

Women and the Gig Economy: A Conceptual Study

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ABSTRACT

In recent times, gig work is creating new avenues for women to join the workforce, which is crucial for attaining gender equality as emphasized in the Sustainable Development Goals for the empowerment of women and girls. The factors that encourage women's participation in the gig economy include the gender age gap, resulting from occupational segregation, which demonstrates that women are often found in certain jobs and industries that are economically undervalued. The study seeks to explore the concept of the Gig Economy and the involvement of women within it. It also addresses the challenges and opportunities of women in this sector. As a conceptual paper, it reviews various research articles to enhance the understanding of the Gig economy. The study emphasizes the necessity of recognizing the role of female workers, the obstacles they confront while engaged in the gig economy, and suggests potential measures to overcome the barriers.

Keywords: Gig work, gender equality, occupational segregation, gig economy, women participation

1.1. INTRODUCTION

The term 'Gig' was coined by musicians in the 1920s, referring to a temporary engagement of paid performance that implies a one-off temporary jobs. The concept of 'gig economy' describes a working model where individuals engage in temporary employment or undertake distinct tasks, each compensated individually, rather than being employed by a single employer. The gig economy plays a crucial role in driving economic growth and creating jobs, especially in India, where it is anticipated to generate millions of employment opportunities. The gig economy can serve as an additional source of income, particularly for individuals seeking flexibility and the chance to engage in multiple projects. Furthermore, gig work provides avenues for skill development and enhancement through various assignments. The gig economy offers a complex scenario for women. It provides avenues for enhanced financial independence, flexibility, and a better work-life balance; however, it also poses significant challenges such as wage gaps, job instability, safety concerns and insufficient benefits. Tackling these issues is essential to guarantee that the gig economy genuinely supports women's empowerment and well-being. (Ria Kasliwal, 2023). According to a Nasscom Aon report, 2024 India's Gig workforce is expected to grow to 23.5 million by 2030, up from 7 million in 2021. This indicates that gig workers will make up 4.1% of the total workforce in India by the 2029-30 financial years, in contrast to 1.5% in the 2021-22 fiscal years.

While the gig economy in India is growing, women's participation remains relatively low, estimated at around 28%. This is despite the gig economy's potential for flexible work hours and location independence, which could benefit women with childcare or other domestic responsibilities. The NITI Aayog reports indicates that over 7.5 million individuals were involved in the gig economy during the 2020-21 period, with projections suggesting an increase to 23.5 million workers within the next eight years. However, despite the significant growth in the gig economy and the working-age population in India, the percentage of women participating in the work force remains stagnant. India ranks among the lowest globally in terms of female workforce participation, currently fluctuating between 16% and 28%, which is less than half of the global average. The World Bank Report highlights that women's involvement in India's formal economy is among the lowest worldwide. Furthermore, the Taskmo Gig Index (TGI) indicates that women's participation in the gig economy stands at approximately 28%, despite the flexibility that this sector offers.

In the gig economy, women are increasingly involved, yet they face various challenges and often earn less than their male counterparts. Worldwide, women represent approximately 42% of online gig workers, surpassing their share in the traditional workforce, which stands at 31.8%. Nevertheless, women frequently set lower hourly rates, possibly due to diminished confidence, resulting in lower earnings compared to men in certain industries. Specifically in India, the NITI Aayog estimates that there were 7.7 million gig workers in 2020-21, including women, with projections indicating an increase to 23.5 million by 2029-30.

In recent times, gig work is creating new avenues for women to join the workforce, which is crucial for attaining gender equality as emphasized in the Sustainable Development Goals. Gig work is closely associated with occupations traditionally dominated by women due to its provision of flexible working hours. Additionally, it has enabled previously marginalized groups, such as mothers and women with disabilities, to participate in the labour market. Women often hold positions deemed 'feminized', including those in beauty services, healthcare, and domestic work, which typically provide lower salaries and are viewed as less prestigious. It is essential to investigate the barriers that limit women's involvement across all aspects of the gig economy.

