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# Women's Participation in the Gig Economy: Opportunities and Challenges in the Marathwada Region of Maharashtra (India)

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**Abstract**

The gig economy has emerged as a new form of employment that offers flexibility, autonomy, and income opportunities through digital platforms such as Swiggy, UrbanClap, Ola, and Meesho. While this sector has created new avenues of work for women in India, their participation remains limited, particularly in semi-urban and rural regions such as Marathwada. This study examines the socio-economic determinants, challenges, and opportunities associated with women's participation in the gig economy in Aurangabad, Jalna, and Beed districts. Using primary data from 200 respondents and secondary sources from NITI Aayog, ILO, and EPW reports, the research analyses patterns of digital inclusion, skill level, and income generation. Findings indicate that although gig work provides women with time flexibility and self-employment prospects, barriers such as low digital literacy, income instability, and social constraints still restrict their economic empowerment. The paper suggests policy interventions to enhance skill training, social security, and awareness to make the gig economy more inclusive for women in Maharashtra.

**Keywords:** Gig economy, women empowerment, digital labour, Marathwada, socio-economic participation, Maharashtra.

## Introduction

The twenty-first-century labour market is undergoing a radical transformation with the rise of the gig and platform economy. Unlike traditional full-time employment, the gig economy is characterised by short-term contracts, on-demand tasks, and freelance engagements facilitated by digital platforms. In India, this model has expanded rapidly due to internet penetration, mobile connectivity, and the growth of digital marketplaces. According to NITI Aayog (2022), India's gig and platform workforce is expected to grow to 23.5 million by the year 2030. However, women's share in this segment remains significantly lower than that of men, reflecting persistent gender inequality in the labour market.

The gig economy is often promoted as a space for women's economic empowerment because it offers flexibility, remote work options, and income diversification. Nevertheless, several studies (ILO, 2021; EPW, 2023) highlight the complex realities of female gig workers — including low wages, lack of social security, and unstable job tenure. For women in semi-urban regions like Marathwada, these issues are intensified by limited digital skills and socio-cultural constraints.

Marathwada is a historically backward region of Maharashtra where female workforce participation has always been low. With the emergence of digital platforms and online marketplaces, new employment

avenues have appeared for women in urban centres such as Aurangabad and semi-urban areas like Beed and Jalna. Women are engaged as beauticians, tailors, food delivery assistants, online sellers, and data entry freelancers. Yet, their access to these opportunities depends on education, family support, technological literacy, and social attitudes toward women's work.

Understanding these factors is critical to formulate policies for inclusive growth and gender equality. Hence, this study focuses on the Marathwada region to analyse how women participate in the gig economy, what challenges they face, and what policy measures can enhance their economic empowerment. By combining primary survey data from 200 respondents with secondary reports, the study seeks to fill the gap between digital opportunity and social reality for women workers in emerging labour markets.

**Objectives of the Study**

The main objective of this research is to analyse the socio-economic determinants, opportunities, and challenges of women's participation in the gig economy within the Marathwada region of Maharashtra.

**Specific objectives include:**

1. To examine the nature and extent of women's participation in various gig and platform-based activities in Aurangabad, Jalna, and Beed districts.
2. To identify the major socio-economic factors influencing women's involvement in the gig economy — including education, income, family background, digital literacy, and mobility.
3. To analyse the opportunities provided by gig platforms in terms of flexibility, autonomy, and income generation for women.
4. To study the challenges faced by women in the gig economy such as job insecurity, lack of social protection, and social stigma.
5. To suggest suitable policy measures for increasing women's participation and empowerment in the gig economy of Maharashtra.

**Hypotheses**

The study is guided by the following hypotheses:

H1: Women's participation in the gig economy is positively related to their level of education and digital literacy.

H2: Family support and social acceptance significantly influence women's willingness to engage in gig work.

H3: Women perceive gig work as an opportunity for flexible income generation but face economic instability and low social protection.

H4: There exists a significant difference between urban and semi-urban women in Marathwada regarding access to digital platforms and earnings.

**Review of Literature**

The gig economy and women's participation have been widely discussed in contemporary research, both globally and in the Indian context. This section summarises relevant studies and identifies the research gaps that the present study aims to address.

**Global Context**

Scholars such as De Stefano (2016) and Graham et al. (2017) have described the gig economy as a transformative labour system built around digital platforms. These studies highlight that while gig work provides flexibility and autonomy, it also leads to precarious employment and lack of job security. Berg et al. (2018) found that women in online labour markets often earn less than men for similar tasks, pointing toward gender-based income disparities. Hunt and Samman (2019) in their UN Women report observed that women tend to use platform work to supplement household income rather than as a primary livelihood, mainly due to care responsibilities.

**Indian Context**

India's gig economy has grown rapidly over the past decade with the expansion of e-commerce, digital services, and app-based work. According to NITI Aayog's report "India's Booming Gig and Platform Economy" (2022), women constitute about 23 per cent of the gig workforce, but their participation is concentrated in low-skill, low-pay sectors. The International Labour Organization (ILO 2021) points out that women gig workers in India face issues of job instability, absence of maternity benefits, and lack of access to credit or insurance schemes.

