

# Women Gig Workers in Chennai: A Case Study

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## Abstract:

The gig economy is expanding and increasing the employment opportunity of women because its nature itself favourable and it is based on flexible, temporary or freelance work, often involves contact with customers or clients through a digital application. It highlights that alternative work arrangements in the gig economy can attract more women and increase their participation in the labour force. It is also playing a prominent role in women empowerment. But the women gig workers often face threats and challenges to their security and limited access to social and legal protection with respect to the time and the place. This exploratory study used case study method to analyse about the specific conditions caters to women's inclusion, lack of provisions for safety and security and uncertainties faced by the women gig workers in the work place.

**Keywords:** Freelance Work, digital application, social protection, safety, security

## Introduction:

In 2010, Flipkart was the sole digital platform in India in recent years; India's gig economy has experienced dramatic growth (Kasliwal, 2020). Following Flipkart, a multitude of diverse platforms have entered the market, offering services related to household work, beauty salons and platform based food delivery. The gig economy has been advantageous to women service providers due to its flexibility. Nevertheless, structural obstacles persist in hindering female's entry into the new form of employment. These brief evaluates food delivery platforms in India that provide to unskilled women workers. It focuses few systematic femininity issues plaguing India's gig economy and suggests addressing them.

India constitutes the world's second largest market for freelancing (approximately 15 million), surpassed only by the United States (approximately 53 million). There are 81 percent of the significant corporations surveyed indicated utilizing gig workers for at least one major organizational issue in the preceding year (The Noble House Report, 2019)<sup>3</sup>. For the first time, recognized gig workers, it included provisions for extending social security benefits to them (Ministry of Labour & Employment, Government of India, 2019). While this is a positive step, the implementation requires enhancement due to the scarcity of sufficient data on gig workers. Globally, countries have initiated data collection. The measurement is rendered more complex due to the fact that gig work often serves as a supplementary income source for many.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.orfonline.org/research/gender-and-the-gig-economy-a-qualitative-study-of-gig-platforms-for-women-workers-65948>

**Structural Barriers faced includes the Women into Workforce:**

The primary drivers of women's elevated attrition rate in gig employment stem from the dual burden of unpaid domestic labour and paid professional work, particularly following childbirth. The flexibility inherent in gig employment enables women workers to reconcile their unpaid care responsibilities with paid work, thereby diminishing their reliance on a fixed physical workspace. It was projected that the expansion of the gig economy would facilitate increased female participation in the workforce. Despite a general increase in India's workforce participation rate, statistical evidence of substantial progress remains limited.

Socio-economic values influence the nature of work, but the flexibility accessible by gig employment mainly focuses upon whether it is a main or additional source of income. The main source of income allows limited flexibility as like the other informal or formal nature of employment. "Platformisation has not directly increased the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLPR) in India" (Kasliwal, 2020). The FLPR has steadily declined for over two decades, dipping from over 30 percent in the early 2000's to 26 percent in 2018. In 2017–18, the FLPR was 34 percent for the urban self-employed population and 13 percent for urban casual workers, paralleled to 42 percent and 14 percent in 2011–12. It denotes that decrease in the participation rate for both categories gig workers could be included<sup>4</sup>. The Studies in the UK shows that women are more likely to exit the gig economy. This could be attributed to their income being in the 'distressed' category. Based on the studies, as soon as conditions improves, women leave the workforce (this phenomenon is also widely visible in India's other types of informal economy)<sup>5</sup>.

The gig workers have one-side to contact digital technologies are another significant hurdle to women's participation this kind of employment. Only 16 percent of women in India are mobile internet users. Government initiatives such as Digital India still digital literacy remains a problem amongst women. The socio-cultural restrictions, women are less to own mobile phones and devices (GSMA Connected Women - The Mobile Gender Gap Report, 2019)<sup>6</sup>. Because of this issue, some platforms are offering their own devices. However, this is a stop-gap solution the imperatives are digital education, skills training and removing barriers to accessibility.

One of the most crucial assets of the gig economy is its equal opportunity for all the people. The gig economy has the potential to promote gender inclusivity. Further, Platformisation enables the combination of paid labour and household work, which tends to disproportionately burdening the women.

**Gender Inequality in the Pay:**

The study reveals that 35 percent of the women surveyed expressed disinterest in entering gig employment due to the lack of job security and employment opportunities (Observer Research Foundation and World Economic Forum, 2018)<sup>7</sup>. The study piloted in India, the booming of on-demand domestic work highlights the inequality in relations with power which emerges from discrimination and exploitation against workers already more vulnerable in traditional domestic work. Women in central

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.orfonline.org/research/gender-and-the-gig-economy-a-qualitative-study-of-gig-platforms-for-women-workers-65948>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.businessinsider.in/careers/news/indian-women-dont-like-being-gig-orkers/amp\\_articleshow/75757460.cms](https://www.businessinsider.in/careers/news/indian-women-dont-like-being-gig-orkers/amp_articleshow/75757460.cms)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/GSMA-Connected-Women-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2019.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.orfonline.org/research/improving-job-satisfaction-india-youth-44894>

decision-making positions need to be included in these issues (Terri Chapman, Samir Saran, Rakesh Sinha, Suchi Kedia, Sriram Gutta, 2018, *The Future of Work in India Inclusion, Growth and Transformation an Enterprise Survey*)<sup>8</sup>. The study on Uber workers in the US visible a gender-pay inequality between men and women performed similar tasks (Kenneth C. Griffin, Department of Economics, 2018)<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, the study observed that 8-10 percent difference in monthly salary between male and female delivery executives (Kar, Team Lease in India, 2019)<sup>10</sup>.

