food an invidious experience. While the platforms cannot play a direct role in mitigating such attitudes, but as cited earlier, platforms can play an important role in creating an environment of equality by providing services to customers who comply by rules of fairness. Further, since the platform workers are usually on the move – commuting from one worksite to another, provision of safe public infrastructure in cities played a crucial part in improving working conditions for women. Asma's comment in the beginning of this section with respect to lack of public toilets in Gurugram is a case in point.

d) Safety and Security at Work

Safety was a major concern for the women workers in our study. Women workers in the platform economy had to frequently experience unfamiliar places or people and odd timings alone, resulting in uncertainties and fears associated with safety and security. Further, these fears were exacerbated as the workers did not trust the platforms to ensure them adequate safety, the workers therefore had to mostly fend for themselves. The respondents from across the four sectors accounted various incidents and occasions of harassments and threats from their worksite. Some of these incidents are quoted below;

"If this happens during the day (Customers talking indecently about sexual life) then we can talk back about but if it is at night, then we have to just listen quietly [...] another time also someone asked me if I am married and was asking me for my mobile no. then I told him "you can go now or I'll call the police" then he got out of the car. This was after reaching the dropping point." (Ruchi, cab driver, interview, February 2020)

"So generally, there definitely are problems...but we've adjusted...what can you do? Even if you don't like it...until you get a salary, you can't say much...when we get our salary in hand, we can say we don't want to work...otherwise I won't get my salary...everyone has problems at home...everyone has to struggle and toil and get work done...no one gets into this work, happily...it's the same story everywhere..." (Harini, domestic worker, interview, February 2020)

"I'm a girl, I have to be afraid...but if you disguise your personality in a way, they'll think you're a boy from afar, no one notices...there's some benefit about this appearance if you want to live a life like mine." (Riya, Food delivery agent, interview, January 2020)

Women show agency in securing their safety in such situations as highlighted above. Particularly in the case of cab drivers and food delivery agents, commuting to remote areas and odd timings of work was a major safety issue. The two sectors also reported greater number of night shifts or work during late hours to earn higher, putting themselves at risk. Ola launched an exclusive women's fleet for women only passengers called Ola Pink in 2014 in Delhi post the rape of a woman passenger in an Uber ride. However, it was discontinued owing to high fares as compared to the usual cab rates. Threat or actual experience of sexual harassment was tolerated up to point until women found a safe exit with minimum losses to her. Women workers did note some of the mechanisms included in the platform to provide remedy in such situations, like the blue button or the emergency button to call for help in Urban company, provision of black listing or blocking of customers, and use of safety kits including pepper sprays. Distance, timings and customer's gender in the case of beauty sector was considered when taking bookings. Beauty worker also had the possibility of establishing her own clientele thereby increasing familiarity and reducing her vulnerability associated with the unknown. Some workers who have had a longer experience in the platform economy also noted the gradual realization among some platforms to have greater safety measures.

"In the beginning there was nothing of this sort, we had to take care of ourselves...in the past year these safety regulation have increased...we have a help button on urban clap...we get call when we press it...and then we can tell them what is happening...then the call is connected to the nearest police station... I've never found the need to use this no." (Sabika, Beauty Worker, interview, April 2020)

However, women expressed disappointment with the safety mechanisms included in the platform and the apathy of the platforms towards their safety.

"They should put a disclaimer---that they really don't care about your safety...if you want to join, please join on your own terms...otherwise don't..." (Bhoomi, beauty worker, interview, April 2020)

"We travel at night 12 midnight to 6...they can't even get through the call centre number...they don't care..."(Zariya, cab driver, interview, January 2020)

One main issue was the inadequate inclusion of safety mechanisms, but what was more disappointing for the respondents were the false promises of support given to the workers. The smaller family-owned startups in the platform economy that were launched by erstwhile workers in the same field, or the enterprises that were backed by non-governmental organizations were more sensitive to the gender specific safety concerns of women workers. A case in point is Sakha Cabs, where women workers are provided immediate support through staff or peers to deal with dangerous events safely. Keeping in view the threat of sexual violence from male customers, Sakha Cabs provides cab services driven by women for only female customers or families. Women recruits are also prepared for work with safety tips and counselling.

"When I came to commercial driving this happened to me only once. Someone crashed into my car and Sakha was there to help me and they were there until I reached home. My support team did not leave me..." (Beena, Cab Driver, interview, July 2020)

Accounts of respondents who participated in the study suggest that smaller companies in the platform economy have shown greater alacrity in providing support to women workers during times of threat to their safety. To illustrate, Beautyglad, a company in the beauty sector confirms the gender of the customer as female before providing the service, no bookings are taken beyond 7 pm, women workers are provided a taxi service to drop and pick them from the customer's house, and are also provided training in safety tips. There are similar arrangements for beauticians working with the Lookplex company. Family-owned businesses with smaller crew of women workers are also able to maintain a personal touch with their workers. However, even in such instances, the attention provided to the full-time salaried workers is slightly higher than that shown towards the freelancers.

"I was working in Lookplex- I live in Ghaziabad and from there I used to go to Gurgaon...they showed concern...whether I've reached or not...how long will it take...I have come home at 2am...and even then they were in touch with me...asking me about my whereabouts...I would feel good, no?"

(Bhoomi, Beauty Worker, interview, April 2020)

This personal touch or human interaction between the platform and the workers was found missing in case of the larger aggregators. And in this scenario, women were left to deal with situations of harassments or threat on their own. Some of the statements below by workers and key informants elucidate the situation.

"These Uber office people don't listen only...they don't let us go up...there are two guards who ask you why you want to go up...and when we tell them for what we want to go...the guards call up the particular person and only then lets us go up." *(Ruchi, cab driver interview, February 2020)*

"The driver first calls the company up...but the company tells them that it is the driver's and customers' personal matter...and the company cannot do anything to resolve it." *(KICD3D, interview, June 2020)*

Women in the beauty sector working with large platforms faced similar issues of apathy from the platform, however, they had greater choice and options available between platforms. And they often chose platforms that were more responsive in maintaining security measures for women. The domestic workers required longer relationship with their customers and spent longer hours in the personal space of their customers i.e., the customers' homes and their work conditions were more difficult to monitor. Nonetheless, women across sectors had to depend on their own instincts and agency to assess risk and take safety measures accordingly. Some respondents reported to have taken help from male family members to drop and pick them from the worksite, gaining confidence overtime. For instance, one of the Beauty workers responded, 'with freelancing, fear has reduced' (Ojas, Beauty Worker). The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, currently does not mandate the platforms to address sexual harassment at workplace for women workers who are independent contractors or freelancers. Although, our data suggests that the majority of freelance women workers are devoted to one platform and are controlled by the incentive and penalty model of the platform, effectively making them full time employees but not calling them such, the platforms escape responsibilities towards their employees.

e) Child care arrangements

The gig platforms in this study claimed to give time flexibility to women workers and this claim in a way absolved the gig platforms of the responsibility to provide child care arrangements or facilities to workers. Further, as freelancers or independent contractors, the assumption was also that the women workers are independently responsible for arranging care for their children. This assumption also fits into the narrative that the platforms are not employers in the traditional sense and are not responsible for such 'staff welfare' needs of the workers. Given that the flexibility in work was only nominal, and the reality of workers was exceedingly



long hours of paid work and high work pressure, coupled with poor access to public services such as toilets, child care was inadvertently taken care of by the family members of the workers, particularly the immediate female relatives of the woman worker. For instance, Muskan pointed out, *"I have a daughter (in 10th standard), she helps me a lot. She does everything, I have a son too, but my daughter supports me a lot"* (Interview, March 2020). Ruchi, another woman cab driver, tells us that her 'sister does most of it'. However, on returning home from work, women were expected to take up care activities for children and family. Another cab driver from Delhi-NCR, Zariya noted, *"After coming back from work I clean the house and prepare lunch for my family. After that I hand wash clothes; mine is a big family so I wash all their clothes including my husband's, his brother's and his wife's"* (interview, January 2020).

While there has been no shift in the gig platform's behavior towards arranging child care, women workers have shared instances of how over a period of time their spouses have come to acknowledge and recognize the work burden women workers were experiencing and made amends to their behavior by becoming more forthcoming in sharing the care responsibilities and household work. Rukhi explains, *"Slowly my husband started to realize that I get a little tired when I come back from Sakha. I also have to leave to work early in the morning...then he began to help me a little. He cannot make rotis, I have taught him to cook vegetables. We share the load. He puts the clothes to dry, I put them to wash, both the tasks get done"* (Ruchi, cab driver). Women who were not married found themselves less burdened with child care and household responsibilities, as noted by Asma, *"I am not married so I don't have to do much, mother does everything, if she can not only then I have to"*. Academics have also noted that in India, married women experience a tightening of cultural patriarchal norms with greater responsibility of domestic chores on them (Deshpande and Kabbeer 2019). This is accompanied with motherhood penalty that demands women to be primarily responsible for direct care of children. Thus, even in the platform economy women experience similar issues of time poverty resulting in fewer women with younger children entering the platform economy. This was also noted by an owner of a beauty services start-up, *"Most of our beauticians are in the age group of 22-28. We have married people too, but they have grown up kids. We have less people in that range (with young children)"* (KIBW2D, interview, February 2020). Thus, the platform economy has mirrored the traditional informal work sector with its poor recognition and little or no child care arrangement by the employer.