A study by Sharma and Mehta (2020) found that although digital platforms offer flexibility, social norms, household responsibilities, and limited mobility hinder women's active participation. Similarly, D'Cruz and Noronha (2021) observed that women platform workers in India often experience customer bias, safety concerns, and lack of grievance redressal systems.

**Regional Studies and Marathwada**

There are only a few studies focusing on Maharashtra or Marathwada. Joshi (2021) examined urban women entrepreneurs using social-media-based gig work in Pune and Mumbai, concluding that digital skills and internet access were key enablers of participation. However, in semi-urban regions, women's involvement remains low due to economic backwardness and limited technological awareness.

Reports from Maharashtra State Skill Development Society (MSSDS, 2022) indicate that rural women's digital literacy is below 40 per cent, which restricts their ability to take up online gig work. In the Marathwada region — particularly in Aurangabad, Jalna, and Beed — gendered cultural norms, safety concerns, and lack of formal training centres further limit women's access to such opportunities.

**Identified Research Gaps**

1. Most existing studies concentrate on metropolitan areas like Delhi, Bengaluru, or Mumbai; very few focus on backward regions such as Marathwada.
2. Quantitative evidence based on primary data from women gig workers in semi-urban areas is lacking.
3. There is insufficient discussion on how socio-cultural barriers intersect with digital literacy and economic empowerment in smaller towns.
4. The role of local policy and social awareness programmes in enhancing women's inclusion in digital labour platforms remains under-researched.

**Conclusion of Review**

The literature collectively shows that the gig economy has potential to empower women but that social norms, digital divides, and structural inequalities continue to limit this potential. Therefore, the present

study bridges this gap by providing empirical evidence from Marathwada — a region that reflects both the promise and the challenges of India's digital labour transition.

## Research Methodology

### Research Design

The present study follows a descriptive and analytical design. It combines quantitative primary survey data with qualitative insights from field observations and secondary sources. The focus area—Aurangabad, Jalna, and Beed districts—was selected purposively because these districts represent the socio-economic diversity of the Marathwada region.

### Population and Sample Size

The target population comprised women engaged (or willing to engage) in gig or platform-based work such as beauty services, tailoring, online sales, food delivery, tuition, or freelancing.
A sample of 200 respondents was selected through stratified random sampling, covering 80 from Aurangabad, 70 from Beed, and 50 from Jalna.

### Data Sources

Primary Data: Structured questionnaire including demographic profile, education, income, digital skill, nature of gig work, challenges, and perceptions.
Secondary Data: NITI Aayog (2022), ILO (2021), EPW (2023), MSSDS (2022), Census of India, and relevant journals and reports.

### Tools and Techniques

**Statistical Tools:** Descriptive statistics, percentages, mean scores, and correlation analysis.
**Software:** SPSS and Excel used for tabulation and chart representation.
**Reliability Test:** Cronbach's alpha (0.82) confirmed internal consistency of the questionnaire.

### Variables Used

Independent variables: Education, family income, marital status, digital literacy, family support.
Dependent variables: Level of participation in gig work, income earned, and satisfaction index.

### Limitations

The study focuses only on three districts of Marathwada; hence the findings cannot be generalised to all India. Responses are self-reported and may contain minor biases.

## Data Analysis and Discussion

### 5.1 Socio-Economic Profile of Respondents

| Particulars | Category | No. of Respondents | Percentage |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Age** | 18-25 | 42 | 21% |
| | 26-35 | 88 | 44% |
| | 36-45 | 52 | 26% |
| **Above** | 45 | 18 | 9% |
| **Education** | Secondary | 60 | 30% |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Graduate | 94 | 47% |
| | Post Graduate | 46 | 23% |
| **Marital Status** | Married | 128 | 64% |
| | Unmarried | 72 | 36% |
| **Occupation before gig work** | Homemaker | 90 | 45% |
| | Private Job | 48 | 24% |
| | Self-employed | 62 | 31% |

**Primary survey data 2025**

The table indicates that nearly 70 per cent of participants are below 35 years, showing that gig work appeals primarily to the younger, educated generation. Almost half were homemakers prior to joining gig platforms, reflecting that gig work provides a transition from unpaid domestic labour to income-earning activities.

**Nature of Work and Income Levels**

| Type of Gig Activity | Examples | Average Monthly Income (INR) | Percentage of Women |
|---|---|---|---|
| Online sales / reselling | Meesho, WhatsApp Business | 6,000 – 10,000 | 32 |
| Beauty and wellness services | UrbanClap, freelance parlour | 8,000 – 12,000 | 28 |
| Tuition / content work | Online classes, typing | 5,000 – 9,000 | 20 |
| Delivery / support work | Swiggy, Amazon Flex | 10,000 – 15,000 | 10 |
| Other freelancing | Design, digital marketing | 7,000 – 12,000 | 10 |

**Primary source 2025**

Average income is ₹ 9 000 – 11 000 per month, supplementary rather than primary household income. Women prefer activities that can be performed from home or require minimal mobility.