The problem in India is dual: an inability to facilitate women's movement into the workforce and the endurance of structural and operational barriers that promotes gender biased division of gig work. Despite introducing the Code on Social Security, 2020, the Indian platform economy continues to carelessness in the protection of women's labour force.

GPS based platforms used in India like Uber, Zomato, Swiggy or Ola is conventionally considered as men's jobs. It owes to the prerequisite of driving a vehicle and interacting with strangers has started actively hiring women for broader gender representation challenging the socio-cultural barriers (Ghosh, 2019 and Kar, 2019)<sup>11</sup>. The women's entries into non-traditional work, gender inequalities have seen an extension in these new domains also. The gender pay gap continues to resound in the gig economy. In the UK found that 75 percent of female gig workers earned less than £11,500 per annum compared with 61 percent of all workers (Balaram et al., 2017)<sup>12</sup>. In the US, gig work constituted a lower share of total earnings for women than for men ie. 16 percent versus 23 percent for men (Farrelland Greig, 2016)<sup>13</sup>.

A study in the US that analysed data from more than a million drivers on the Uber platform and found a 7 percent earnings gap between men and women cab drivers (Cook et al., 2018)<sup>14</sup>. These findings found echo in a study conducted in India Team Lease Services on Indian gig workers found that women delivery workers in India are paid around 10 percent less than men (Kasliwal, 2020; Kar, 2019)<sup>15</sup>. This is mainly connected to women's inability to earn more by taking advantage of the surge pricing, schemes, incentives and being more cautious drivers than men, etc. These are further affected by their unpaid work responsibilities, social norms around mobility, competition at work, attitudes and perceptions about their work and access to training, etc.

In the gig economy, participation in work is contingent upon access to mobile phones compatible with relevant applications (predominantly smartphones). While the gig economy's growth is fuelled by widespread mobile penetration and internet connectivity, it is important to acknowledge the gender digital divide in India. The digital divide among women in India is 20 percent (GSMA Connected Women – The Mobile Gender Gap Report, 2019)<sup>16</sup>. In those, the women possess or own mobile phones itself reflects the gender differences in access to the internet are even more alarming 50 percent gap

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.orfonline.org/public/uploads/posts/pdf/FoW-Digital.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Cook, C., Diamond, R., Hall, J., List, J. A., & Oyer, P. (2018). *The gender earnings gap in the gig economy: Evidence from over a million rideshare drivers* (Working Paper No. 24732).

<sup>10</sup> [https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-06/25th\\_June\\_Final\\_Report\\_27062022.pdf](https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-06/25th_June_Final_Report_27062022.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> <https://olawebedn.com/ola-institute/women-platform-economy.pdf>

<sup>12</sup> <https://cdn-odi-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/12586.pdf>

<sup>13</sup> [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2911194](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2911194)

<sup>14</sup> <https://web.stanford.edu/~diamondr/UberPayGap.pdf>

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.orfonline.org/research/gender-and-the-gig-economy-a-qualitative-study-of-gig-platforms-for-women-workers-65948>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.gsma.com/solutions-and-impact/connectivity-for-good/mobile-for-development/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/GSMA-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2019.pdf>

persists (Rountree, 2020)<sup>17</sup>. 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 percent of men have access to smartphones compared to 14 percent of women restricts women's ability to enter the gig economy adding to the loss of economic activity for women (Mangat, 2020)<sup>18</sup>. Lack of access to digital technology and the absence of digital literacy skills exaggerate the gender divide further in developing countries like India (Subramanian, 2017)<sup>19</sup>. The study points out that the ICT sector is predominantly urban-based it is dominated by men it provides employment to only a few women. The platform economy is an employment option available to a few women in urban centres (Chakraborty, 2020, p.21)<sup>20</sup>.

While access to technology is crucial, it is also important to highlight that within the gig economy, the workers do not 'own' the technology governs their work and as such has no power over the invisible algorithms that dictate their ability to earn (IWWAGE, 2020)<sup>21</sup>. This lack of control over technology is further fuelled by platform-based ranking and ratings based on customer's subjective views directly impacting your jobs. For instance, Uber 'deactivates' the accounts of drivers with not enough ranking and ratings. As a result, this non-ability to be the holders of technology have implications on workers can push back against the machinations of these platforms. This powerlessness becomes more acute in the case of women workers owing to the disadvantageous positions 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. There is a general assumption of the 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)<sup>22</sup>. For instance, in case of domestic workers detailed demographic profiles apart from their qualifications can be viewed by the users such as their age, religion and caste including their profile pictures (Hunt, 2017; Tandem Research, 2020)<sup>23</sup>.

