Global perspectives on women, work, and digital labour platforms:

A collection of articles from around the world on women's experiences of digital labour platforms

Digital Future Society

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GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN,
WORK AND DIGITAL LABOUR PLATFORMS

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Foreword

Global perspectives on women, work, and digital labour platforms is a collection of 10 articles about key issues concerning women engaged in digital platform work. The articles have been written by 26 authors based around the world. Most of the authors belong to the Gender and Gig Economy Working Group, which is a collective of researchers, analysts and practitioners working on the broad topic of 'gender and the gig economy' that comes together online every month, to learn, reflect and collaborate.

We first had the idea to set up the working group at the end of 2020, when we both met and had several conversations about our own research. These conversations noted the gaps in the literature on the gig economy in highly feminised sectors such as domestic work, and more generally, a lack of attention to gender dynamics in research on workers' experience of gig work, including how gender interacts with other intersecting inequalities based, for instance, on age, education or location. We both knew of researchers trying to fill these gaps in different countries and so decided to set up an online, international working group.

Over the last year, the group has grown organically to now include 64 members from 16 countries. The sessions so far have covered a wide range of topics. Some of these include domestic worker collectivisation and cooperative platforms in India and South Africa, the experience of women gig workers working for food delivery apps in Argentina, and the challenges found in doing qualitative and quantitative research including finding cleaners and carers who are willing to take part in

interviews. Many of the articles in this series contain research
presented by different members throughout the year. This
collection is a way of capturing on paper some of the insights
and discussions held on Zoom every month and shared from
each of our homes and workspaces across the globe.

As the articles in this series highlight, platform-mediated
work can offer women important opportunities to enter (or
re-enter) the labour market and earn an income. Yet, around
the globe, significant deficits in quality work remain in the
platform economy, that need addressing by policymakers
and platform companies in partnership with workers'
organisations.

We hope therefore the collection will provide useful insights
for those working in and regulating platform work and help
raise awareness about the pressing need for more research
and analysis from a gender intersectional perspective. Also,
for the gig economy to be anything other than a new stop
on the continuum of the gender-based inequalities found in
traditional labour markets, there is an urgent need for more
gender-sensitive platform and regulatory policies.

For this, as coordinators of the Gender and Gig Economy
Working Group, we would like to thank all the authors for their
timely and relevant contributions to this debate. We would
also like to thank Digital Future Society for supporting the
publication of this collection of articles as part of its efforts to
bring a gender perspective to all of its work and give visibility
to women and their experiences across the digital economy.

Edited by Olivia Blanchard, Carina Lopes and Patrick Devaney

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By

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Introduction

Over the last ten years, the rise of digital platform work has quickly become one of the most significant developments in the world of work. In many cities, it is now possible to order food or a taxi and find a cleaner, nanny, or plumber through an app. Individuals and businesses anywhere in the world can now go online and within minutes find freelancers to remotely perform numerous tasks for them such as designing a website, translating a legal document, moderating social media content, tagging images or building a machine learning model.

The expansion of digital labour platforms across multiple sectors and countries lies at the intersection of digital innovation and changing employment trends. The rise and penetration of mobile phone technology and the internet, advancements in artificial intelligence, and the expansion of the data economy have fuelled the expansion of digital platforms including those that mediate work. At the same time, the deregulation of labour markets and the increasing externalisation and fragmentation of work have provided, and continue to provide, fertile ground for the growth of digital platform work.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), between 2010 and 2020 the number of digital labour platforms multiplied by five, and they have become even more prominent since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.[1] Meanwhile, governments and legislators in many countries

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[1] In the case of online web-based platform work (freelance and microtask) the distribution of digital labour platforms is notably unequal with revenues and clients concentrated in a few countries in the Global North and the workforce predominantly concentrated in the South.

across the globe are addressing the challenges presented by the fast-paced growth of platform labour and introducing new regulations on issues such as the employment relationship, algorithmic management and social protection.

The rise of digital labour platforms has attracted the attention of the media and public, regulators, and academics. Numerous reports, research papers, and media articles have been produced over the last few years. Public debate around the advantages and disadvantages of platform work was further revived during the periods of strict lockdown at the start of the pandemic when riders working in the gig economy were seen cycling empty streets to deliver items ordered online or through an app by customers confined at home.

Yet, despite the vast amount of literature and commentary produced over the last few years, with some exceptions, there continues to be a general and persistent knowledge gap about the gender dynamics that exist in the platform economy and about women's experiences of platform work across different economic and social realities.