**Determinants of Participation**

Correlation analysis shows:

Education (r = 0.58) and digital literacy (r = 0.63) positively influence gig participation.

Family support (r = 0.54) significantly affects continuity in gig work.

Income stability and social recognition have lower coefficients (r = 0.32, 0.28), implying persistent barriers.

These findings confirm Hypotheses H1 and H2 that education and social support are key enablers for women's gig work participation in Marathwada.

**5.4 Major Challenges Identified (by percentage of respondents)**

| Challenge | Percentage (%) |
|---|---|
| Low and irregular income | 68 |
| Lack of digital training | 62 |
| Absence of social security / insurance | 55 |

| | |
|---|---|
| Family pressure or social stigma | 48 |
| Safety concerns / mobility issues | 44 |
| Customer bias or harassment | 31 |

**Primary source 2025**

These results indicate that economic and digital barriers are the dominant constraints for female gig workers. Social and cultural restrictions remain prominent in Beed and Jalna, where mobility of women is still limited.

**Opportunities and Positive Impacts**

Despite challenges, a majority (72 %) reported that gig work enhanced their confidence and decision-making ability. About 65 % stated that it helped them contribute to family income without leaving home. More than half felt that gig work allowed them to balance household duties and professional life.

Qualitative interviews revealed improvements in self-esteem, peer networking, and awareness of digital tools. However, many women expressed a desire for training centres and secure payment systems to sustain their participation.

**5.6 Urban vs Semi-Urban Differences**

Urban respondents (Aurangabad) showed higher digital skills and average monthly income (₹ 11 500) compared to semi-urban Beed and Jalna (₹ 8 300). This confirms Hypothesis $H_4$ that location significantly influences access to platforms and earnings. Urban women were more likely to own smartphones and have bank accounts linked to digital payments.

**Discussion**

The findings reveal a dual nature of the gig economy for women in Marathwada. On one hand, it offers a path toward financial inclusion and flexible employment; on the other, it perpetuates informality and economic insecurity. The results align with ILO (2021) and EPW (2023) studies that highlight the need for gender-sensitive policy frameworks.

To make the gig economy a true agent of empowerment, government and private platforms must invest in digital skill training, safe mobility, social insurance schemes, and inclusive algorithms that ensure fair pay and recognition for women workers.

**Major Findings and Policy Suggestions**

**Major Findings**

1. **Age and Education:** Most participants (65%) were below 35 years and nearly half were graduates. Education and digital literacy showed a strong positive relationship with gig participation.
2. **Motivation Factors:** Women joined gig platforms mainly for supplementary income, flexibility, and work-from-home convenience.
3. **Income Pattern:** Average monthly income ranged between ₹ 8 000 – 11 000, with urban respondents earning more than those from semi-urban areas. Income instability was a key concern.
4. **Socio-Cultural Barriers:** Family pressure, lack of mobility, and social stigma restricted women's full-time engagement, especially in Beed and Jalna.

5. **Digital Divide:** Only about 40% of respondents possessed moderate to high digital skills. Limited access to smartphones and internet connectivity further constrained participation.
6. **6. Safety and Security Issues:** Respondents reported concerns regarding late-hour work, customer behaviour, and lack of grievance mechanisms.
7. **Perceived Empowerment:** Despite barriers, 70% of respondents acknowledged improvement in self-confidence, decision-making, and financial contribution to households.

**Policy Suggestions**

1. **Digital Skill Training:** Establish district-level digital literacy centres exclusively for women to enhance employability on gig platforms.
2. **Social Security Mechanisms:** Include gig workers under ESIC or new portable insurance schemes ensuring maternity and health benefits.
3. **Financial Inclusion:** Facilitate easy access to micro-credit and digital banking for women freelancers and home-based entrepreneurs.
4. **Awareness and Counselling:** Conduct awareness campaigns to sensitise families and communities about the legitimacy of gig work for women.
5. **Safety and Regulation:** Government should frame Gig Work Code of Conduct ensuring safe working conditions, gender-neutral pay, and anti-harassment systems.
6. **Skill–Market Linkage:** Collaborate with local universities and NGOs to integrate gig-economy skill modules (digital marketing, data entry, design) into vocational courses.
7. **Platform Accountability:** Encourage platforms to adopt fair algorithms, transparent payment systems, and grievance redressal portals in regional languages.

**Conclusion**

The study concludes that the gig economy has created significant opportunities for women in the Marathwada region by providing flexible, accessible avenues of employment. However, these opportunities remain limited by low digital literacy, income insecurity, and patriarchal social structures.

The dual character of the gig economy—empowerment through flexibility versus exploitation through informality—defines the current stage of women's participation in this sector.

For the gig economy to become a true vehicle of inclusive growth, both the government and digital platforms must adopt gender-sensitive policies that promote training, safety, and social protection. Strengthening institutional support, expanding rural digital infrastructure, and recognising women gig workers as a legitimate part of the formal workforce will ensure that the benefits of technological change reach every corner of Maharashtra, including Marathwada.

Future research can expand this work by incorporating comparative studies across regions, longitudinal analysis of income stability, and case studies of successful women gig entrepreneurs.

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