An Indian-based study observed the company's selection criteria included women younger than 45 years and discouraged people with disability from now adding to the existing stereotypes and discrimination (Chaudhary, 2020)<sup>24</sup>. The 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

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/GSMA-Connected-Women-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2019.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Sultana, A., & Sultana, S. (2021). How patriarchal gender norms limit women's use of mobile phones: A qualitative study from rural Madhya Pradesh, India. *BMJ Global Health*, 6(9), e006020. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2021-006020>

<sup>19</sup> Subramanian, M. (2017, May 29). Why are there so few women on the Internet in India? *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/locating-gender-in-the-digital-divide/story-zt10VjNAwnOqcChjkYCLfN.html>

<sup>20</sup> Chakraborty, S. (2020). *Digital India* (Working paper). SSRN. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=4629266](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4629266)

<sup>21</sup> Chaudhary, R. (2020). *India's emerging gig economy: The future of work for women workers* (Report). Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE). <https://iwwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/IWWAGE-Gig-Economy-Report.pdf>

<sup>22</sup> Raval, N., & Pal, J. (2019). Making a 'Pro': 'Professionalism' after platforms in beauty-work. *Work Organisation, Labor & Globalization*, 14(1), 136–149. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/01634437211029890>

<sup>23</sup> Hunt, A., & Machingura, F. (2016). *View of domestic work and the gig economy in South Africa: Old wine in new bottles?* Anti-Trafficking Review. <https://www.antitraffickingreview.org/index.php/atjournal/article/view/491/385>

<sup>24</sup> [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3944205](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3944205)

freedom, the lack of literacy the unaffordability of devices restrict women's access to technology thus widening the gap (Mawii, 2019; Hunt and Samman, 2019)<sup>25</sup>. To address this issue, companies have used phone messaging or calls to connect with their workers (Hunt, 2017)<sup>26</sup>. There is evidence that supports the fact that, overall women earn less than men through gig work. In the UK the studies found that 75 percent of women gig workers earned less than £11,500 per annum compared with 61 percent of all workers (Balaram et al. 2017)<sup>27</sup>. The other studies found that 49 percent of female gig workers had earned less than £250 in the previous year, compared with 35 percent of men (Lepanjuuri et al. 2018)<sup>28</sup>. In the US, gig work constituted a lower share of total earnings for women than for men i.e., 16 percent versus 23 percent for men (Farrell and Greig, 2016)<sup>29</sup>.

In the grievance redressal system, in cases it even exists the companies hold the power to make the final decision without any legal obligation (Kasliwal, 2020)<sup>30</sup>. This lack of accountability and redressal systems raises questions about the safety of workers; particularly women workers are more vulnerable to cyber harassment and stalking (Mawii, 2019)<sup>31</sup>. Women workers providing services through online platforms are susceptible to sexual harassment. Some start-ups in India that 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 mechanism (Tankha, 2020)<sup>32</sup>.

## CASE STUDY AMONG THE WOMEN GIG WORKERS:

### Case Study: Gendered Dimensions of Gig Work — The Experience of Mrs. Sudha, a Dunzo Delivery Partner:

This case study explores the lived experiences of Mrs. Sudha, a 39-year-old women gig worker affiliated with Dunzo in Chennai. Her narrative reveals that the dual nature of platform-based gig work, offering both empowerment and precarity. She highlights how gig work contributes to women financial independence and discussed about how expose to systemic inadequacies in infrastructure, safety institutional support. With the proliferation of gig economy platforms in India, an increasing number of

<sup>25</sup> Hunt, A., & Samman, E. (2019). *Gender and the gig economy: Critical steps for evidence-based policy*. Overseas Development Institute. <https://odi.org/en/publications/gender-and-the-gig-economy-critical-steps-for-evidence-based-policy/>

<sup>26</sup> Hunt, A., & Samman, E. (2019). *Gender and the gig economy: Critical steps for evidence-based policy* (p. 17). Overseas Development Institute. <http://cdn-odi-production.s3.amazonaws.com/media/documents/12586.pdf>

<sup>27</sup> Balaram, B., Warden, J., & Wallace-Stephens, F. (2017). *Good gigs: A fairer future for the UK's gig economy*. The Young Foundation.

<sup>28</sup> Lepanjuuri, K., Wishart, R., & Cornick, P. (2018). *The characteristics of those in the gig economy: Final report*. UK Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5aa69800e5274a3e391e38fa/The\\_characteristics\\_of\\_those\\_in\\_the\\_gig\\_economy.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5aa69800e5274a3e391e38fa/The_characteristics_of_those_in_the_gig_economy.pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Farrell, D., & Greig, F. (2016). *The online platform economy in 2016: Drivers, workers, sellers, and lessors*. JPMorgan Chase Institute. <https://www.jpmorganchase.com/content/dam/jpmc/jpmorgan-chase-and-co/institute/pdf/institute-ope-2018.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Kasliwal, R. (2020). *Gender and the gig economy: A qualitative study of gig platforms for women workers* (ORF Issue Brief No. 359). Observer Research Foundation. <https://www.orfonline.org/research/gender-and-the-gig-economy/>

<sup>31</sup> Mawii, M. (2019). *Women as independent workers in the gig economy* [Working paper]. SSRN. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=3815975](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3815975)

<sup>32</sup> Raval, N., & Pal, J. (2019). *Making a 'Pro': 'Professionalism' after platforms in beauty-work*. <https://osf.io/ch8wg/download>



women are entering informal digital labour markets. Her experience serves as a representative of the opportunities and challenges faced by women in urban gig work.

### **Economic Empowerment and Flexibility:**

Mrs. Sudha highlighted the financial autonomy and stability from the gig work has brought to her household. As a secondary income earner that contributes to meet the family expenses especially children's education. Additionally, the flexibility of gig work allows her to manage domestic responsibilities effectively. Unlike traditional 9 to 5 jobs, Dunzo's flexible scheduling enables her to balance caregiving duties with paid work. This temporal autonomy is a crucial advantage for many women managing dual roles in family and employment.