1.2. AIM

The aim of this paper is to examine the scope of gig economy in empowering women.

1.3. OBJECTIVES

1. To study the development of the gig economy and involvement of women in it.
2. To examine the opportunities and challenges faced by women in the gig economy
3. To suggest the policy measures for empowering women through the gig economy.

1.4. METHODOLOGY

This paper is a review paper which aims to explore the development of the gig economy in India, along with its opportunities and challenges, as well as the policy consequences for the Indian economy. By utilizing data from a range of sources such as government reports, research studies, and industry surveys. This paper assesses the role of the gig economy in the empowerment of women in India, the issues

encountered by women in the gig sector, the challenges in delivering social security to gig workers, and ensuring social security for women gig workers.

2. THE GIG ECONOMY AND EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES

The gig economy refers to a free market framework in which organizations engage workers for specific projects or services on a temporary basis. These positions are not full-time or permanent; instead, workers may participate as independent contractors, commonly referred to as freelancers or gig workers (Techtarget, 2020). The gig economy is creating opportunities for skilled, semi-skilled, and unskilled labour across numerous manufacturing and service industries nationwide, significantly impacting the Indian economy and contribution to the national GDP. Furthermore, it offers women a chance to assert control over their lives, achieve financial empowerment, and attain increased independence. Women now have the opportunity to establish adaptable work schedules that cater to their individual needs, utilizing their existing skills to secure fulfilling employment. This transformation in the labour market has opened up new avenue for women to chase their aspirations while enhancing their financial stability. The gig economy has played a pivotal role in advancing women's empowerment in recent years, allowing more women to enter the workforce and granting them the flexibility and independence necessary to manage their time and resources effectively. With appropriate support, gig economy participants can attain higher economic success and financial security compared to traditional employees. (Bhagya Rathna R, 2023)

In India, the participation rate of women in the labour force is 20.3%, compared to 76% for men. Over the last ten years, there has been a modest increase in women's labour force participation, especially among young men urban settings, which can be linked to the expansion of the gig economy. Women play a crucial role in this economy, engaging in various activities across multiple sectors, including technology, customer service, home services and creative industries. However, their overall workforce participation remains relatively low at 57% in contrast to 69% economy and gender equity. Women often pursue roles that offer autonomy and flexibility, primarily due to care giving responsibilities for children, elderly family members, and other dependents. These care giving duties frequently hinder their advancement in traditional career paths. The flexibility and independence provided by non-traditional job arrangements enable women to balance their domestic and professional obligations effectively. Non-traditional employment encompasses contract work, part-time roles, and freelancing all of which are part of the gig economy.

The Involvement of women in the gig economy, particularly within food delivery and cab services is notably less than that of men. They encounter numerous challenges similar to those faced by their male counterparts in the taxi industry. For instance, the nature of food delivery work requires a higher level of mobility and interaction with unfamiliar individuals, which is often perceived as undignified for women. A significant number of women participate in the gig economy as a feminized workforce, primarily in sectors such as beauty and domestic services.

3. WOMEN AND THE GIG ECONOMY- AN OVER VIEW

According to recent global estimates released by the ILO, approximately 708 million women around the world are not part of the labour force due to unpaid care giving duties. In 2023, a total of 748 million individuals aged 15 and older were excluded from the global labour force for similar

reasons, representing one-third of all working-age individuals not engaged in employment. Among these, 708 million were women and 40 million were men.

Gig work has been a longstanding concept for women in India, serving as an essential source of income. This encompasses roles such as day labourers, artisans, domestic workers, agricultural labourers and various other informal sector positions. According to a 2018 report by the International Labour Organization, there are 151 million women engaged in India's informal sector, participating in fields like domestic work, home-based tasks, waste collection, construction and street vending. According to the e-Shram national data base, women constitute a greater proportion of the unorganized sector workforce compared to men. As of March 2022, 52.7% of the 28.7 crore registered unorganized workers are women. It is important to note that this figure may be an under representation, as not all informal workers are registered with e-Shram.

