



Women In Gig Economy

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Abstract: The gig economy has experienced remarkable growth in India over the past decade, propelled by several key factors like widespread availability of mobile devices with internet connectivity facilitating last-mile access for platform workers to connect with customers. The proliferation of app-based technologies in the past five years has further accelerated this growth trajectory. India's booming gig economy is drawing millennials, including women, with its promise of alternative employment avenues. For women workers, the gig economy holds particular significance as digital platforms are seen as potential vehicles for increasing their participation in the labor market. India has long grappled with the issue of low and declining female labor force participation, with rates among the lowest in South Asia. Against this backdrop, the rapid expansion of India's gig economy could help alleviate some of the barriers women face by offering flexibility to balance care obligations while engaging in work.

Despite the increasing participation of women in the gig economy, many of the available jobs remain concentrated in traditionally female-dominated and low-wage sectors such as domestic work, caregiving, beauty, and wellness. Gig work presents a multitude of challenges for women, including limited access to the digital economy and concerns regarding security and safety, which hinder their full engagement in this sector. Addressing these challenges is essential to ensure that women can fully benefit from and contribute to the opportunities presented by the gig economy.

Index Terms - Gig economy, women, challenges of gig economy

INTRODUCTION

The gig economy refers to a market system where individuals provide services on a short-term basis through digital platforms, connecting with businesses (Dr., Rashmi, Subbiah, 2023). This model has gained traction due to technological advancements, enabling flexible work arrangements and cost-effective solutions for businesses. Gig work is often characterized by low pay, lack of benefits, and shifting risks from employers to workers, leading to social and economic challenges (Ivona, et al 2023). The gig economy accommodates non-traditional jobs, offering flexibility for both workers and firms, especially during economic downturns (The GIG Economy – Result of the Labour Market Platformization. Económica(2023)). Internet-

based platforms play a crucial role in facilitating connections between service providers and consumers, shaping work conditions and relationships in this evolving economic landscape Fadillah, et al(2019). Overall, the gig economy presents opportunities for innovation but also raises concerns regarding worker well-being and societal implications.

WOMEN IN WORK FORCE

India's female workforce participation rate is alarmingly low, with less than 20% of women engaged in paid jobs, a trend that has been declining over the past two decades, according to a report by India Today (June 2023). The International Labour Organisation (ILO) reports a significant gender gap in employability, with only 19.2% of women compared to 70.1% of men in the labor force.

An Indian Express report suggests that increased involvement of women in entrepreneurship could substantially boost India's GDP by \$0.7 trillion by 2025. By establishing and managing their own businesses, women entrepreneurs not only create job opportunities for other women but also serve as inspirations for them to enter the workforce, potentially driving significant economic growth.

Despite the desire expressed by 52% of women in India to work, barriers persist, leading to a decline in female labor participation rates across various social classes, religions, and age groups, including rural women who often depend on income the most.

Data from the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE) reveals a sharp increase in rural unemployment rates to 9.2% in February 2022, while urban areas experienced a reversal, reaching 7.5%. However, even with these fluctuations, one in four urban women aged 15-29 struggle to secure employment.

A report by Hero Vired titled 'Women in Modern Workplaces in India' highlights that 70% of women face challenges with work-life balance, seeing it as the main obstacle to career growth. Drawing from a survey of 200,000 women, the report emphasizes the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to address these issues and facilitate greater female participation in the workforce.

GIG ECONOMY AND TRADITIONAL EMPLOYMENT

The gig economy has significantly impacted traditional employment by introducing new modes of work arrangements. It has provided opportunities for flexible work, reshaping labour markets and creating millions of jobs across various sectors. However, gig workers often face challenges such as lack of welfare protection, unstable income, and health concerns. The gig economy has redefined the relationship between workers, customers, and employers through digital intermediation, leading to inequity and unfairness in labour practices. Moreover, the gig economy's growth has been fuelled by rapid digitization, leading to a paradigm shift in the workforce and working systems. Overall, while the gig economy offers flexibility and independence, it also highlights the need for better worker protection and inclusive policies to ensure sustainable development and worker well-being.

The gig economy offers several advantages over traditional employment. Firstly, it provides more flexibility and freedom for workers, allowing them to choose when and where they work Chen, Yang. (2023). Secondly, the gig economy can contribute to economic growth by creating job opportunities and potentially adding to the GDP Wouter, Verheyen. (2023). Additionally, gig work can help in achieving Sustainable Development Goals by lowering entry barriers, facilitating job creation, and increasing work flexibility (Deepak, Agrawal., et al 2022) Moreover, the gig economy allows for independence and flexibility, redefining the labour market and offering opportunities for self-employment (G., Nioradze. 2022). Lastly, for the older generation, the gig economy can provide social security, integration into a new labour reality, and opportunities to improve well-being.

GIG ECONOMY AND WOMEN

The gig economy presents opportunities for women to engage in flexible work arrangements and entrepreneurship (Ali, Mohamad, Mouazen.ET AL 2023). Research in various countries like Lebanon, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and India highlights how women are leveraging gig platforms for financial inclusion, entrepreneurial ventures, and work flexibility (Alka, Agarwal., et al 2023). In India, women are actively participating in gig work sectors such as domestic work, beauty work, cab driving, and food delivery, reshaping traditional labour dynamics. Platforms like Meesho in India have enabled women, especially homemakers, to enter the commercial realm by reselling products, overcoming social barriers, and accessing digital opportunities. Overall, the gig economy provides women with avenues for economic empowerment, skill development, and increased autonomy in their work pursuits.