### **Challenges and Precarity:**

In spite of all these benefits, her engagement with platform work is ruined by several structural deficiencies. She indicated the absence of basic amenities such as clean toilets, access to drinking water safe spaces to rest during shifts. These shortfalls are particularly concerning for women gig workers and it may have leads to specific health and hygiene issues.

She exposed to harassment and sense of vulnerable in unfamiliar places working during late hours. It is a major concern for women workers. It underscores the gender based risks associated with mobility in urban public spaces.

The lack of an effective grievance redressal mechanism within the platform worsens worker's vulnerability. Issues related to customer misconduct, delayed payments or app-related penalties often remain unresolved and leaving workers with more concerned.

Digital platforms like Dunzo provide women with new avenues for income generation and independence but the absence of infrastructural and institutional safeguards limits the transformative potential of such employment. She suggests and recommends for urgent policy attention towards ensuring gender-sensitive reforms in platform labour including the provision of basic amenities, robust safety protocols and easy accessible to grievance mechanisms.

### **A Case Study: Empowerment and Exploitation of Mrs. Kanchana, a Swiggy Food Delivery Worker:**

She is a 42-year-old woman employed as a gig worker with Swiggy a major food delivery platform in India. She shared her experiences to understand how platform-based employment offers opportunities for empowerment and simultaneously exposing workers to precarious and gender-specific challenges. The key themes such as economic independence, flexibility and work-life balance and also addressing issues of infrastructure, health, safety and nature of gig work.

The gig economy in India has experienced rapid expansion driven by digital platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, Uber and Dunzo. While gig work offers an entry point for women into urban labour markets and it also raises critical concerns about working conditions, health and gender-sensitive infrastructure. It reflects on the double-edged nature of platform work for women.

### **Dimensions of Empowerment:**

#### **• *Economic Independence and Shared Responsibility:***

Her income contributes directly to household expenses and reducing the financial burden on her husband. This change has enhanced her self-esteem and decision-making power within the family.

- ***Flexibility and Work-Life Balance:***

She explains the flexibility provided by Swiggy which offers allowing her to choose work hours that accommodate her domestic responsibilities. This autonomy has helped her to maintain a balance between caregiving responsibilities and income generation.

- ***Low-Skill Accessibility:***

The nature of gig work does not require any qualifications and making it accessible to women like her who lacks formal education. This inclusivity is very critical.

### **Challenges and Constraints:**

- ***Inadequate Infrastructure:***

Despite the observed benefits, she reports a lack of basic amenities such as clean toilets, access to drinking water and places to rest between deliveries.

- ***Health and Safety Issues:***

The nature of the work demands driving long distances daily on a two-wheeler and it has taken an issue on her physical health and it leading to recurring body aches, fatigue and respiratory issues caused by urban pollution. Safety is a constant concern particularly when delivering late at night or in isolated areas. She highlighted the lack of platform-led safety measures or emergency support.

- ***Absence of Institutional Support:***

She informed frustration over the ineffective grievance redressal mechanisms in place. She often faces rude customers, system glitches and unjust penalties. The lack of formal communication channels limits her ability to seek support or express concerns. She experience and illustrates the complex interplay between economic agency and labour precarity in platform work. While the gig economy enables women's participation in the labour force and it also reproduces traditional inequalities in new digital forms. The absence of social security, health benefits, gender-sensitive infrastructure which restricts the potential for such employment to serve as a truly empowering force.

She highlights the urgent need for a regulatory framework that addresses the specific needs of women gig workers. Key recommendations include:

- Provision of public amenities (toilets, drinking water, rest zones) in high-traffic delivery zones.
- Introduction of health insurance and wellness programs for platform workers.
- Stronger grievance redressal systems and anti-harassment policies.
- Regular safety audits and availability of emergency support services.
- Gender-sensitive infrastructure and policies to accommodate first-aid boxes and menstrual hygiene needs.

Until such reforms are implemented, the gig economy will continue to present a paradox but incomplete pathway to women's empowerment.

### **A Case Study: Invisible Labour and Silent Struggles of Mrs. Radha, a Women Gig Worker with Dunzo:**

This case study explores the lived experiences of Mrs. Radha, a 39-year-old women gig worker associated with the Dunzo delivery platform in Chennai. While gig work offers flexibility and a source of an income which highlights the socio-psychological challenges it imposes particularly isolation, lack of peer interaction which leads for de-motivation. The analysis reveals how the absence of community in

gig work deepens the precariousness of informal labour, especially for women calls for integrated social and infrastructural reforms.

Platform-based gig work in India has grown rapidly, offering informal employment to a large number of urban workers, particularly in food and goods delivery sectors (Kumar, 2020)<sup>33</sup>. While much has been discussed about the economic benefits and precarity associated with gig labour, less attention has been paid to the socio-psychological dimensions of this new work regime. This case study investigates these overlooked elements through the experience of her.

### **Economic and Structural Conditions:**

#### ***Economic Role and Household Contribution:***

She appreciates the financial autonomy her work provides and her earnings contribute significantly to household expenses, easing the economic pressure on her spouse and allowing her to support her children's education benefits reported by other women in similar roles (Sundararajan, 2021)<sup>34</sup>.

#### ***Infrastructure and Health Concerns:***

She shares her grievances as like other gig workers, lack of access to basic amenities such as public toilets, drinking water or rest zones during shifts. She also reported physical strain, including joint pain and fatigue, due to prolonged driving and pollution exposure common complaints among urban delivery workers (Mehta & Sengupta, 2019)<sup>35</sup>.