Gig economy exhibits varying scales across APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) member economies, with women representing approximately 19 percent to 56 percent of the total gig workforce. Women engaged in online gig work tend to gravitate towards traditionally feminized roles, including clerical tasks, data entry and care giving. Although gig work presents an opportunity to bridge the gender employment gap, numerous barriers disproportionately impact women, such as socio-cultural gender biases, discrimination and harassment, wage disparities, and inadequate regulations, complicating this endeavour. It is essential for policy to mitigate the precarious conditions faced by women in the gig economy. Consequently, policy makers are encouraged to tackle these issues by fostering behavioral changes to counteract socio-cultural gender biases, actively regulating gig work, and ensuring accessible social protection or alternative support systems. These policy measures would be in line with APEC's objective of empowering women within this evolving economic context. (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation, 2024)

Bhagya Rathna R (2023) 'GIG Economy and Women Empowerment – Indian Scenario' stated that gig economy is an increasingly prevalent trend that has transformed the landscape of employment and income generation. It allows individuals to engage in short-term, flexible work arrangements, enabling them to earn without the constraints of long-term contracts or conventional jobs. Gig workers enjoy the autonomy to determine their working hours, locations, and income levels, thereby gaining enhanced control over their personal circumstances. However, this newfound flexibility also necessitates that gig workers take on greater responsibility for financial management and future planning. As a burgeoning economic model, the gig economy relies on short-term or freelance agreements to deliver various services and products. As it expands it is crucial to comprehend its effects on both the workforce and businesses. (Bhagya Rathna R, 2023) Ashwini Kishore Sonawane (2023) in her study titled "Women and Gig Economy Opportunities and Challenges" emphasized that the gig economy has transformed the nature of work, granting unprecedented flexibility and autonomy to women globally. It has also been observed that gig work enables women to earn a respectable income, thereby enhancing their quality of life and financial independence. By challenging conventional gender roles the gig economy offers women access to valuable job opportunities. However, issues such as gender bias, disruptive clients, and rapid changes in company policies, job insecurity, and privacy concerns continue to pose significant and unresolved challenges for women. Currently, gig work primarily serves as a supplementary income for women, but it is anticipated that it will evolve into a primary income source in the future. Tarun Bansal and Dr. Swarita De (2024) "*Gender and the Gig Economy: An Analysis of Women Workers across Gig*

Platforms” highlight that the growth of the gig economy has introduced short-term, flexible employment opportunities facilitated by digital platforms, which have created new avenues for individuals. The findings indicate that women are frequently overlooked on gig platforms, often relegated to lower-paying positions with reduced flexibility. Moreover, they face challenges such as unequal compensation, job instability, and limited benefits within the gig economy. Sakshi Sardana and Gaurav K. Mangar, (2022) “*A Conceptual Study on Women Workers in Gig Economy in India*” Stated that the rapid emergence of the gig economy is driven by advancements in innovation and technology globally, presenting significant career opportunities for individuals, particularly women professionals who struggle to adhere to rigid work schedules that complicate the management of both domestic and professional responsibilities. The traditional era, where women were primarily responsible for household duties and relied on their husbands or parents for financial support, has passed. The current landscape necessitates financial independence for survival. While the increased participation of women in this sector may pose challenges to the economic growth rate, the government is actively working to provide legislative benefits that can enhance their careers while ensuring protection. The study concluded that government intervention has the potential to effect substantial change, fostering more favourable gig economy that offers work benefits and enhances the work culture for gig workers, thereby contributing positively to the economy.