Immanent Features in the Platform Economy in Relation to Working Conditions

There is no denying that the platform economy has opened new avenues and opportunities of paid work for women. It also provides the flexibility of timing and location to some extent that is highly appreciated by women workers. In comparison to the existing conditions of traditional informal economy in India, platform economy indeed provides a step towards formalization of economy. But are these features good enough to be traded with continued precarity, insecurities and asymmetries experienced by gig workers. Hicks (2017) outlines some immanent asymmetries found in the platform economy, that hold true for our data as well. 'These include: a) Value asymmetry – that ensures inequalities between capital and labour, whereby transaction costs of providing services to the client is transferred to the labour; b) Risk asymmetry – the risks involved in service delivery are also shifted to the worker from the platform; c) Information asymmetry – the platform economy is designed in a manner that all information resides with the platform. The platform can see the worker, the client, each and every transaction, and individual workers commute to work. The platform aggregates information on all workers, and their progression. It also understands and implements all rules that run the transactions. On the other hand, the worker is not even fully aware of all the information being collected about her, and has the internal details of how and who runs the platform economy concealed from her; d) Power asymmetry – platform economy reinforces the platform–client–worker hierarchical relationship, by keeping all the controls in favour of the platform. This includes lack of regulations, the nature of individual contracting, and lack of dialogue with the workers' (Hicks 2017: 17–18). These asymmetries engender unilateralism on part of the platforms and discourage dialogue with the workers. Further, in-built algorithmic control mechanisms that maximized productivity of workers in addition to fragmentation and high commodification of labour left the workers feeling exploited and fatigued. This sense of exploitation or frustration was further heightened due to high prevalence of worker fungibility and little career progression.

To these asymmetries, already discussed above—in the nature of contracts, wage payments, incentive and penalty approach, and lack of social security—we may also add the asymmetries that women already face in their social and cultural contexts. These social asymmetries related to, 1) the prevalent male–breadwinner model that make women primarily responsible for most of the care work. The flexibility offered by the platform economy, as we saw in our data, did not actually facilitate a better balance between paid and unpaid care work. Women workers who entered the platform economy were those who could receive support from other female members of the family or found themselves further burdened with both paid and unpaid work. 2) Another social asymmetry that came across as a major concern for platform women workers were their safety matters and a real threat of gender–based violence. The platform economy had instituted negligible mechanisms to assuage or remedy this gender specific concern. Women used their own agency to overcome these threats and address dangerous situations, sometimes at the cost of losing their work. 3) Public infrastructure has also come across as a major predicament for women workers who have to be on the move to complete their gigs. Access to something as basic as safe and hygienic toilets was a major struggle for women workers especially in the cab driving and food delivery sector. These social asymmetries are merely a few of the much social structural discrimination that either remain the same or exacerbated for women on entry into the platform economy.

The empowering indicators, for instance, the greater confidence displayed by women, was a result of exposure to different work settings and clients experienced through the platform economy, but it was their own personal agency rather than an affirmative policy by the platforms to empower women workers. However, it is important to note that the exception here were the NGO backed digital enterprises or even some smaller platforms that have sensitively and encouragingly designed their work environment in a manner that enables women to overcome some of these asymmetries. These have presented examples of gendering the platform economy that have valued women workers through practices such as social dialogue and personal interaction, flexibility in timings and work but also sharing of risks and burdens, and instituting safety mechanisms.

5

SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND TRAINING

Skill development is a crucial component of the gig economy mainly in sectors of cab driving, beauty work and domestic work. India's current era of vocational education and skill training was marked with the setting up of the first Industrial Training Institute (ITI) in 1969 by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India. With the opening up of the economy in the 1990s, new sectors grew rapidly, especially in the IT sector and the service sector, which meant a significant amount of employment for skilled and semi-skilled workers was no longer in the traditional sectors (Ernsberger, 2016) Eventually the need for expanding the capacity of skill development was felt and significant number of private sector organizations in to the system. The National Skills Development Center (NSDC) was established and the National Skill Development Policy set out the vision for National Qualification Framework (NQF) and the creation of a unified competency-based training system.

The creation of the new Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE) in 2014 provided an important unifying force in the sector. In 2015, Skill India was launched with an aim to skill 400 million people in different skills by 2022 which gave further impetus to the skill development sector in India. The Union government also announced that students passing out from ITIs will be considered at par with students graduating from Class XII, thereby bridging the gap between formal and vocational streams of education in the country. The recent National Policy of Education (NEP) 2020 also aims towards vocationalizing education and aims to impart vocational skills from classes 6-11 for students to be able to make an informed choice regarding their professions.

Women workers in India are mostly found in the informal economy which means they have negligible access to decent wages, social security or protection. As such, there has been a concentrated effort to skill women, albeit in traditional occupations such as tailoring, zardosi work, food processing, beauty work. However, it is a recognized fact that skilling women is fraught with challenges because of prevailing gender norms, women's unpaid and care responsibilities, gender wage-gap and lack of work opportunities. The 'Status of Women in India', a report released by Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman in September 2019 says that Narendra Modi government's skills development schemes and initiatives are not benefiting women and special measures are needed to provide the appropriate skills and employment opportunities. The report is significant because it specifically assesses the impact of various government schemes on women and finds that they are lagging behind men in "acquiring employable skills".

Women and Skills Training in the Gig Economy

In this study, we found skill development and training were crucial to women's job opportunities, especially in cab driving and beauty sector and to some extent, for domestic workers. In case of food delivery girls, either it was a livelihood option for female headed households or a means of earning extra income for younger girls who were pursuing some form of education or training. In this study, we found that in the beauty sector within the gig economy, women had some form training ranging from basic to advanced when they joined any of the platforms. Training was also provided to women beauty workers after joining the platform and the training period

ranged from a few days to up to a month across various platforms and based on the skill of the worker, *'It [training] was very comprehensive; from how to talk to the client to how to set up, to ask for allergies, etc. Then the theory, they told you about the benefits of certain products. We had exams as well, some tests too. Our teacher was very nice.'* (Sabika, beauty worker with Urban Company, interview, April 2020)

Within the beauty industry, skills and salaries are intrinsically linked and hence companies and platforms invest much in training of beauty workers. A key-informant from Lookplex, a beauty workers platform functional around Noida explains:

"The problem is the unskilled manpower...90% of beauticians are unskilled. This is a much unorganized industry. I have personally taken interviews of more than 200 and most of them have not done any certification, any proper training. They've gone to a beauty parlour to learn all these things...the skilled labour that is expected, is not there.... We provide free of cost training. For the same skill outside, you'd have to pay more than 60/70,000...the first benefit is that those who are associated with us are provided proper training...the only thing is that because we are providing you with so many resources...we make an agreement that they at least have to work with us for 6 months...We empower them, a lot of beauticians who were hardly earning 8-10k, they came to us, there's not much salary in this field and salons hardly pay like Rs. 15,000 for skilled labour and if you're not skilled then your salary is between Rs. 8,000-10,000. But after coming here and after our training, they can earn more than Rs. 30 - 40,000." (KIBWID, Interview, January 2020)

Grooming and soft skills training was found to be an important focus in the three sectors of beauty and wellness, cab driving and domestic work. As compared to the other two sectors, the beauty and wellness sector on gig platforms emphasised, on workers' external presentation to the client because of the direct human touch involved in the work (Raval and Pal, 2019). The KI interviews reflected that apart from the technical skills (which are often preferred as a prior qualification), the workers are "groomed" on their social skills as well as their physical appearance. This is a deliberate effort by the companies to prepare the workers to match the class image with that of customers (Maitra and Maitra, 2018). For instance, words like didi/aunty are considered as "unprofessional" and of low status as against usage of ma'am (KIBW2D, Interview, February 2020).

"Our training we brief them about that too...the way you've to be present in front of the customer...the way you've to talk to the customer and the way you've to deliver the services. We work on grooming and soft skills. If you normally talk to anyone in a salon...we don't refer to our clients as didi/aunty. It's ma'am. All these things make an ordinary service an extraordinary experience. You can't ask personal questions." (KIBW2D, Interview, February 2020)

One also finds a class difference in the kind of jobs women prefer based on their own class as well as customer's perceptions and attitude;

“They [women from lower households] prefer a shop kind of an establishment, like a MAC kind of store where they’ll have to do make up. They prefer that because their need is not as much as the need of the BPL family. A girl from a BPL family will have so much social stigma about going in for at-home services. Whereas the others would belong to a higher class...and people who are availing these services are also middle-upper middle class...so there’s stigma there as well.”

(KIBW3D, Interview, September 2020)

In terms of skilling for domestic workers, an orientation around soft skills was mostly provided by various platforms. Helper4u also shared that they provide soft skill training in both English and Hindi, and if a client requires, “then we also provide a more exclusive one-to-one training in soft skills for the domestic help.” Interestingly, the KI from My Chores in Mumbai also helped domestic workers to learn the art of giving interviews to the prospective clients.

Platforms such as Homedroid, an app for finding cooks in Bangalore initially began with skilling in cooking but discontinued the same owing to high attrition rate of the workers, a challenge faced by various platforms working with women workers. Tankha (2019) in her evaluation of the Maids Company in Gurgaon revealed that training and skilling domestic workers incurred huge costs for the company. Besides, she shared, *“A major learning was that women workers remain more preoccupied with searching for work opportunities; or else attending to their own household chores. Women were reluctant to sit in during the demonstration period where skills are taught, often thinking they knew the basic skills and viewing this as a waste of time.”* (2019, p.26). This resonates in the prevalent idea that domestic work is not a skill but something that women inherently do owing to their gender. As a way to bridge the skill gap, the Maids Company launched a skilling app called the Dekho-Seekho, which provided videos on cooking, housekeeping and soft skills as an opportunity for domestic workers to upgrade themselves at their own convenience.

To come up with a specific module for training for domestic workers is difficult (Tankha 2019) Unlike Urban Company, which only allows a standard list of products to be used by their company and hence making skilling easier based on the same, this is not possible to achieve in case of domestic work wherein each household has different taste, task and equipment. As such, the skill of the domestic worker while it helps them to negotiate better wages, the precariousness of the job remains based on the employer’s preference and attitude.