### **Socio-Psychological Dimensions:**

#### ***Social Isolation:***

She faces social isolation in workplace. She does not know her co-workers, has no team support experiences the workday as an unsociable attempt. This absence of workplace community can lead to a sense of alienation and has been linked to reduced job satisfaction in the gig economy (De Stefano, 2016)<sup>36</sup>.

#### ***Lack of Motivation and Emotional Support:***

With no formal supervision or team interactions, she reports a decline in motivation. She feels unnoticed and unrecognized despite her contribution which leads a feeling that can erode long-term emotional well-being (Scholz, 2017)<sup>37</sup>.

#### ***Absence of Knowledge Sharing:***

She has no access to forums and exchange knowledge, learn from peers or share best practices. The lack of peer learning deprives her of informal education and psychological reinforcement is crucial in building a sense of professional identity (Woodcock & Graham, 2020)<sup>38</sup>.

Her experience demonstrates that gig work is not only precarious economically and physically but also emotionally and socially fragmenting. Unlike traditional employment, platform work disaggregates labour into isolated tasks devoid of human connection. For women workers, especially those already

<sup>33</sup> Kumar, A. (2020). *Platform-based gig work in India: Growth and challenges*.

<sup>34</sup> Sundararajan, A. (2021). *Gig economy in India: Transforming employment dynamics and women's participation* [PDF]. Journal of Industrial Engineering and Research. <https://ijer.org/index.php/journal/article/download/2475/2039/4384>

<sup>35</sup> Mehta, S., & Sengupta, P. (2019). *The invisible workforce: Exploring the lives of India's gig workers*. Oxfam India. <https://www.oxfamindia.org/knowledgehub/working-papers/invisible-workforce-exploring-lives-indias-gig-workers>

<sup>36</sup> De Stefano, V. (2016). The rise of the "just-in-time workforce": On-demand work, crowd work and labour protection in the "gig-economy." *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal*, 37(3), 471–504. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2682602](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2682602)

<sup>37</sup> Scholz, T. (2017). *Platform cooperativism: Challenging the corporate sharing economy*. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung.

<sup>38</sup> Woodcock, J., & Graham, M. (2020). *The gig economy: A critical introduction*. Polity Press.



juggle unpaid domestic labour and this isolation amplifies stress and limits opportunities for solidarity or support (Brawley & Pury, 2016)<sup>39</sup>.

The gig economy offers flexibility and income opportunities but also reproduces new forms of alienation. Key recommendations include:

- Development of worker rest hubs with sanitation facilities.
- Platform-facilitated peer networks and regular community meetups.
- Access to mental health resources and counselling support.
- In-app communication tools to foster collaboration and support.

Incorporating social infrastructure into gig work is essential to ensure it is not only economically viable but emotionally sustainable.

### **A Case Study: Empowered but Unprotected of Mrs. Marry, a Women Zepto Delivery Worker:**

This case study explores the working life of Mrs. Marry, a 40-year-old women gig worker affiliated with Zepto, a hyperlocal delivery platform. While her employment has provided economic independence, flexibility a better standard of living, the study uncovers a significant gap in awareness of welfare provisions and social security. The case highlights the dual reality of platform work for women in India empowerment through income yet vulnerability due to informalization and lack of institutional support.

India's rapidly growing gig economy has redefined urban employment particularly for women entering the labour force through digital delivery platforms such as Zepto, Swiggy and Dunzo. These platforms promise flexibility, income independence but often operate outside the purview of labour regulation and social protection (Kumar, 2021)<sup>40</sup>. This case study focuses on Mrs. Marry, a delivery partner with Zepto, to explore the intersection of empowerment and precarity within platform work.

Mrs. Marry, aged 40, joined Zepto to support her family financially after her husband's income became insufficient due to rising living costs. With no formal education or professional experience, the low-skill entry offered by gig work enabled her to step into the workforce. She currently delivers vegetables and groceries to doorsteps in her urban neighbourhood.

#### **Gains from Gig Work:**

- **Economic Independence:** Marry attributes her financial autonomy to her gig work. Her earnings contribute directly to household expenses and children's education personal needs. For the first time in her life, she controls her own income a significant shift from earlier dependency.
- **Flexibility and Work-Life Balance:** Zepto's platform model allows her to choose her working hours and enabling her to balance household duties and caregiving roles. This flexibility is essential for women like her to balance both paid and unpaid work (Sundararajan, 2022)<sup>41</sup>.
- **Improved Standard of Living:** With dual incomes, the family has experienced a modest rise in their standard of living. They now afford better food, clothing and small comforts were previously out of reach.

<sup>39</sup> Brawley, A. M., & Pury, C. L. S. (2016). Work experiences on MTurk: Job satisfaction, turnover, and information sharing. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 54, 531–546. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2015.08.026>

<sup>40</sup> Kumar, A. (2021). Constitutional values in the gig-economy? Why labor law fails at platform work, and what can we do about it? *Journal of Socio-Economics and Contemporary Thought*, 11(3), 86.102 <https://ideas.repec.org/a/gam/jsocet/v11y2021i3p86-d602691.html>

<sup>41</sup> Sardana, S., Kuttly, S. H., & Sundararajan, S. (2022). A conceptual study on women workers in gig economy.