The gig economy has significantly influenced women's financial independence by providing opportunities for supplemental income and entrepreneurship (M., C., Fernández, Díez., 2023) Women engaging in gig work, whether online or offline, have found avenues to enhance their financial autonomy (Caroline, Bruckner., Jonathan, Barry, Forman 2021). Platforms like Meesho in India have enabled women, especially homemakers, to enter the commercial realm and negotiate social permissions to work from home (Santosh, Kumar, Yadav. 2023). Research in Lebanon indicates a positive relationship between the entrepreneurial ecosystem, gig economy, and women's entrepreneurship, highlighting the impact on women's decision to become entrepreneurs. (Nur,2022).

CHALLENGES WOMEN FACE IN THE GIG ECONOMY

1. FINANCIAL INSTABILITY

One of the primary hurdles faced by gig workers is the irregularity of their income. Their earnings tend to vary from one month to another, posing difficulties in budgeting and anticipating expenses. Unlike traditional employees, gig workers often lack benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans, or paid time off. Consequently, they must take full responsibility for managing their own benefits and savings. Additionally, gig workers are heavily influenced by market demand and competition, which can result in periods of unemployment or insufficient work opportunities. This unpredictability makes it challenging for them to maintain a consistent income flow. Freelancers and independent contractors also bear the responsibility of handling their own taxes, which involves keeping track of expenses, deductions, and making quarterly tax

payments. Without proper foresight and planning, they may find themselves burdened with significant tax bills or penalties.

2. ACCESS TO UTILITIES

Female workers in the platform economy, particularly cab drivers and food delivery agents, often rely on public toilets for restroom facilities. However, beauty workers and domestic workers encounter different challenges regarding access to toilets, given that their worksites are often in other people's homes. The availability of restroom facilities depends on whether customers permit the workers to use their washrooms. Unfortunately, biases and discriminatory attitudes from customers may hinder access to essential utilities such as toilets, water, or even food, creating a difficult and potentially unfair situation for these workers.

3. ACCESS TO DIGITIZATION

Limited access to internet services and digital technology presents a barrier to women's participation in the gig economy. While smartphone ownership among women in India has increased, it still lags behind men. Economic and socio-cultural factors contribute to this gap, particularly in rural areas where women face greater challenges accessing digital devices and internet services. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of online connectivity for women, driven by factors such as online education, video calls, and income opportunities. However, further research is needed to understand the implications of increased smartphone usage for women's engagement in the gig economy. Overall, unequal access to smartphones perpetuates gender disparities in gig economy participation, with urban women having better access to in-person service platforms compared to rural women who may lack internet access altogether.

4. DISPARITY IN PAY

Studies on the gender pay gap in online web-based platforms present varied findings. ILO surveys suggest a gender pay gap exists on average. Female online workers tend to earn slightly less on average than males, especially in developed countries. However, in developing countries, women's average hourly earnings can be higher, possibly due to higher education levels. Gender pay gaps persist in some developed countries, like the US, where male app-based taxi drivers earn around 7% more than females. Safety concerns limit women's access to work, particularly during night hours. Despite increasing female participation in the gig economy, reports indicate women are often paid less than men for the same jobs.

5. SAFETY AND SECURITY

According to global surveys conducted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), a significant majority of workers in the app-based taxi and delivery sectors express safety concerns about their work. Specifically, approximately 83% of workers in the app-based taxi sector and 89% in the app-based delivery sector reported safety concerns, which often relate to issues such as road safety, theft, and physical assault.

Furthermore, in countries where women were included in the survey sample, a higher proportion of women compared to men reported experiencing discrimination or harassment in the workplace. Additionally, women were more likely to be aware of instances of discrimination or harassment faced by their peers in these sectors.

These findings underscore the need for enhanced measures to ensure the safety and protection of workers, particularly addressing gender-specific challenges and promoting a safer work environment for all.

6. OTHER CHALLENGES

Women engaging in platform work encounter numerous challenges. These workers grapple with issues such as insufficient access to non-wage benefits, concerns about safety, labor rights, income stability, opportunities for career advancement, intensified competition, limited bargaining power, and restrictions on forming associations. Additionally, there is a significant lack of safety nets for gig workers in general. A vast majority of service providers do not receive any additional benefits aside from health insurance. Moreover, of respondents express dissatisfaction with the absence of maternity benefits, while are unhappy with the incentive and increment system.

CONCLUSION

While gig work in India is often perceived as offering women the advantage of flexibility and choice in employment, it comes with its own set of entrenched challenges. Women actively participate in India's thriving gig economy, attracted by the flexibility it offers in terms of work hours and options. However, they also grapple with persistent issues such as unpredictable income, limited avenues for career advancement, a lack of bargaining power, occupational segregation, and the pervasive impact of automated ratings systems within the gig economy. Moreover, the absence of social protection mechanisms presents a growing concern for these workers. Despite these obstacles, women remain the primary beneficiaries of the gig ecosystem. Looking ahead, the gig economy is poised to expand beyond urban areas, drawing in even more women as participants. To address the challenges faced by female gig workers, it's crucial to foster dialogue between policymakers and platform operators. This collaborative approach can facilitate discussions on pressing issues related to platform work and ensure access to decent work for women within the gig space. By working together, policymakers and platforms can enact measures to improve the working conditions and livelihoods of female gig workers, thereby fostering a more inclusive and equitable gig economy.

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