Both beauty work and domestic work, both highly feminized work sectors are recognized skills under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojna (PMKVY), under the Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship (MSDE). The Beauty Workers Sector Skill Council (BWSSC) has been in the skilling sector for many years and is currently with in skilling as well, there are various programmes – funded and non –funded (by the government),

“There are many categories, the PMKVY is one programme, we do a lot of trainings under these in government schools, which come under MHRD...we run even degree courses in schools and colleges; these courses are under the B.Voc programme. Other than this there are also special projects that are not PMKVY projects such as for widows, war-widows, transgender those are separate—over and above the project. Plus, they are standalone courses so they also come to us for certification...so PMKVY is one component of the skilling, there’s a wide range beyond that.”

(KIBW3D, Interview, September 2020)

Besides, there is a huge demand for the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) certificate which is for persons with prior experience in the trade but have no recognized certification. RPL has been a very popular form of training especially in the domestic work sector as well and it is being encouraged by the MOLE and MSDE across the country, tying up with various domestic worker unions and groups in an effort to professionalize domestic work. Housemate, a platform-based app offering multiple services, has been in touch with DWSSC seeking various forms of training for their domestic workers; however, training for domestic workers has always been a challenge especially in terms of number of days to be put in for the training,

“We are an industry partner for DWSSC and we are in talk with DWSSC, for the skill training part and they have few types of training but for that our workers are not ready; they cannot even give you five days...that is too much, they will not even go for 2 days...so we are just looking into this training part and as soon as we reach a certain number...we will try to open a training centre in Gurgaon so that at least for 2 or 3 working days they should come and learn something.”

(KIDWID, Interview, December 2019)

Skill development for cab drivers includes not only technical skills for driving the vehicle but also includes soft skills, ability to negotiate with families, etc. For all women cab driver, taking up a career in driving was a very big challenge. As compared to beauty and domestic work, bringing women to the training center and further retaining them, is a big challenge as driving a car for work is assumed to be a masculine profession. Azad Foundation's Women on Wheels was one of the first initiatives that began to skill women in the 'non-traditional' skill of driving a car with an aim to support them in earning a 'decent livelihood with dignity'. They fought resistance and skepticism from various sections of the society and have managed to build a market for women drivers over the last decade.

“We invest as much in our mobilization as we do in our training in terms of human resource, finances; we're investing in terms of building community structures such as peer leaders. These are some things to create an enabling environment for the women to come for the training. We believe that being alone will not take you anywhere. So our model is that skip++; if they come for Women on Wheels programme, it's not just driving but various other things. There is a lot of emphasis on self-development, on personal empowerment understanding issues of gender and violence, self-defense, sexuality, sexual and reproductive health. These are a very integral part of our system. It's not that I only learnt driving but how did I learn to take control of my own life, how do I assert myself, work readiness, how to negotiate, communicate with prospective clients, etc. All these things are part of our training program and it takes almost 6-8 months.” (KICD2D, Interview, November 2019).

In this study, we found that for most of our respondents in the beauty and cab driving sector, training and certification boosted their confidence and helped them in negotiating matters at work and in their personal lives, *“During the training, they definitely taught us driving but they also made me self-reliant because I had always*

³ Based on findings of a WIEGO study conducted by ISST on Social Protection for Domestic Workers in South Asia with IDWF partners in India, Nepal and Bangladesh in 2019. (report forthcoming)

been inside the house, living in a joint family and for 12 years of marriage I barely saw what is happening outside the house and after that I did a lot of classes and became independent. (Beena, Cab Driver, interview, July 2020)

Safety on roads is a major concern for women cab drivers. As such, road and self-safety plays a major role in training for women drivers, *“we also have self-defense classes, if something happens...how do we face it...how do we safely come back, to navigate to a crowded place...that’s all a part of training” (Dhara, Cab Driver, Interview, January 2020).*

Challenges and Issues Around Skilling and Retaining Women Workers

Most trainers, companies and platforms mentioned that skilling women workers is a challenge right from the beginning and the challenge continues throughout the period of training. Given their unpaid and care responsibilities, most women are unable to complete their training or there is a delay in the completion of training. *“I took 10 months to do the training...normally it’s a 6–7-month long course...but because I didn’t have anyone to look after my kids...so I needed to take holidays...I tried my hardest to not take leaves and complete the course as soon as possible... but the kids were small...and there was no one else to take care of them.”*

KICD2D of Azad Foundation emphasizes the need to restructure the skilling industry and the market in order to bring more women in the workforce,

“Bringing women into the workforce is also about working with the entire ecosystem. Starting from how do you negotiate and work with the family. How do you make sure she continues with the training...what kind of enabling structures. Infrastructure and counseling support, are you providing her within the training space where she feels safe, she feels like she is respected...where she feels that she has the ability to learn and encouragement. Also, when she goes into the market...Sakha’s goal is pivotal in that sense...on their behalf, they negotiate in the market...and these are real challenges. Those who want to bring women into non-traditional livelihood...this whole idea ---how do you create and invest in the structure that enables women to come out.” (Interview, December 2019)

Almost all KIs who work with women workers extensively shared that not only the government but also the private sector needs to recognize women’s unpaid care responsibilities and hence build infrastructure and systems in place which are not gendered.

“When you talk about the resource for women, first of all there are no decent crèches, no system of childcare, hardly any working women hostels...even in Delhi forget anywhere else. Even when young women want to come and be independent, of course violence is so pervasive in our society, there are hardly any shelters for women...it’s a long stretch...there are all these things..even washrooms., hardly any safe and hygienic washrooms for women, even in decent govt. building. Hence, when we talk about smart cities and smart economies, we need to be putting women in the centre and we need to be investing in all of this only then we can talk about women’s contribution to an increase in the GDP.” (KICD2D, interview, November 2019)

Access to limited education also acts as a challenge while imparting training and retention of women workers, Revathy Roy of Heydeedee, a logistics and training company for women in Mumbai says,

“Giving training to women on traffic science who have never been to school or have sat on class is a real challenge. On job training is given to them. Stipend is given to them to hold them back. There is no contractual work; every girl gets a PF, ESI and other benefits. The day a girl joins a joint FD is made of 12,000 with the girl and Revathi and no one can touch this for a year. After a year they get the interest and the amount. This is a retention mechanism.” (Revathy Roy, Heydeedee, Mumbai)

It is important to note that family and community are crucial barriers to women’s ability to work and their access to gain any skills. Women from the younger generation are restricted from working outside and more so post marriage owing to social norms around women’s mobility and sexuality (Zaidi et al. 2018). Some of the respondents who were cab drivers also shared how someone from the neighbourhood would taunt them for learning to drive or the family being discreet about their daughter being a driver, *“my parents are looking for a husband for me but on enquiry from the groom’s side, my parents say, I don’t do anything. I feel very angry because I have learnt this skill and I work hard to earn a living and provide for the family...I am scared of getting married as I don’t know if they will allow me to drive after marriage.” (Ruchi, Cab driver in Delhi, interview, February 2020).*

In order to circumvent this crucial challenge, Revathy Roy shared some innovative ways adopted by her company in order to retain women trainees and workers (in the inception workshop, August 2019), *“We keep an annual day for mothers-in-law as we believe them to have control over the movement of their daughters-in-law. Hence, we invite our workers to bring their mothers-in-law and have a day of merriment and we gift them pressure cookers, etc., which are very appealing to the women...This allows the mothers-in-law to see the place where their daughters-in-law work and also brings a sense of pride for the latter. This gesture helps us retain the girls we train.”*

Similarly, at Homedruid, gifts are also given to their ‘star’ workers to encourage and retain them, *“they also gave me a TV after looking at the reviews, after the star rating. They gave some people an iron box.” (Puneeta, Bangalore, interview, January 2020)*

To sum up, skilling is an important aspect for women to aspire for better paying jobs and working conditions. In the four sectors here, skilling is an essential requirement in cab driving and beauty work. There is also a growing demand for skilled domestic work in the urban areas. Besides for essential skills such as profession related skills like driving, there is a sustained focus by platforms on soft skills; KIs from the industry maintain soft skills are important to project a high degree of professionalism and hence crucial for women to earn better and for the brand value. However, the industry laments that there is a skill gap and quality of skilling under government projects is often inadequate and hence platforms such as Urban Company invest a lot in skill training. Skill development and retention of women workers is essentially difficult owing to gendered social norms, lack of education and awareness, etc. Hence, many companies and NGOs which work with women understand these challenges and are innovating their strategies in order to skill and retain women in the larger gig economy. Further, a crucial link to women’s access to skills training and decent jobs is their ability to collectivize which we will now discuss in the upcoming chapter in terms of the existing gig economy in India.

6

COLLECTIVIZATION IN THE GIG ECONOMY

With a bare minimum physical human contact, the space for collective bargaining within platform economy is a challenge. As one of the prerequisites for unionizing, workers need a shared space for interactions, encouraging them to connect and understand their shared challenges and experiences as workers. Digitization on the other hand limits or in some cases completely diminishes that space, leaving lesser opportunity for collective bargaining (Duguid and Weber, 2019; Kabeer et al, 2013). Furthermore, the KI interviews highlighted that the platforms have heterogeneous business models with unique commission rates, incentives, work timings and redressal systems, acting as a hurdle in bringing the workers together for a collective demand, *“If you’re going to say that this is earning 1075 rupees, if they earn 800 rupees, they will be 200 rupees as incentive...and this incentive scheme will vary from one delivery partner to another. There is no uniformity in this delivery, they don’t want these workers to unite”* (Vinay Sarathy, Interview, January 2019). Gearhart (2017, pg. 13) has explained, even where there are unions, they “cannot collectively bargain with an algorithm, they can’t appeal to a platform, and they can’t negotiate with an equation” thereby pointing to the challenges of organizing gig workers.