**The Invisible Risks: Lack of Welfare Awareness:**

- **Unawareness of Social Security Schemes:** Despite her active participation in gig work, she is unaware of government welfare schemes or any platform-led social security measures. She has not enrolled in health insurance, pension plans or accident coverage assuming such provisions are irrelevant or inaccessible.
- **Informal Status and Legal Gaps:** As an independent contractor, she receives no employee benefits like paid leave, maternity support or retirement benefits. The platform does not provide formal orientation or training on labour rights or safety nets which leaves the workers like her uninformed and vulnerable (De Stefano, 2016)<sup>42</sup>.
- **Lack of Representation and Advocacy:** She has no access to a union or worker collective that might advocate for benefits or negotiate better working conditions. She performs a crucial public service yet remains outside the realm of formal worker protections.

Her's experience embodies the duality of empowerment and exclusion. While the gig economy has given her agency and income the structural absence of social protection leaves her precariously placed in the informal labour sector. This tension reflects broader trends in platform capitalism; individual economic gains coexist with systemic neglect of labour rights (Woodcock & Graham, 2020)<sup>43</sup>.

The lack of knowledge about social security schemes such as the e-SHRAM portal<sup>44</sup> or PM Suraksha Bima Yojana reflects a gap in policy outreach and digital literacy among women workers. This disconnect not only jeopardizes their current wellbeing but also threatens long-term economic security. It calls attention to the need for integrated policies that combine flexibility with protection. Empowerment through income must be accompanied by institutional safeguards to ensure that gig workers are not left behind in the digital economy. Key policy suggestions include:

- Mandatory onboarding modules on welfare schemes and labour rights.
- Collaboration between platforms and government for auto-enrolment into social security programs.
- Community-based support groups to improve awareness and representation.
- Mobile app interfaces that display localized welfare updates in regional languages.

Without bridging this knowledge and access gap, the promise of gig work for women will remain only partially fulfilled.

**Case Study: Mrs. Shanthi – A 36-Year-Old Woman Gig Worker in Urban Company:**

Mrs. Shanthi is a 36-year-old woman residing in the outskirts of Chennai. She belongs lower-middle class and completed her education till 12<sup>th</sup> standard and was married at the age of 20. After her children started school, she began looking for ways to support her family financially. With limited formal qualifications and work experience, she found it challenging to enter traditional full-time employment. However, the gig economy emerged as a promising alternative.

**Entry into the Gig Economy:** She began her journey as a gig worker in 2019, signing up as a service provider on a domestic work and home cleaning platform that connected households with part-time

<sup>42</sup> De Stefano, V. (2016). The rise of the “just-in-time workforce”: On-demand work, crowdwork and labour protection in the “gig-economy.” *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal*, 37(3), 471–504. [https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2682602](https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2682602)

<sup>43</sup> Woodcock, J., & Graham, M. (2020). *The fight against platform capitalism: An inquiry into the global struggles of the gig economy*. University of Westminster Press.

<sup>44</sup> <https://eshram.gov.in/e-shram-portal>

cleaners, cook and caregiver. She was introduced to the app through a local NGO that conducted digital literacy training for women. Initially hesitant due to her lack of experience with smartphones and apps but slowly learned how to manage bookings, communicate with clients and handle the digital payments.

**Challenges Faced:** Despite her growing confidence, her journey was far from smooth. The Indian labour market is deeply heterogeneous which access to stable internet, smartphones digital skills is unevenly distributed. She often faced issues such as:

- **Poor internet connectivity:**  
In her neighbourhood, mobile data networks are inconsistent which affected her ability to receive real-time job notifications.
- **Low digital literacy:**  
Though she learned basic app navigation, she struggled with reading instructions in English and understanding customer reviews or app updates.
- **Work insecurity:**  
Unlike salaried employment, her income fluctuated significantly based on the number of bookings which she received each week.
- **Platform bias and ratings pressure:**  
Client's reviews often determined her visibility on the platform. A single bad review even for reasons beyond her control impacted her ability to get future jobs.
- **Gendered constraints:**  
As a woman, she also bore the dual burden of paid work and unpaid domestic responsibilities; limiting the hours she could commit to gig work.

### **Success and Resilience:**

Despite these hurdles, she slowly built a steady clientele. Word-of-mouth referrals and positive reviews helped her secure regular work in a few high-income neighbourhoods. She also began to assist other women in her community to join the platform, acting as an informal mentor and translator.

To supplement her income, she later joined another app-based food delivery service during weekends. She managed deliveries using her husband's two-wheeler, navigating through traffic while dealing with gender biases in a male-dominated sector. Over time, she contributed significantly to her family's income, supporting her children's education and improving their standard of living.

### **Broader Structural Insights:**

The complexity of India's labour market, technological advancement exists alongside deep structural inequalities. The gig economy offers flexible, accessible opportunities, especially to women like her face barriers in formal employment. However, it also amplifies existing vulnerabilities due to lack of social security, absence of legal protections and limited digital inclusion.

India's digital divide deep rooted in class, gender, location and education continues to limit the transformative potential of gig work for many women. While platforms claim to democratize work, access to technology and the ability to leverage it meaningfully remain privileges.

Her journey also highlights the importance of community support, digital training policy intervention to create a more equitable and inclusive gig economy, particularly for women from marginalized backgrounds.