Much of the literature and research on platform work has focused on male-dominated sectors such as ride-hailing and delivery. Even still, little is known about the experiences of women who work as riders or drivers in the platform economy or the barriers they face. Furthermore, platform work has expanded and is likely to continue expanding into traditionally female-dominated sectors such as domestic work, home care and beauty services. Yet again, the academic literature has paid relatively little attention to these sectors. We also lack an understanding of gendered experiences of online web-based platform work, including on both freelance and microtask platforms.[2]

This collection of articles responds to the need to bring a gender intersectional perspective into research, policymaking, and the operational design and labour practices of the platforms themselves. The collection contains 10 articles written by 26 authors based in Argentina, France, Germany, India, Kenya, Spain, South Africa, Switzerland, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Most of the authors belong to the Gender and Gig Economy Working Group, which is a collective of researchers, analysts and practitioners working on the topic of 'gender and the gig economy' that

comes together online, every month, to learn, reflect and collaborate. The collection covers a wide range of themes and countries across the globe and focuses on both on-location and online web-based platform work.

Platform work can offer women a number of important opportunities: flexibility, an entry or re-entry into the labour market, an income (sometimes higher than in the traditional labour market), financial and social independence, digital inclusion, etc. However, while some of these benefits are experienced by women in some places some of the time, the following articles highlight the obstacles many women face when trying to access decent work in the world of digital labour platforms. As the articles illustrate, digital labour platforms in and of themselves will not necessarily break with the structural inequalities that permeate traditional labour economies. In fact, as some of the following articles show, the platform economy often presents a continuum of or even amplifies said inequalities.

The series starts with a global overview of women's experiences on online web-based platforms (including freelance and microtask work) in an article by Uma Rani, Nora Gobel and Rishabh Kumar Dhir from the International Labour Organization (ILO). In their article, **Experiences of women on online labour platforms: insights from global surveys** the authors present key findings from ILO surveys and interviews conducted with 3,000 workers in 100 countries. Among other things, their research provides insights into how online web-based platform work mirrors dynamics found in the offline labour market. For example, tasks remain heavily segregated by gender and unpaid care responsibilities influence women's motivations for working from home through online web-based platforms.

The 2nd and 3rd articles then zoom in on Argentina and Kenya and explore direct experiences of women working in two male-dominated sectors in on-location platform work.

Writing from Argentina, Ariela Micha and Francisca Pereyra from the *Universidad Nacional de General Sarmiento* (National University of General Sarmiento) and Cecilia Poggi from the *Agence Française de Développement* (French Development Agency) have authored the article **Assessing gender inequalities in the platform economy: an analysis of**

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[2] Online web-based platform work includes two different types of platform work: freelance and microtask. In freelance platform work, the workers take on project-based commissions for a wide variety of jobs ranging from web design to legal services. In microtask services, workers take commissions to work on smaller and often repetitive tasks such as data labelling as a part of a much wider project or initiative. These microtask services are also referred to as crowdwork and due to the globally dispersed nature of all the contributors to this series, these different phrases will come up during the series.

ride-hailing and delivery workers in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area. The authors' field research found that women are less likely than men to own or drive a motorcycle, they are less likely to work at night for safety concerns and tend to avoid working at peak times such as over the weekend or during the evening due to care responsibilities. As a result, female workers in ride-hailing and delivery see their ratings affected, and, consequently, their access to more gigs and pay, as companies tend to assign higher scores to workers offering total dedication, who reject fewer gigs, and who are able to travel faster and do more gigs in less time.

In the article, **The experience of women platform workers in Kenya**, Savita Bailur from Caribou Digital and Columbia University, Grace Natabaalo from Caribou Digital, and Nasubo Ongoma at Qhala, describe the barriers women gig workers and female entrepreneurs working through e-commerce platforms face in Kenya. These barriers relate to social and cultural norms, and expectations around the sex-based segregation of work; access to vehicles, digital devices, and digital skills; safety and gender-based violence in public spaces, at night, or online; and the burden of unpaid care work. The article contains quotes from women who have broken down social barriers and stereotypes to take up platform-enabled ride-hailing and delivery work in Kenya.

Beyond ride-hailing and delivery, digital labour platforms have also emerged in highly feminised sectors such as home care, domestic work and beauty services, all characterised as being highly informal sectors with low wages. These sectors are the focus of the 4th, 5th and 6th articles in the series.

Spain has one of the highest volumes of platform workers of all European countries. In the 4th article, **Digital labour platforms in highly feminised sectors: home care in Spain**, Olivia Blanchard from Digital Future Society, explores the context that has seen digital labour platforms entering the home care sector in Spain. She then describes the different platform models operating in this highly feminised sector and critically analyses the narratives offered by platform founders as well as stated ambitions to "formalise and professionalise" the sector.

In the 5th article, Abhishek Sekharan, Chiara Furtado and Ambika Tandon from the Centre for Internet and Society in India, do a deep dive into the experiences of beauty workers in India and discuss how historical challenges faced by women trying to collectivise are deepening further

within the platform economy. Their article is called **Gender and collective bargaining in the platform economy: experiences of on-demand beauty workers in India**. Using primary data, they show how platform-based surveillance, digital management techniques, and the isolated nature of beauty work are underpinning barriers to collective action, as well as highlighting how women are using novel techniques to overcome these barriers.