Platforms tend to make it extremely hard for workers to collectively organise or bargain. On some platforms, workers are inherently encouraged to compete rather than collaborate. On others, they can be “delisted” (i.e., fired and not eligible for future contacts) for anything deemed threatening to the platform. The fact that platforms tend to see themselves as simple brokers between clients and suppliers of labour, rather than as employers in the traditional sense means that it is difficult for workers to even know who to bargain with in the first place when suffering from issues such as non-payment or poor working conditions. (Graham and Woodcock, 2018, pg. 244) Recently, drivers from three ride-hailing apps – Rapido, Uber and Ola went on indefinite strike in Guwahati, Assam, staging protest against high rate of commission (30%) in spite of lowering the ride fares and as a result hurting the earning capacity of the workers especially with rise in fuel costs and impact of the pandemic on the ridership. All the three companies have shut their Guwahati offices owing to the pandemic and as a result the drivers and their representatives are not able to reach the management of these firms.⁴ This invisibilization of the management along with the lack of shared workspace makes organizing for gig workers a difficult task altogether.

Conversely, Sabina Dewan from Just Jobs thinks aloud that there is a need to explore the digital space as an opportunity for mobilizing women:

“In that case, abrogating them within an urban company workforce or a uber/ola workforce—there’s an opportunity there, but I don’t think that opportunity has been fully exploited yet...that’s something we’re starting to see...I think that’s an opportunity where...different groups that are looking at women’s work could use technology and technology platforms to actually bring these women together...but there isn’t a whole lot of precedence that I’ve come across that specifically focuses on female gig workers...” (Interview, July 2020)

⁴ Pratidin Bureau (14 December 2020) Rapido, Uber and Ola on indefinite strike in Guwahati. Pratinetime, <https://www.pratidintime.com/rapido-ola-uber-on-indefinite-strike-in-guwahati/>

On the other hand, the business firms recognise the power of unionizing and seek to limit the same by isolating workers, narrowing any possibility of shared sense of identity. As such, connecting with other workers is discouraged and often looked at as a fight against the firm rather than a fight for the workers' rights. For instance, Asma, a Delhi based cab driver recalls, *"they also say that if you have an issue, come and talk personally, don't make a group and come to us. It's that you're manipulating others"* (Asma, Interview, June 2020).

This isolation of workers makes it also difficult for workers' unions to contact and organize workers. Geeta Menon Stree Jagruti Samit⁵ describes the isolation of workers as exploitative, *"This is another reason why we say this is exploitative, collective bargaining cannot take place... I don't have a job every day, I don't meet everyone...I am isolated...which is there in the regular sector but we at least meet in our communities...there is no way they can unionize..."* (KIDW2B, Interview, January 2020).

The collectivisation of gig workers especially came to fore during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Gig workers, especially food delivery workers were deemed as essential workers. However, there was scant regard given by companies towards their safety, *"Workers are made to work on the pretext of "essential services" have you given them masks and sanitizer? No. They've not given them any form of PPE. They just sent them to die. If the customer needs something...the company tells them that their food is safe in their hands, but how? They've not been trained or provided facilities"* (KIDG1J, Interview, June 2020).

On one hand where delivery partners report lack of safety measures, food delivery platforms have started displaying the delivery worker's temperature on the bill to ensure the safety of customers and if it's above 98.4-degree Fahrenheit they will not be allowed (Sing, 2020). Similar initiatives have been started by beauty companies focusing on surveillance (pertaining to the safety of customers) of workers and not vice-versa (Sabika, Interview, April 2020). Also, beauty workers with Urban Company have to send pictures of sanitization, of them wearing the full PPE kit, etc., but there is no such requirement from the customers thereby the onus of maintaining hygiene is only on the beauty worker. While there has been no collectivization from the beauty workers, there have been a slew of strikes by food delivery workers (especially Swiggy) and cab drivers (Ola and Uber). The All India Gig Workers Union (AIGWU) which was created during the lockdown period and has been protesting against manipulation of ratings and reduced incentives for delivery workers by companies in the month of August (Kauntia, 2020; Surie, 2020). As such, COVID-19 has helped in shaping the collectivisation process by bringing forth the plight of workers in times of COVID-19, which has in turn led to collectivization of workers with more focussed demands. This is a good opportunity for gig workers to work within an umbrella union rather than segregated sector demands.

Parallely, civil societies and researcher communities have also stepped up to the front of the discourse, demanding fair worker treatment during the pandemic. A charter of recommendations was released by The Centre for Internet and Society and Tandem Research⁶ along with Union representatives for the government as well as the platforms. Much of this worker agitation was also in the context of recent passing of labour codes in India which resulted in nationwide protests.

⁵ Stree Jagruti Samiti (SJS) is a mass organisation in Bangalore that emerged in the 1980s and works extensively with domestic workers for their worker rights.

⁶ This charter of recommendations was in continuation of a webinar held by Tandem Research and The Centre for Internet and Society on 9th April 2020 to understand the gig workers condition during lockdown in India. See the full

State of Collectivisation of Women Gig Workers

The gender gap in the platform economy is also mirrored in women's membership in trade unions. The national level trade unions such as United Food Delivery Partners' Union (UFDPU) and Indian Federation of App Based Transport Workers (IFAT) for gig workers are overwhelmingly male dominated. This skewed gender - scenario can be attributed to layers of challenges - Firstly, the number of women workers in sectors such as delivery and driving is extremely low as compared to male counterparts which further reduces the ratio of female representation. Respondents from trade unions and local non-profit organizations observed that the company's claims of increase in women workforce is not reflective on ground due to lack of gender sensitivity. With deplorable working conditions and unpaid work burden, there is more attrition among women workers in such spaces.

"Very few...women do their work, complete it and then go back home...and take care of their kids...women are able to earn money more effectively. They don't get into drugs/alcohol...but ever since they reduced their rates and increased the commission there's been a problem...women must be 2% of drivers... and that's also an overestimate." (KICD4D, Delhi, Interview, April 2020).

Moreover, in sectors dominated by women such as domestic and beauty work, there is a dearth of unions representing platform workers. Traditional trade unions and organizations for domestic workers have been in the forefront of women workers' rights such as Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)⁷, but platform specific issues and challenges are yet to gain focus.

This leads to the second issue - the gendered nature of collectivization itself. It was noted that all the mainstream unions are actively working within sectors dominated by men such as driving or delivery work which often leaves out addressing women's issues. A lot of these platform models are developed with a male centric approach, disadvantaging women. Such issues do not come to the forefront because of the lack of representation of women in raising their demands,

"Men and women are kept in the same category by the company...if you want more women to join...then you have to change timings. Have a 7-5 shift...fixed for women...then have the prime performance for women during those hours, then more women will join...they will think of convenience, safety and earn how much they want to." (Sulekha, Interview, December 2019)

Even within these sectors, delivery workers from Zomato and Swiggy reported that they were not included in the WhatsApp groups due to their gender, though they often received updates through other male workers from the union (Sulekha, Interview, December 2019). As a Delhi based Zomato worker mentioned, *"They've not added her to the group because she's a girl...the boys keep telling her about the latest updates"* (Riya, Interview, December 2019).

⁷ Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) is a registered trade union. They have worked extensively to organize women in self-employed and unorganized sectors. For more details check - <http://www.sewa.org/>

Trade unions are viewed as men's territory owing to its rough nature (such as protesting and public agitation - often seen as masculine traits) and increased demand in terms of time and resources which restricts gender mainstreaming within unions (Ledwith, 2012). KI interviews reflected that women's responsibilities at home and work impact their willingness and capability to participate in such activities. Women respondents, especially domestic workers mentioned that they do not have the bandwidth to participate in activities related to union due to the burden of paid and domestic responsibilities. Such groups and meetings are seen as an additional task which may negatively impact their livelihood and earnings. When enquired about her membership to unions, Lekha, a domestic worker responded:

"No no...first I used to do baby care...so I would head out of home in the morning...make tiffin for my children...and then after reaching the place of duty...take care of the kid there...so I didn't get time to o out too much...I didn't get to mingle with people so much." (Interview, April, 2020)

There is also some level of risk and fear connected to union activities. Union representatives shared that the protestors have to face harassment by police as well as the company for raising their voice. These companies exert power by threatening the worker's livelihood which engenders fear among workers.

"Number of women working here is very less. How can they do the Union? If we have a union, we have to take leave and stay at home. Otherwise they will not allow us to work. Then we cannot do union work. They are not saying anything to ladies. Zomato people will tell us that we all are in Zomato so we will stay united. No need to do union work." (Jeena, Food Delivery Worker, Bangalore, April 2020)



Having said so, association to a union becomes an asset specially for women in the informal sector. For those who are not linked to any union, under circumstances of unfair treatment or wage conflicts, respondents reported that they were left with not much choice.

"Once I did. They informed me that they have discussed the extra payment with the office. When I asked the office, they had no clue. Usually, I am caught in the middle. I will raise a complaint. But I will have to wait. Also, the new customer would be worse." (Harini, Domestic Worker, Bangalore, Interview, January 2020)

In absence of a collective voice, the choice is between accepting the unfair situation or risking their safety and often "getting caught in the middle", reiterating the necessity of the worker groups for ensuring decent working conditions. Geeta Menon highlights that the domestic workers associated with SJS are more aware of their rights and take agency in deciding wages and demanding better working conditions.

“Most cases the company has an agreement for 1 year-11 months only...after that they change the employer...employers decide the salary, leaves all of that...so the workers cannot negotiate... sometimes in our union you’d see workers and employers negotiate very well about salary...leave and all...in agencies workers cannot negotiate at all.” (Interview, January 2020)

As against these two sectors, those working in large scale companies Uber, Zomato and Swiggy are either members of local unions/groups or are at the least aware of them. Membership to these groups is an added advantage to the workers in terms of safety, payment issues, and conflict with customers which are often not addressed by the companies.



“We have a union, I’m also part of it. We discuss together, they said that if you have any trouble and you have any concern, wherever you are, just put on your live location. then 4-5 people will come to help you. I am in that group.” (Muskan, Cab Driver, Delhi, Interview, March 2020)

Similarly, a registered non-profit organization called Expert Drivers’ Solution is connected with around 170 women drivers across Delhi. As part of ensuring women’s safety, female drivers are provided with chilli powder/needles and awareness sessions.