Ria Kasliwal (2023) “Gender and Gig Economy: A qualitative study of Gig platforms for women workers” stated that participation of women in the gig economy is on the rise, motivated by factors such as enhanced digital literacy, a preference for flexible work arrangements, and the opportunity for increased financial autonomy. Although the gig economy presents potential advantages for women, it also poses challenges including wage gaps, job instability and safety issues. Isha Sharma (2023) in her study titled “*Making Gig Work For Women in India*” emphasized the female working-age population in India is increasing diverse, encompassing women from various socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, as well as differing educational and skill levels, who are engaging in the gig economy. Nevertheless, despite the potential of the gig economy to enhance women’s participation in the labour market, significant challenges regarding their workforce involvement must be tackled. T.N.Geetha, & K.Rathina Jothi, (2024) “*The Process Of Women Empowerment In Gig Economy*” which looks at the gig economy’s growth in India, its opportunities and challenges, and the policy implications for the Indian economy stated that the gig economy is quickly changing the women’s labour market in India. Recently, the Labour Minister of India suggested that the majority of states have prepared the regulations and that the law will be put into effect at an appropriate time. However, once implemented, the code has many urgent issues regarding the recognition of gig workers. In the short term, the gig economy might serve as a means to enhance female labor force participation and promote women’s empowerment.

Nevertheless, in the long term, stable and formal employment opportunities that allow for skill development are essential. A combination of labor laws and regulations, along with the documentation of best practices from around the world on how various sectors are adopting new technologies while simultaneously creating job opportunities for women, would assist in forming supportive policies. Manu Saigal (2022) highlighted that while women have traditionally been prominent in gig roles such as care giving and home cleaning, their involvement in other sectors of the gig economy has only recently increased. It is encouraging to observe a significant rise in women’s participation across diverse demographics and age groups, contributing to India’s expansive informal, and flourishing gig

economy. For newcomers and those at the beginning of their careers, the gig economy serves as a valuable stepping stone. This presents a practical avenue for women to re-enter the workforce in substantial and impactful ways. The wide array of opportunities now available empowers women with access and options that were previously lacking, fostering sense of pride and financial autonomy, while the limited working hours enable them to spend more time at home. Govind Kelkar (2024) in his study titled “*The Gender Question in the Gig Economy*” explores the increasing feminization of the gig economy, aiming to identify its structural gender-related issues and the potential changes that may arise from new policies and practices. The gig economy, a significant aspect of the modern economic landscape, breaks down traditional capabilities into specific tasks that are executed through online platforms. It encompasses freelance and short term employment arrangements where organizations engage independent workers on a temporary basis. Future projections indicate that within the next eight to ten years, the gig economy could generate up to 90 million jobs in India’s non-farm sector, contributing over \$250 billion in work volume. Among these 90 million positions, nearly 35 millions are expected to be accessible to middle and low income workers. This growth in the gig economy has notably led to a higher participation rate of women, allowing them to enter fields traditionally dominated by men, such as tax driving with Uber and Ola, computer programming and cosmetics sales. Ramesh Kailasam and Munish Chawla (2023) in their study on “*Forging Women Empowerment Through Representation, Safety, Gig and Self-Reliance*” emphasized that traditional gender roles often prevent women from seeking employment outside the home, despite their education and qualifications. In various regions of India, existing cultural taboos not only inhibit women from pursuing external work but also restrict them from entering certain professions. Nevertheless, nationwide initiatives aimed at enhancing women’s safety have motivated many to explore job opportunities. The gig economy has created new possibilities for women by providing them with the flexibility to select their own careers, working hours and income. This environment enables women to follow their passions, engage in projects of their choosing and achieve a better work-life balance.