**Case Study: Ms. Rekha – A 37-Year-Old Dunzo Gig Worker in India:**

Rekha, a 37-year-old woman from Bengaluru, Karnataka, is a gig worker associated with Dunzo, a popular hyperlocal delivery platform. Her experiences throw light on the structural dynamics of India's gig economy particularly the oversupply of labour, its impact on wages and conditions the unique challenges faced by women gig workers in urban India.

She belongs from a modest socio-economic background. She completed high school but was unable to pursue further education due to family responsibilities. After years of working as a part-time domestic helper, she was introduced to the idea of gig work by a younger neighbour. In 2021, during the COVID-19 recovery phase, she began working as a delivery partner with Dunzo to gain financial independence and flexibility to support her two children.

**Entry into the Gig Workforce:**

She was attracted to the gig economy for its low barriers to entry. All she needed was a smartphone, a two-wheeler (she shares with her brother) and an Aadhaar card. Dunzo's onboarding process was quick and straightforward. Her ability to navigate the city and communicate in Kannada and basic English helped her pick up the job quickly.

**Challenges Faced:****1. Oversupply of Labor:**

Her key concern is the growing number of young, unemployed workers entering platforms like Dunzo. With minimal entry barriers, thousands of individuals, especially during periods of economic slowdown, turn into gig work. This glut of workers reduces the availability of high-demand time slots and order frequency for each worker directly impacting their earnings.

**2. Declining Wages and Incentives:**

In the early days of her gig work, she earned daily bonuses and per-order incentives. However, as more workers joined, platforms reduced incentive structures. She notes that peak-hour bonuses are now rare many orders pay only a base fare that hardly covers fuel and mobile recharge costs.

**3. Unstable Working Conditions:**

Gig work offers flexibility, but at the cost of predictability. She finds herself working long hours sometimes 10-12 hours a day just to meet minimum earnings. There are no benefits such as sick leave, insurance (except basic accident coverage) or long-term job security.

**4. Gender-Specific Issues:**

As one of the few women delivery partners in her area, she faces safety concerns and occasional harassment. She prefers to work during the day and avoids late-night deliveries, limiting her earning potential compared to male counterparts.

**5. Platform Control and Algorithmic Management:**

She feels that the app's algorithm is not transparent. She doesn't understand why some workers receive more orders despite being online for the same duration. The lack of transparency and recourse leads to frustration and feelings of helplessness.

**Resilience and Agency:**

Despite these issues, she continues gig work because few alternatives. Traditional employment offers little flexibility and even lowers pay. She has started organizing informal WhatsApp groups with other

women workers to share experiences and navigate safety issues together. She believes that worker representation and better regulation could improve conditions in the long run.

**Structural Reflection:**

She reflects the broader macroeconomic context highlights high unemployment particularly among the youth a rapidly growing informal digital labour sector. The gig economy, while providing livelihood in times of crisis is functioning in a deregulated environment labour oversupply is structurally weakening collective bargaining power and driving down wages.

**Her perspective underscores a pressing issue:**

While platform-based gig work is often celebrated for its flexibility and ease of access, it simultaneously masks the precarity and structural imbalance that workers especially women faces.

Her experience exemplifies the dual realities of the Indian gig economy. On one hand, it provides crucial income-generating opportunities for individuals excluded from formal employment. On the other hand, it reveals a fragile ecosystem oversupply of labour and algorithm-driven management place enormous pressure on workers' well-being and income security. Her story is a strong call for policy interventions that ensure fair wages; safe working conditions the inclusion of gig workers in social protection frameworks.

**Case Study: Mrs. Karthika – A 38-Year-Old Uber Auto Driver Navigating the Platform Economy:**

Mrs. Karthika, a 38-year-old resident of Chennai, represents a new wave of working class women entering platform-based employment. As an Uber Auto driver, she challenges traditional gender roles while leveraging technology to ensure financial stability for her family. Her story reflects how the emergence of the gig economy and digital platforms is transforming livelihoods and expanding opportunities for women from diverse social and economic backgrounds.

**Background:**

Hailing from a lower-middle-class family, she had minimal exposure to technology until her early 30's. Married at the age of 22 and a mother of two, she initially worked as a tailor from home to supplement her husband's income. However, the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 caused a sharp decline in tailoring work, pushing her to explore other avenues. Her husband was an auto-rickshaw driver himself, encouraged her to learn driving and apply for a commercial license.

With the support of a local NGO that trained women in driving and digital literacy. She acquired the skills to enrol as a partner with Uber in 2021.

**The Role of Technology in Economic Inclusion:**

Her entry into the Uber platform illustrates how technology can act as an enabler of economic participation. The Uber app provided:

- Flexible work hours, allowing her to manage household responsibilities.
- Digital payments, offered transparency and security.
- Customer ratings, building trust and accountability in her profession.
- Navigation tools minimized dependence on local knowledge and reduced risks associated with unknown routes.

This technological mediation helped her to avoid traditional entry barriers in male-dominated professions like public transport.



**Platform Work and Gendered Experiences:**

Despite these advancements, her experience shaped by her identity as a woman in a traditionally male space. She faces:

- Gender bias from both passengers and fellow drivers.
- Safety concerns, especially during night shifts.
- Platform invisibility, as Uber does not provide specific support or protection mechanisms for women drivers.

Still, she finds a sense of autonomy and pride in her work. She feels proud because earns more than previous self-employment.