A contrast can be observed here when we compare this with women centric platforms such as TaxShe, Sakha and Koala Kabs⁸, where the workers were not aware of or not members of any local or mainstream unions but rather connected through WhatsApp groups or informal meetings. These groups serve as a means to share their demands, concerns, wage negotiations in addition to the social support. *“Now everyone has raised the issue so we’ll get more. Everyone says that this money is less...we decide amongst ourselves and sometimes spontaneously...we have a WhatsApp group and if we have a problem we help” (Tanya, Interview, February, 2020)*. Such women specific companies also bring together the workers through weekly/monthly meetings or events which respondents have mentioned to be helpful. For instance, Delhi based Koala Kabs conducts a monthly meeting with all their staff members to discuss the challenges and listen to the stories of women workers. This one-on-one interaction is appreciated by the workers as a space to associate themselves to the company as well as co-workers.

⁸ These companies were mostly involved in ferrying private commuters and/or driving children to school. Recently, Koala Kabs and Uber entered in to an arrangement which allows for some of their experienced women drivers to drive for Uber during the times they are not on regular duty.

7

SOCIAL SECURITY

Social and legal protection for workers needs to be re-imagined and strengthened, given the global shift from the traditional standard forms of work to non-standard forms of work which includes the platform/gig workers. Since the protection coverage was developed around full-time working conditions, platform workers are often neglected. Social protection is provided to support the workers in their vulnerabilities through policies and schemes on maternity benefits, disability, old age, accidents or illness.

In a report by ILO (2017), India has the highest percentage of casual workers within which more than 60% were contributed by female workers due to their distributed responsibilities at home and at paid work. This overwhelming percentage clearly calls out to gendered policies and benefits for covering more workers under this section.

In a woman-dominated platform such as domestic work, it is especially difficult to incorporate workers within the social security coverage (ibid). The nature of domestic work which includes having multiple employers, closed/private work space, irregular working hours and lack of concrete and standardized division of work makes it even more challenging to formalize their work and limits access to security (Sarkar, 2019). Though the gig platforms to some extent have professionalised domestic work, it has not changed the coverage benefits.

Flexibility at the cost of Social Security

With their position as self-contractors or independent workers, gig workers are not legally covered under social protection laws. The relationship between the company and the worker is strictly that of a contractor with no legal obligation. Despite the absence of social protection workers tend to opt for platform-based work mostly due to inadequate alternative economic opportunities (Bester et al., 2020).

We observe in the study that the lack of social protection was expressed and acknowledged by the respondents as the cost for the flexibility (hence the relief of being able to manage household chores), which is not possible in a time-bound traditional work (Bhoomi, Interview, 2020; Jeena, Interview, 2020). Even in platforms with mixed models, part time or gig workers have to compromise their social protection benefits in exchange for the flexibility. The relationship between the platform and the worker is supposed to be short term and as a result often lacks trust (with respect to their stickiness to the platform). The platforms are hesitant in investing in gig workers since the possibility of company making profit from a gig worker is also precarious (KIBWID, Interview, 2020). Though, looking at this from a gig workers' perspective, this flexibility comes with the price of managing social protection on their own, diluting the workers' rights in the ambit of flexibility.

The recently released Fairwork India Ratings 2020 report⁹ provides a much-needed picture of the management policies of digital platforms in the context of working conditions for its partners. It finds that, platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato and Uber rank lowest in the fairness index (while Urban Company scored a high score of 8/10). Resonating with this, the respondents in this study highlight that companies such as Zomato, Swiggy and Urban Company do provide accidental or life insurance to the partners (workers). Having said that, these benefits are not particularly seen as beneficial as compared to the financial risk that workers have to undertake in the form of lower incentives and precarity (Kaveri, Interview, 2020).

Additionally, respondents also expressed discontent in the limited support in case of accidents (Jeena, 2020; Kaveri, 2020). The usability of the insurance benefit is very limited that in case of minor accidents the workers can neither use the insurance nor receive any payment for the rest time (Kaveri, interview, 2020). A beauty worker from Urban Company reflects,

"No ma'am, no one pays for that (accident during service)...the other month my friend went to do waxing at someone's place...and the rica wax fell on her hand...and her hand got burnt, no one helped her...she did everything herself, she hasn't even gone to work after that...these minor accidents are not covered." (Piyali, Beauty Worker, Interview, 2020)

Similar finding is reported by Fairwork India Rising report 2020 which reiterates the inefficiency of insurance policies through the platforms especially in case of accidents without hospitalization.

Full time and Women Centric Platforms

As discussed before, companies such as Beauty Glad, TaxShe within mixed modelled platforms consider their workers as employees with a fixed salary giving them a legal right for these safety nets. These newer firms, especially whose focus employees are women, are cognizant of women's needs and have their policies and structures around these needs. Social security benefits such as maternity leave, Provident Fund, health insurance was made available to the workers.

"Six months leave for maternity. 3 months before and 3 months after and we give half the salary for the entire 6 months. This doesn't have a defined structure, but as I said we aren't much bootstrapped. Funds are a challenge. In MNCs they pay full salaries. We give half but MNCs at least have a work from home option...but we have pay restrictions. A lot of people continue working with us even after pregnancy." (KIBW2D, Interview, January 2020)

Moreover, few of these companies such as TaxShe or Sakha have women empowerment at the core of their company philosophy, which also extends to the concept of care. With prior acknowledgement of women related

⁹ Factors considered by Fairwork for the ranking were – fair pay (minimum wages), fair conditions (health and safety), fair contract (simple terms and conditions), fair management (clear communication between leaders and workers) and fair representation (right to organise, worker unions).

issues such as family restrictions, child care responsibilities which is replicated in their policies such as training women on gender, women empowerment and self-defence. A key informant mentioned that they are planning to extend their support to workers' care needs at home, *"we're looking for partners who will help us with this. Possibly someone who sponsors their senior citizens' health care...mother-in-law falls sick is the biggest issue where everyone falls out"* (KICDIB, Interview, January 2020).

Gig platforms with mixed gender focus such as Uber or Swiggy often lack this gender lens. Not having a women centric policy may not impact their profit turnover to the same extent since the dependence on the female workforce is less as compared to a women centric platform. With a lack of statutory law, there is also no uniformity in providing social protection to the workers and it is completely on the companies to decide if they will receive any benefits and then what kinds of benefits. For instance, *"they've told me that we look at experience and how important it is for skills. Looking at that we will open a PF for you"* (Bhoomi, Interview, April 2020).

Box: 4

Impact of COVID-19 on the Gig Economy

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the national lockdown in India. The platform-based service work was declared as part of the essential services allowing the platforms to operate during such crises period. This, as a result brought forward the conversations around health security of the platform workers even more prominently. Safety measures varied depending on platforms, for instance Zomato workers were mandated to download Arogya Setu App (Mawii et al., 2020), Hospital Cash Insurance policy by Uber (Pant and Shende, 2020) and many other insurance and medical initiatives (Shipra and Behera, 2020) were included. Companies also provided safety gears and special training on services during pandemic to the workers (Sabika, Interview, April 2020). Although there was the factor of choice of working in the pandemic time and risking their and their family's health, with the lockdown and lack of alternate opportunities to work. However, such an option was a matter of privilege. Platforms were also reducing the incentive and per-order rate, against which there have been worker strikes in many metro cities (Rakheja, 2020).



8

REGULATION

Currently, Indian labour and employment laws recognize three main categories of employees: government employees, employees in government-controlled corporate bodies known as Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) and private sector employees who may be managerial staff or workmen. All these employees are ensured certain working conditions, such as minimum wages under The Minimum Wages Act, 1948, a set number of hours of work, compensation for termination, etc. The gig or the platform economy, which is digitally defined, is drastically changing the nature of work, worker –relationship and worker rights. In India, where 92% of the workforce is informal (contributing to 50% of the national product), gig jobs contribute to a new kind of informality, which makes the existing challenge more difficult to resolve. While many workers are traditionally found to be working on piece-rate work, the gig economy further complicates it by adding a new dimension, that of gig or task-based work, for which as of now there is no regulatory framework. By definition, the platform workers are categorised as ‘independent contractors’, and not as employees, which makes it difficult to bring them under adequate protections. (IWWAGE 2020). Furthermore, The ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights of Work recommends that workers be given adequate social protection and in their absence be given the freedom to form associations through which benefits can be appealed for and grievances can be redressed (ILO, 1998). However, gig workers owing to their status of being independent contractors and not employees in the traditional term can be excluded from this.

Historically, platform companies have argued that they are merely technology platforms. But over time, these companies have been brought under the purview of certain sectoral regulations pertaining to transportation, food delivery, and other services. For example, the Food Safety and Standards Authority has issued specific guidelines for “ecommerce food business operators.” Similarly, the Motor Vehicles (Amendment) Act, 2019, requires platform companies offering transport services to possess an “aggregator” classification and a state license to operate. The latest Motor Vehicle Aggregator Guidelines, 2020, provides a framework of rules for states to regulate the service conditions and tariffs of the aggregators. Now, given the range of entities potentially involved in regulating platform companies, a concern is that this may take place without a clear demarcation of accountability between these entities. As a consequence, no one entity is currently held accountable for ensuring workers’ rights or regulating their working conditions in this regulatory landscape. (Fairwork India Report, 2020, pg.11)

Until recently, there was much confusion amongst policy makers regarding laws regulating the gig economy, except some state provisions around operation and control of ride – hailing cabs. The first forms of collectivisation came from cab drivers in local cities in response to these government controls. An organized effort for collectivization was initiated by unions such as All India Democratic Youth Organization (AIDYO) in Karnataka which began organizing food delivery partners in Bengaluru. Vijay Sarthy of AIDYO shares his initial experience of contacting the labour department for policy advocacy for apps such as Zomato and Swiggy, *“When we started, we went to the labour department, to senior IAS officers...everybody said they come under the labour law. The labour dept responded stating there is the shops and establishments act; check if any of these laws apply to them, otherwise don't come to me.”*

Furthermore, many of the platforms are designed in a manner that goes against the law of the land and disallows any form of resistance or organization amongst its ‘partners’. For example, *“at one point the contract of Zomato*

states that no local law is applicable; and you cannot go on any kind of strike...it is there in their formal agreement where people sign...and none of the government authorities are aware of this. They were simply shocked when we showed this to them” (Vijay Sarthy, AIDYO). In 2017, several drivers’ unions brought a challenge to the Delhi High Court in the case of Delhi Commercial Driver Union v Union of India & Ors, claiming that the drivers came under the definition of “workmen” under Section 2(s) of the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, and that a relationship of employer and employee existed between them and the aggregators. It also contended that, if Ola and Uber are employers under the meaning of Section 9A of the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, they “must give a notice to their workmen before effecting any change in the conditions of service applicable to them.” No decision has been taken on the matter and recent years have seen a number of strikes by Ola (and Uber) drivers against low earnings and financial precarity.