Anweshaa Ghosh and Risha Ramachandran (2023) in their study titled “*Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India- An Exploratory Study*” underscore the precarious nature of gig employment. It reveals that these workers lack essential social and legal protections in their new employment arrangements. Furthermore, many women struggle to maximize their earnings under incentive-based models due to their care giving responsibilities, societal gender norms, and concerns regarding safety and security. Their opportunities to acquire or enhance skills are similarly constrained by these factors. Consequently, trade unions have faced difficulties in mobilizing women across various platforms, which are predominantly male-dominated. Alarming, there are no unions led by women workers, even in sectors that are heavily feminized, such as domestic work and beauty services. Typically, women negotiate individually with platforms and companies, seldom engaging with trade unions; informal networks, such as WhatsApp groups, serve as their primary means of support and connection. Additionally women have reported that in mixed unions, male members often hesitate to include them, leading to a significant under representation of women’s voices in India’s gig economy. The empowerment of women is crucial for social transformation in India. Furthermore, enhancing women’s autonomy and improving their economic, social, health and political status is a significant goal in itself. Thus, promoting women’s full participation in productive activities and alleviating their care giving responsibilities will ultimately

lead to their empowerment, increased agency, and an overall enhancement of women's status within both the family and society. In this regard, the gig economy offers opportunities for women that are not only economically empowering but also alter their relative standing within the family. The gig economy provides advantages to employers, employees, and the broader economy, with benefits that extend beyond traditional concepts of convenience, on-demand availability, and flexibility. (Manu Saigal, 2022)

4. SUMMARY

To sum up, the swift rise of the gig economy is driven by global advancements in innovation and technology, offering substantial career prospects for individuals, especially women professionals who find it challenging to comply with inflexible work schedules that hinder the management of both domestic and professional duties. The gig economy is rapidly transforming the labour market for women in India. This new economic model has redefined the nature of work, providing women worldwide with unprecedented flexibility and autonomy. The gig work allows women to earn a respectable income, thus improving their quality of life and financial independence. Gig workers have the freedom to choose their working hours, locations, and income levels, granting the greater control over their personal situations. The gig economy has opened new avenues for women by allowing them to select their careers, working hours, and income, enabling them to pursue their passions, engage in preferred projects, and achieve a more favourable work-life balance. Furthermore, the gig economy presents opportunities for women that are not only economically empowering but also enhance their status within the family. These economic model benefits employers, employees, and the wider economy, offering advantages that surpass traditional notions of convenience, on-demand availability, and flexibility. The participation of women in the gig economy is increasing, driven by factors such as improved digital literacy, a desire for flexible work arrangements, and the potential for greater financial independence.

The gig economy, as an emerging economic model, is based on short-term or freelance contracts to provide a variety of services and products. As it continues to grow, it is essential to understand its impact on both the workforce and businesses. Challenges such as gender discrimination, job insecurity, and privacy issues remain significant and unresolved, particularly for women. Women are often marginalized on gig platforms, frequently assigned to lower-paying roles with less flexibility. Additionally, they encounter obstacles like unequal pay, job instability and limited benefits within the gig economy. Women in the gig economy often lack vital social and legal safeguards in their new employment arrangements. Moreover, many women find it difficult to optimize their earnings under incentive based systems due to care giving responsibilities, societal gender expectation, and safety concerns. Their ability to acquire or improve skills is similarly hindered by these factors. There are no unions led by women workers, even in heavily feminized sectors such as domestic work and beauty services. Government intervention has the potential to bring about significant change, creating a more supportive gig economy that provides work benefits and improves the work culture for gig workers, thus contributing positively to the economy.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the factors that encourage women's participation in the gig economy include the gender age gap, resulting from occupational segregation, which demonstrates that women are often found in certain jobs and industries that are economically undervalued. Additionally, the hours gap indicates that women tend to work positions with flexible hours due to family obligations and safety issues. These patterns have contributed to an increase in the number of women entering the gig and platform-based workforce. It is crucial for women involved in gig work to have full access to social protection, which guarantees their rights to income and health care, including provisions for unemployment, maternity leave, work-related injuries, illness, retirement, disability, loss of income provider, and child support. These protections are essential for safeguarding their human right to social security and improving the effectiveness of the labour market. By establishing adequate social protection measures and gender-sensitive policies, women in gig work will be empowered to sustain their roles, thereby promoting the overall growth and diversity of the labour market.

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