**Expanding Platform-Based Opportunities for Women:**

She is also aware of how digital platforms are opening avenues beyond ride-hailing. She speaks of friends who use:

- E-commerce platforms like Meesho to sell sarees and cosmetics from home.
- E-commerce via WhatsApp and Instagram to market homemade snacks, jewellery and handicrafts.
- Freelance platforms for tutoring, graphic design, or home-based data entry.

These developments signify a growing trend in women especially from semi-urban and urban lower-income households are leveraging technology to blend domestic roles with income-generating activities. Her journey from a home-based tailor to an uber Auto driver underscores the transformative potential of technology in reshaping labour markets. Platform work offers women new opportunities, but it also reproduces existing social inequalities if not carefully regulated. The gig economy can be both empowering and precarious, demanding policy responses that ensure fair wages, social security and gender-sensitive protections.

Her experience highlights the intersection of class, gender and technology in the evolving labour landscape. While platform work democratizes access to jobs, it also necessitates critical reflection on platform governance, algorithmic control informalization. For women, especially from marginalized groups, the platform economy can serve as a double-edged sword offering freedom but lacking long-term guarantees.

The online gig work and e-commerce opportunities facilitates women can work from home. Home-based work allows women to balance domestic responsibilities with income generation. But there's also a cautionary note that it evidence suggests into it. Women confront a vast amount of time poverty already, that the demands on them when they are at home are significant that then are adding onto that this expectation that not only do they handle a disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities but that they also. There are implications to changing your place of residence into your workplace that also needs to be acknowledged. Finally, the tendency to keep women in home-based work can backfire in countries with significant patriarchal norms.

**Suggestions and Recommendations:**

In recent times in India, it becomes straightforward for families; the women can stay at home and generate an income. They don't need to go out into public spaces. At the same time, we want to increase female labour force participation by creating opportunities for home-based work which facilitates by the platforms. There is a need to empower women with real choices by reducing their time poverty and giving them a natural alternative to go out of the house. Women are more attracted because of its

flexibility. The gig work promises flexibility actually point out women are end up fighting heat exhaustion and traffic.

This study understands that it aims at promoting increased participation of women in India's gig economy.

- **Dispute Redressal System:**

In case of a dispute between registered parties, the platforms claim no obligation to become involved and are not liable for any damages or demands. The only provisions offered are cost-effective, unbiased and quick ways of solving disputes and/or redressal via arbitration or mediation instead of litigation. For feedback resolution, the platforms claim final authority on the action taken, without being obliged to any liability. Corrective actions can range from account termination to content modification or deletion. The lack of a free dispute-resolution system can lead to ambiguity in the process and extra expenses incurred in that way. Moreover, the end decision can still be influenced by the more powerful amongst the parties. Therefore, the threat of retaliation through negative or incorrect feedback might prevent workers from raising legitimate disputes.

The establishment of a transparent in-house dispute resolution system would be quite useful. The disputing parties could then present their cases without the fear of an absolute final call; they otherwise would not be able to contest. The establishment of a dispute redressal body would be especially profitable for women service providers.

Gig workers, in general, shy away from raising disputes not only because of the lengthy processes involved but because of the fear of a consequential fall in ratings. For a lot of women workers, gig work is the primary source of income, they cannot afford to lose. Consequently, they do not even raise disputes. The need for dispute redressal especially needs to be seen in the context of restrictions on women's movement. Facilitating women's inclusion in gig work necessitates the provision of an online in-house transparent dispute redressal system by the platform; both parties could complain if there is any problem that emerges during the service.

- **Provision of Privacy, Safety and Security:**

- No clear legislations or institutions to comprehensively regulate gig workers.
- Ensure the cyber and digital safety of the service providers.
- Self-defence training can also be made compulsory for all gig workers to empower women workers to ensure their safety if they find themselves in unsafe spaces while out for work.
- Including an emergency button in service apps could genuinely save lives especially for women provide who may encounter unpredictable or dangerous environment in the job.
- Need to include an emergency button in the applications used by these service professionals, using will terminate the service and send an SOS message to both the emergency contact of the service professional and the platform. In response, emergency transportation would immediately be dispatched to shift the service provider to a safe space. Such a mechanism is especially important for women workers, might find them in an unsafe space and low connectivity areas during the start of the service and till completion of the duty.

- **Prevention of Workplace Harassment for Gig Workers:**
- The term “employee” is more narrowly interpreted, and many gig workers—like app-based drivers, delivery partners, or freelance beauticians—are often classified as independent contractors, not employees.
- This classification allows platforms to argue that they are not legally required to set up Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) or provide redressal under the POSH Act.
- **Social Security and Employment Benefits:**
- To set up a national, state and district level of social security board for gig workers to makes provisions for the formulation of social welfare schemes for them, such as provident fund, employment injury benefit, housing, educational for children, skill upgrade of workers, funeral assistance and old-age homes.
- Gig work must be included in a new category in the NSSO surveys to accurately ascertain the percentage of gig workers in the Indian economy. Data pertaining to the gig economy is essential to recognise the actual extent of gig work in India as well to understand the labour force is employed.

### Conclusion:

An emergent feminist digital labour agenda, to show an explicit engagement with gendered relations of labour uneven gender divisions of care opens up new worker-based understandings of ‘digital labour’. The original analysis has identified women’s varied motivations for turning to digital labour platforms new work–care ‘flexibilities’ achieved and gendered constraints on worker’s abilities to compete for gigs and to remain visible within platform algorithms. The analysis also highlights urgent issues of health and safety commonly experienced on platforms, but largely undocumented.

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