There is also an oversight of regulation when it comes to aggregators. For example, Rapido was banned in Karnataka but it kept running surreptitiously. AIDYO pointed out how the RTO persons would book a bike/taxi via the RAPIDO app and once the boy comes to them, they would take him to police station where the driver is harassed and money is taken from him before letting him go. However, there had been no efforts to end the functioning of the app within the geographical boundary and mainly resulted in exploitation of the drivers.

Box: 5

The Controversy Around the AB-5 law in America

The amendment to labour laws passed on September 2019, in the California Senate – Assembly Bill 5 (or AB-5) cited the harm that comes to misclassified workers, in terms of loss of benefits such as payroll taxes, social security and unemployment benefits; and called for gig workers, currently classified as independent contractors to be treated as employees. This classification is subject to a three-part test (or ABC test) by which a person must be classified as an employee unless the worker is a) free from the employer’s control or direction in performing work; b) the work takes place outside the usual course of business of the company; and c) the worker is engaged in an independent trade or business of the same nature as the work being performed by the company.

However, due to push back from unions and recent legislation, Uber has suffered losses that have led it to lay off over 1,000 employees in the months following the AB-5 legislation. In response, Uber, along with other US-based ridesharing companies like Lyft invested \$30 million each to fund a 2020 ballot initiative wherein that would enable them to keep drivers as independent contractors. The companies fought tooth and nail to save their business model from the legislation, spending millions to plaster California with advertisements in support of the ballot measure for the last several months. This extensive campaign helped them win the ballot as roughly 58% of ballots were cast in favour of Proposition 22 which allows the companies to continue classifying their workers as contractors and not employees (as granted under the AB-5 legislation), thereby keeping workers without access to employee rights such as minimum wage, unemployment benefits, and health insurance. The proposition carves out an exemption from AB5 for some driving and delivery apps. The companies have been promoting the schedule flexibility of the independent contractor status and offering concessions on minimum wage standards, health benefits and collective bargaining rights.

Inclusion of Gig Workers in the Labour Codes

The Union Labour Ministry of India recently introduced the Labour Codes on wages, industrial relations, social security and occupational safety, health and working conditions which are sought to subsume as many as 44 central labour laws. Out of the four Labour Codes, only the draft Code on social security mentions gig worker, who is defined as, 'a person who performs work or participates in a work arrangement and earns from such activities outside of traditional employer-employee relationship' and platform work as, 'an employment form in which organisations or individuals use an online platform to access other organisations or individuals to solve specific problems or to provide specific services in exchange for payment' (The Code on Social Security, 2019).

On the face of it, the Code on Wages, in Section 2(k) contains a definition of "employee" far wider than any of the laws it repeals. It is largely drawn from the Minimum Wages Act and seems to be worded widely enough to potentially cover workers in the gig economy, and for good measure including those declared by the "appropriate government" (state or union) as employees. However, in spite of the expansive definition, the Wage Code cannot be applied to gig workers on two counts: (i) gig workers may simultaneously work across different platforms and thus it would be difficult to define the 'employer' by the traditional definition; (ii) While Minimum wages is fixed on the basis of piece-work or time work, there is no explanation for setting minimum wages for completion of the 'gig' or task-based work. (Prasanna, 2019) While, the Wage Code presented an important opportunity to reform wage legislations and address the challenges facing wage security in India, it was a missed opportunity to include a new and fast emerging category that is keenly taking over the traditional forms of work, workplaces and wage structure.

By excluding gig and platform workers from the Code on Wages Act, the government has essentially kept them out of the purview of minimum wage legislation, equal pay for equal work, Employees' Provident Fund, Employees' State Insurance schemes and gratuity (Jha, 2019). Under the new Code on Wages, an 'employee' refers to any person who is 'employed on wages by an establishment to do any skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled, manual, operational, supervisory, managerial, administrative, technical or clerical work for hire or reward', while a 'worker' is defined as any person 'employed in any industry to do any manual, unskilled, skilled, technical, operational, clerical or supervisory work for hire or reward' (Code on Wages, 2019). Both these definitions exclude the nuances of the platform worker. However, trade unions and association of workers have taken into cognisance these lapses and are demanding adequate social protection for platform workers. (IWWAGE 2020).

The Code on Social Security 2020, which subsumed 9 existing labour laws into one code, was passed in Parliament in September 2020. This was a historical moment from policy perspective for the gig economy in the country - Firstly, The said Code recognised platform companies as "aggregators" -- a digital intermediary that connects users of a service with sellers or service providers -- and lists nine categories of aggregators, including "ride sharing services", "food and grocery delivery services", "logistic services", "e-market place", and "professional services provider." Secondly, the code acknowledged for the first time, gig and platform workers as a new occupational group and provided for social security for gig and platform workers along with unorganised sector workers. As such, it is the first occasion that gigs and platform workers have been defined and incorporated within the ambit of labour laws. While this has been a significant moment in terms of policy for gig workers in India, it raises many concerns and suffers from serious lacunae which would make it harder for gig workers to accrue benefits under the same.

To begin with the code defines the platform worker on the basis of their vulnerability rather than their position of a worker and the vulnerability of platform work. Further, there are overlapping definitional issues of various categories of workers included in the code. Sarkar (2020) explains that under this new Code, section 2(35) defines a gig worker as a person who participates in a work arrangement and earns from such activities outside of a

traditional employer–employee relationship, section 2(61) defines a platform worker as someone engaged in or undertaking platform work, and section 2(86) defines an unorganised worker as a home-based, self-employed or wage worker in the unorganised sector. This includes a worker in the organised sector who is not covered by the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947, or Chapters III to VII of this Code. These three definitions have overlapping parts which can lead to further confusion in terms of access to social security schemes.

In addition to the above, Sarkar further elaborates, as employer–employee relations are fudgy for gig and platform workers, they can be also considered as self-employed workers. Self-employed workers are already included within the unorganised workers' fold. This would have avoided duplication of having separate schemes for three categories of workers. In section 109 of the bill, social security for unorganised sector's workers has been provided. In section 114, social security for gig and platform workers has been provided. This is an unnecessary duplication.

Legislation in the UK provides a unique solution to this. The UK divides individuals into broadly three categories: self-employed, employees and a middle-category called “worker.” Gig workers can fall into any of these three categories. While the “self-employed” are entitled to almost no benefits and the “employees” have complete employment benefits including parental leave, the “worker” category is entitled to a minimum wage, paid vacation and pension. This division helps classify gig workers according to their working hours, mutuality of obligation, provision of services, devotion to one or more platforms, as well as the control exercised by the company over the worker. However, there is a caveat, wherein companies can choose to place their full-time employees into the “worker” category to withhold the full set of benefits. To prevent this from happening, the UK government provides all workers the right to contest their place in the organization by taking up their case to HMRC (Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs) or the Government Pension Regulator. (Kasliwal 2020)

In India, there are no legislations or institutions to comprehensively regulate digital platforms. While the Companies Act, 2013 governs the registered companies, it is inadequate for monitoring the actions of such dynamic platforms. (Kasliwal 2020) Thus, a new and updated set of regulations is required, especially in light of the expansion of the gig economy network. Kasliwal(2020) suggests the need of the hour is to establish a body or a “Platform of Platforms” with legislative backing, which would not only establish a standard set of guidelines that the platforms must adhere to but also monitor these platforms. (pg.5) The guidelines could include employee/worker code of conduct, rules for the dispute redressal body and mechanism, and instructions for other areas of governance

With the introduction of Code on Social Security, 2020, platform workers are eligible for certain benefits like maternity leaves, life and disability cover, old age protection, provident fund, employment injury benefits, and more. However, given the various terms and conditions attached to eligibility to these government schemes, there is no guarantee of actual access to these schemes. , the worker must be registered with the social security board. According to the rules, to access these schemes workers have to be registered with Aadhaar or with self-declaration of their details, after which they will get a Unique Registration Number. When they get this number, they will have to authenticate themselves through Aadhaar. The aggregator will also have a database, which will be linked to the unique registration number. With the limited participation of women gig workers in union activities and organizing, there is also concern about women's access to information regarding registration, new rules, etc. This has been a significant challenge for domestic workers movement, wherein vast number of women domestic workers continue to stand outside the social security net owing to lack of information, limited time and low negotiation ability with the employers and the state.

As mentioned above, one of the criteria for registration is enrolment which involves mandatory submission of a worker's Aadhaar number, amongst other documents. Given that the Supreme Court has not made Aadhaar mandatory for several instances, it would be unethical to deny any deserving worker social security for not having an Aadhaar number. Imposing restrictions such as these will only go against the spirit of the Code – to widen the social security net umbrella to all.

Furthermore, the new draft rules of the Code propose the creation of a social security fund, a National Social Security Board for Gig Workers and Platform Workers. This 25-member board will reportedly make recommendations to formulate schemes for gig workers. However, unions are skeptical regarding the functioning of the Board given the shoddy functioning of the Unorganized Workers' Social Security Board for extending these benefits to the workers in the unorganised sector. The scheme for the social security fund envisages that the platforms and aggregators like Swiggy, Zomato, Ola, Uber, Urban Company and others will make contributions to the fund which would be either 1-2% of the turnover or 5% of a worker's wages. The central and the state governments can also contribute to the social security fund. However, this would mean less cash in hand from wages and commissions for the workers. This in fact goes against the fight of the platform-based workers for sustained incentivisation and commissions which would help platform workers to earn more.

There are also practical problems around applicability of the provisions of the Code to gig workers. Most workers in cab-driving and food – delivery work on multiple platforms in order to optimize their earning capacities. Further, many gig workers work for some convenient hours and days, given the 'flexibility' of gig work which makes it a favourable option for many; this is especially true for women workers who owing to their unpaid and care responsibility and restrictions on mobility are only able to work gigs during certain hours and days. As such, there is no clarity on how the Code will respond to this flexibility and how the social security would benefit percolate down to workers who only work a certain number of days.

Given the nature of operation, funding patterns and profitability, the aggregators are bound to pass on the costs of the benefits on to the worker. *"There will be a huge pushback," said Kunal Khattar, founder of early-stage venture capital fund that has invested in start-ups such as Tripoto, Sheru, Shuttl and bike taxi start-up Rapido. Most companies will add social security to deductions of workers, he said in a text response. "No platform is profitable—and will not have the ability to increase their costs in the current Covid situation where revenue and transactions are significantly down anyway."*¹

The debate around definition of gig workers as workers and not self-employed or independent contractors has been a major labour concern of this new economy for some years now, the UK Supreme Court's verdict on 19 February 2021 which declared that Uber drivers are "workers" and not "self-employed", has set a new precedent for platform workers across the globe. The court looked at elements of fare fixing, contract, driver performance rating and penalized to conclude that working for Uber is a classic form of subordination that is a characteristic of an employment relationship. Sarkar (2021) explains that this verdict has long term implications for Indian gig workers as well for it acknowledges that behind the veil of technology there lies the employer-employee relation in gig and platform works too.

Box: 6

No Surge Prices for Uber and Ola and Other New Regulations

On 27 November 2020, the Indian government issued a set of guidelines on commissions and surge pricing for ride-sharing cabs Uber and Ola. As per the new guidelines, Ola and Uber can only draw a commission fee upto 20% on ride fares. They also added a cap on surge pricing, an inflated rise in fares applied during peak hours, to be not more than 1.5 times the regular fare. The rules also state that drivers will not be permitted to work for more than 12 hours in a day, and that the companies need to provide them insurance cover. The guidelines also limit cancellation charges to not more than Rs. 100. Uber and Ola have not previously publicly shared precisely how much they charge their drivers for each ride, but industry estimates show that a driver partner with either of these firms makes up to 74% of the ride fare, after paying taxes. The new guidelines say drivers should get to keep at least 80% of fares. While it is positive in terms of formalizing the sector as well as increasing the consumer trust on aggregators through improved safety regulations, many drivers are opposed to the cap on surge prices and platform fee as it would reduce their earnings drastically.

Women Gig Workers in India – Regulation

Regulation for women workers has always been an after – thought and most regulations have been designed as per the male breadwinner model. While gig work is fairly a new form of work, one must also examine the existing regulation protecting women’s work in the unorganized sector. Sabina Dewan, President and Executive Director of Just Jobs reflected, in terms of policy, one should first look at the broad range of policies that pertain to women’s work in general. Even in regular wage settings, what kinds of benefits do women get...maternity, menstrual leave, adoption leaves, etc. There is a whole host of different kinds of policies that are geared towards women...then looking at which one should and could apply to gig worker. Even in the social security code, in terms of social protection there isn’t much especially for women workers per se’ (Interview, August 2020).

Informal women workers in India have negligible access to any form of protective legislation and social security. While there are legislations around provision of crèches in factories, plantations, construction sites, etc., the implementation has been extremely poor. The maternity leave policy is restricted only to women workers in the formal economy. For example, let us see the case of domestic work in India, a traditionally feminized, low-paying and insecure form of work which has found its place within the gig economy. While the social security code includes gig workers, it has kept domestic workers outside the purview of the same. In such cases, there would be a clash in terms of identity of the worker – would that woman be considered a domestic worker or a gig worker? Under what category of work as specified in the code the worker would be registered? Further, many women, especially domestic workers in the gig economy also continue to take up part-time domestic work besides their gig jobs as was found in this study. As a result, this blurs the line between gig work and the traditional informal work. This inclusion–exclusion dichotomy in terms of domestic work can impact adversely in terms of their access to social security schemes. The refusal to acknowledge one set of workers while including a similar set of workers under new definitions is neither prudent nor just and goes against the principle of labour rights.

Sexual Harassment at the Workplace

The 2013 Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act widened the definition of the workplace and covered the informal sector, including domestic workers. Popularly known as the POSH Act, it provides protection to all workers in the public and private sectors including health, sports, education, or government institutions, and any place visited by the employee during the course of her employment, including transportation.

The ILO uses the concept of “the world of work” to include the broader place of economic activities. The concept of the world of work helps capture paid productive work that does not take place within the traditional “public sphere” such as a factory or office, but which is employment such as selling products in the street or artisanal production or piece work in the home (PRIA and ILO 2013). It also comprises not just the place of work but related contexts where gender-based violence can take place, such as on public transportation while going to work, or returning back home after a night shift (ibid). It is important to recognize and include the broader place of economic activities in any effort to prevent and address sexual harassment. In fact, by the virtue of this recognition, the law has helped in recognizing domestic workers for the first time as workers. (Martha Farrell Report n.d)

While the law includes employees, contractual workers, volunteers, interns, etc., gig workers are termed as independent contractors and hence women gig workers are not covered by the Act. While there are discussions around including gig workers in the labour codes, there has been no effort to extend the law to gig or platform-based women workers. One of the reasons for this is the invisibilization of women gig workers within the broader

gig economy which is still male centric in India. This is evident especially when speaking to union leaders as well as policy makers; a very senior bureaucrat in Karnataka frankly shared, *“even to get basic social security like accidental insurance for these [gig] workers is a herculean task...if we speak about maternity leave then it will become a whole new story so we are not even thinking on these terms.”* (PIB, Interview, February 2020)

In this study, women workers, as expected were reluctant to speak about any form of sexual harassment they may have faced at their workplace. Most point towards a fellow worker’s experience. The study found most women considered mainly physical forms of sexual harassment and not the other categories. While women-centric gig companies such as Koala Kabs, TaxShe are more proactive and spend time on informing women about the law during their orientation, however, women drivers working with Uber and Ola, or with food app companies are completely on their own and are not accounted for. In almost all cases, background checks are conducted more rigorously for the service providers, than the service users. However, the platforms withdraw the legal liability of any individual involved. For example, in the event of a service provider being harassed by a service user while providing the service, the issue will be termed a “dispute” and must be resolved independently by the two parties. Thus, there is no provision of registering a case of harassment. (Kasliwal 2020)

With regards to implementation of the law, the situation is woeful. In almost all companies and start-ups approached here, there were no functional Internal Committees as mandated by law and in case these existed on paper, they were restricted to mostly their own employees. Also, there was non-existing knowledge about Local Committees, an alternative to not having an internal committee, both at the level of the company and that of the worker. As a result, any case of ‘minor or moderate’ forms of sexual harassment seems to be dealt at an individual level and there is no knowledge or system in place on how to deal with serious cases.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The platform economy is the newest form of work, which has seen exponential growth globally in recent years. Firms have been transitioning from traditional employment relationships to temporary, contractual ones, which has taken on the popular moniker of the “gig economy”. This lower cost form of production is partly passed onto the consumer, in the form of consumer surplus, and is partly paid out to executives and shareholders, at the cost of middle-class employment. As the scale and scope of work mediated by digital platforms has grown in India, so has the number of workers registering on such platforms.

It is important to emphasize here that the gig economy further builds on the informal economy which has been existing and as a result suffers from the same limitation – lack of worker protective measures – thereby rendering them vulnerable. Gig economy workers are not regarded as workers for the platforms but as ‘independent contractors’ which makes it difficult for them to claim any social security benefits or seek legal recourse in case of any labour-related injustice. While the cardinal principle of ‘flexibility’ is apparently what makes it ‘desirable’, the study found that the algorithms play an important role in keeping workers on a tight leash and to earn a decent wage, in many cases workers are overworked and exhausted. These algorithmic games essentially hurt women workers’ ability to earn more as they lose out on incentives owing to their familial and care responsibilities.

While there is some estimate as to the number of workers involved in the platforms mostly culled from secondary data, however, no gender disaggregated data available for the workers. Companies such as Uber, Zomato, Ola are reluctant to share their worker database making it difficult to come to an estimate of the same. It is also difficult to capture gig workers as a category in the national statistics as the services under the same are varied and would fall under different categories. It is also difficult to define a gig-worker based on piece work as workers often float between different platforms and across sectors, the essence of ‘flexibility’ as glorified by the gig economy. This makes it difficult to come up with concrete data for the same.

It is important to note that women workers within the gig economy continue to be concentrated in the feminized and traditional sectors of domestic and beauty work. In the food delivery sector women were few in number and were difficult to tap given that they stayed away from the ‘hubs’ where mostly men were concentrated. With initiatives of some individuals and organizations such as Sakha, TaxShe and Koala Kabs, we find a concentrated effort to build a workforce of women cab drivers. However, it is also important to note that there was also an element of essentializing feminine characteristics of being maternal, guarded and polite (as compared to men) and women cab drivers were mostly hired for either ferrying women passengers and/or ferrying children to school (Koala Kabs, TaxShe).

There has been much emphasis on vocational training and skill development in India, especially in recent times. In this study, we found beauty workers and cab drivers to have the most extensive training with a special focus on developing soft skills. While government aided training is popular especially among girls and women from low-income households, there is a difference in the quality of training as compared to paid training run by private players, thereby harming their prospect of being placed. Further, women’s unpaid work responsibilities and gender norms around mobility also affect women’s ability to train and develop their skill which also impacts their ability to find jobs.

The gig economy in its present form is highly precarious and exploitative in nature with long hours of work, low income and no social security. For women, the terms are worse off as their ability to work and earn decent wages are also affected by gender norms, their care and unpaid work, lack of public infrastructure and services and lack of technical knowhow. As we mapped the industry, we found varied forms of worker arrangement and operation models within and across the sector and it is safe to say that there is no standard gig economy. In this study, we found two types of gig work – platform based and a hybrid model which took characteristics from traditional and well as the new platform economy. We also found that certain NGO-led or women-led organizations that are working in these sectors are more considerate of women workers' time and responsibilities than the bigger platforms such as well-know cab, food delivery and services apps. These often tend to fall in the hybrid model. However, there is the difficulty of funding such ventures as profits are smaller and retention of women workers is challenging because of gender norms, care burdens, time availability, etc. The concern for safety is also an important cost and consideration while working with women workers in the gig economy and plays a crucial role in their ability to earn and retain.

In response, over the last couple of years, gig workers have begun to organize in protest against platforms' discriminatory policies. However, it is a matter of concern that women's voices are completely invisibilised in these male-dominated spaces and there were no forms of organization among women workers. With pressure from these unions, there have been some policy changes with the most recent and important one being the Code on Social Security which recognizes gig workers as a new category of worker for the first time. While the details are being shaped there are concerns around implementation, registration and overlapping identities of being workers of multiple platforms. Besides, the Code is not a guarantee of social security benefits and it missed the opportunity to recognize gig workers as employees and the workers continue to be defined as independent contractors, thereby denying them access to labour courts. Of utmost importance is also the inclusion of gig workers in the Sexual Harassment Act. As of now, women reportage of any sexual harassment incidence is dealt at an individual level with no Internal Committee available for the workers. Women were reluctant to speak of harassment incidents but shared their experiences of being followed on the road, misbehaving clients, indecent phone calls and they were unaware of any systems in place to report the same.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, and some similar secondary literature, below are some recommendations that the study offers for strengthening the gig economy especially from a gender lens:

- ▶ Need for a comprehensive mapping of the gig economy from a gender lens to understand the various models that exist and the implication of the same for women workers
- ▶ Gender disaggregated data is required to understand the scope and size of the gig/platform economy and for these platforms and companies should make available their data and worker profile.
- ▶ Efforts should be made by unions to engage more women gig workers and provide them with leadership positions so that women's voices don't remain unaddressed.
- ▶ Enhance the quality of skill development and concentrate on strengthening women's recruitment within the placement.
- ▶ Legal recognition of gig workers as employees and not independent contractors or service providers thereby guaranteeing them fair working conditions, access to social protection and labour courts for grievance redressal.
- ▶ Earning and wage should be calculated based on the living wage
- ▶ Contracts must be provided in local language and in an easy to understand format
- ▶ The culture of 'rating' needs to be revisited as this is subjective in nature and often not reflective of the service provider. Workers should not be penalized or deprived of earning owing to bad ratings.
- ▶ Inclusion of women gigs workers in the Sexual Harassment of Women Act, 2013. Efforts should be made to inform and educate women workers, customers and other key actors in the company of what comprises of sexual harassment and what is the grievance mechanism available to victims of sexual harassment
- ▶ Introduce women-friendly policies that will help women so that more women are willing to join the various platforms
- ▶ Need to provide and improve basic facilities such as toilets, lighting, crèches, etc. which will help women to work for longer duration and enhance their earning capacities.
- ▶ There is a need for more research on the gendered nature of work within the gig/platform economy which would enable policy makers to make evidence based policy responses.





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ANNEXURE I: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES INCLUDED IN THE STUDY

*Respondent's Name	Date of Interview	Type of Respondent	Study Site
CAB DRIVING			
Asma	June, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Beena	July, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Sonali	March, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Tanya	February, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Zariya	January, 2020	Worker	Bangalore
Dhara	January, 2020	Worker	Bangalore
Manmeet	November, 2019	Worker	Delhi
Muskan	March, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Ruchi	February, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Reeta	July, 2020	Worker	Delhi
KICD1B	January, 2020	Key informant	Bangalore
KICD1D	November, 2019	Key informant	Delhi
KICD2D	December, 2019	Key informant	Delhi
KICD3D	June, 2020	NGO member	Delhi
KICD4D	June, 2020	Trade Union member	Delhi
CD5D	March, 2020	Worker FGD	Delhi
DELIVERY WORK			
Jeena	August, 2020	Worker	Bangalore
Kaveri	August, 2020	Worker	Bangalore
Sulekha	November, 2019	Worker	Delhi
Riya	January, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Sidhi	August, 2020	Worker	Bangalore
KIDG1B	January, 2020	Trade Union member	Bangalore
KIDG1D	June, 2020	NGO member	Delhi
KIDG1J	July, 2020	Trade Union member	Jaipur
KIDG2B	January, 2020	Trade Union member	Bangalore

*Respondent's Name	Date of Interview	Type of Respondent	Study Site
BEAUTY WORK			
Karuna	July, 2020	Worker	Bangalore
Ojas	April, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Bhoomi	April, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Piyali	April, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Pratiba	April, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Sabika	April, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Shreya	January, 2020	Worker	Delhi
KIBWID	January, 2020	Key informant	Delhi
KIBW2D	February, 2020	Key informant	Delhi
KIBW3D	September, 2020	Member of Government institution	Delhi
DOMESTIC WORK			
Kashish	January, 2020	Worker	Bangalore
Jiya	July, 2020	Worker	Mumbai
Harini	January, 2020	Worker	Bangalore
Ila	July, 2020	Worker	Mumbai
Mona	June, 2020	Worker	Mumbai
Kavita	June, 2020	Worker	Mumbai
Lekha	July, 2020	Worker	Delhi
Puneeta	January, 2020	Worker	Bangalore
Surbhi	June, 2020	Worker	Mumbai
DW4B	January, 2020	Worker FGD	Bangalore
KIDWIB	January, 2020	Key informant	Bangalore
KIDWID	December, 2019	Key informant	Delhi
KIDWIM	May, 2020	Key informant	Mumbai
KIDW2B	January, 2020	FGD - Trade union members	Bangalore
KIDW2D	July, 2020	Key informant	Delhi
KIDW2M	June, 2020	Key informant	Mumbai
KIDW3D	September, 2020	Member of Government institution	Delhi
OTHER STAKEHOLDERS			
PIB	January, 2020	Senior Government official	Bangalore
KID	July, 2020	Researcher	Delhi

Note: All respondent names have been coded for maintaining confidentiality.

ANNEXURE II: SECTOR WISE LIST OF PLATFORMS AND COMPANIES INCLUDED IN THE STUDY

Platform/Company	About the Platform
CAB DRIVING	
TaxShe	Bangalore based driving company which works with women drivers and caters to the women riders and children. The workers are called Roo - taken from Kangaroo who in addition to drivers also fulfill the role of caregiver. The company considers dignity and respect as a priority for both workers and clients.
Koala Kabs	Started in 2017, the platform operates in Delhi NCR region and provides cab services to women and children. There are two kinds of services provided - i) school model - pick and drop services for school children and ii) for the general public on hourly basis. The bookings are done on Koala mobile application.
Sakha Consulting Wings Pvt. Lt.	The company was started in 2008 with a collaborative model with Azad Foundation which provides driving services to elderly, children and female customers. The company is functional in Delhi NCR, Jaipur, Kolkata and Indore.
Uber*	Uber is an American cab hailing aggregator platform. The rides are booked through its mobile application where the platform connects the drivers and clients.
DELIVERY SERVICE	
Zomato*	Indian based food delivery service platform which was started in 2008. The company has now expanded to 24 countries. Zomato is an application-based platform which is also a restaurant aggregator.
Swiggy *	The app-based platform which provides food delivery services. The company was founded in 2014 and functional in more than 300 cities across India.
BEAUTY WORK	
Urban Company *	Earlier known as Urban Clap, the company provides home based services such as beauty services and cleaning (includes range of services). The company is functional in 19 cities in India and have more than 25,000 professionals registered with them.

Platform/Company	About the Platform
Beauty Glad	Beauty Glad is a home-based beauty service platform which started in 2016. The platform connects the professionals registered with the company with the clients. They are working in Delhi NCR and more prominently in Greater Noida.
Lookplex Salon at home	This is a web-based platform for at home beauty and grooming services. The company is operating in Noida, Delhi, Dehradun, Hyderabad, Gurgaon, Pune, Faridabad and Ghaziabad.
YLG *	The company was started in 2009 in Bangalore which covers various beauty related services such as home-based service, locating YLG salons, enrolling in YLG training institute and shopping for beauty products.
DOMESTIC WORK	
HomeDruid	The company was started in 2017 and provides male and female cooks to their clients in Bangalore and Pune. The service is provided to household customers and is extended to corporate, hotels and guest house bookings.
House Maid**	The company operates through a website through which clients can specify their requirements and the company matches their need to the database of workers registered with the company. The company is operating in Delhi NCR.
My Chores	This is a website based domestic help hiring service started in 2015 in Mumbai, Navi Mumbai & Thane (Maharashtra). In addition to domestic services, the company also provides home and office cleaning services. There are two separate job portals. For workers (dayjobs.com) and for customers (mychores.com).
NannyManny	Website based platform which provides domestic and care services such as child care, cooking, elderly care, patient care, cleaning etc.
Helper4u	A mobile based hiring platform which functions like a job portal, where the professionals such as domestic workers, office help, construction and factory workers post their profile and clients/customers can choose the workers as per their requirements. The company has a multi-city model and includes all gender of workers.

Note:

*Only the workers from the platform were included in the study.

The management members could not be approached for the interview.

**Only the platform management was included in the study. The workers could not be accessed for the interview.



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