Other methods for worker empowerment, beyond collectivisation, are also appearing. As an alternative to private, profit-driven platform companies, worker-owned cooperative platforms are emerging in different sectors and countries. Fairuz Mullagee from the Social Law Project in South Africa, and Salonie Muralidhara Hiriyur from the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Cooperative Federation and Nitya Nangalia from SEWA Bharat in India have contributed to the series with the 6th article, called **Domestic work and platformisation in India and South Africa: a look at enablers and barriers**. They share the lessons learnt in both countries when creating platform cooperatives as viable alternatives in a sector that predominantly employs low-skilled and disempowered women in an environment dominated by patriarchy and patronage. The article shows how some of the key obstacles faced by domestic gig workers in India and South Africa relating to gender-based digital divides (access to digital devices, the internet and mobile data, and a lack of digital skills) mirror those, as described in the earlier article, faced by female gig workers in Kenya.

As mentioned earlier, there has been a proliferation of research on the gig economy in recent years. Despite this, there are some significant gaps in current research agendas which is an issue addressed in the 7th and 8th articles.

In their article, **Gender and care work platform operational models: setting a research agenda**, the Oxford-based Fairwork team of Funda Ustek-Spilda, Alessio Bertolini, Oguz Alyanak, Kelle Howson, and Mark Graham call for more scrutiny into the ways different platform models operating in the care sector affect working conditions for workers. Their article draws on Fairwork research from India, South Africa, Germany and the United Kingdom. They conclude that the operational models that platforms use in these countries exacerbate the poor working conditions found in the traditional care sector offline. Furthermore, the amount of unpaid work time, non-pay and exposure to unreliable sources of income increases substantially for workers who try to depend on platforms for their livelihood.

Another piece reflecting on the need for more research into platform modus operandi comes from Aditi Surie at the Indian Institute for Human Settlements and Krishna Akhil Kumar Adavi at the University of Texas. Their article **Gender out of focus: methodological reflections on work in India's platform economy** reflects on the gender gap in data held by platforms about their workforces and how platforms' attempts at having gender-neutral policies end up being gender-blind.

The final two articles in the series focus on policymaking and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on women gig workers' access to work and on their working conditions across different countries.

Emma Samman, at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI), and Abigail Hunt, formerly at ODI and now at the Trades Union Congress, describe in their article **Gender and the gig economy: critical steps for evidence-based policy revisited** how the Covid-19 pandemic has deeply affected women's economic security. Globally, women have lost nearly twice as many jobs as men and were more affected in the poorest contexts because of a higher likelihood of being in informal work as well as being over-represented in the hardest-hit sectors (e.g., hospitality, retail, domestic work). In the gig economy, female-dominated sectors such as domestic work and beauty services contracted, while male-dominated sectors such as food delivery experienced a surge in demand. As the article discusses, the pandemic has also exposed once again how the classification of workers as independent contractors negatively impacts their access to social protection, which is an inalienable pillar of decent work.

When it comes to the response from platforms during the pandemic, across the world, and with few exceptions, platforms did little to support women platform workers who saw their work reduce or disappear overnight, as is highlighted in the article **Women gig workers, policymakers and platforms: the pandemic's impact across several G20 economies** by Oxford Analytica's Megha Kumar. The article presents Oxford Analytica's research on the experiences of women digital gig workers during the pandemic in the United States, China, India, Mexico, Indonesia and South Africa. Some women responded to the loss of jobs in their sector by shifting to app-based transport and delivery services, although the gender balance remains heavily skewed. More than two years on since the start of the pandemic, the article notes little advancement made in gender-sensitive policy interventions in regard to the gig economy, meaning that women workers of digital labour platforms will likely

continue to experience gender-based discrimination in hiring practices, lower wages and a higher risk of harassment.

Across the world, there is a consistent lack of employment data on gig workers, which means policymakers lack insight into the true numbers of women (and men) finding work via digital labour platforms and lack knowledge of their wages and working conditions. This, in turn, hinders policymaking. Furthermore, as these articles illustrate, if platform work is going to truly offer a genuine opportunity for women's economic and social empowerment, there is an urgent need to include women's experiences in the data, to critically review the way platform models and processes compound the gender-based inequalities found in traditional labour markets, and for governments and international regulatory bodies to incorporate a gender lens in their policymaking.

Finally, while women across the world continue to bear the brunt of unpaid domestic and care responsibilities, and without significant change on behalf of platforms and policy remedies, the digital labour economy will continue to reflect the dynamics already seen in traditional offline labour markets, characterised by gender pay gaps, and an overre-presentation of women in temporary, low paid and informal employment.

Experiences of women on online labour platforms:

insights from global surveys

Words by

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57%

45 40 35 30

Article

01

Introduction

Digital labour platforms have become a common feature in today's world and part of our everyday lives. Platforms have grown five-fold over the past decade and have become even more prominent since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, with its ensuing lockdowns and remote working arrangements, as consumers and businesses increasingly turn to such platforms to meet their diverse needs (ILO 2021). They are changing the way work is organised and regulated. These platforms can be classified into two broad categories: online labour platforms[1] and location-based platforms.[2]

The International Labour Organization (ILO) has investigated the changes digital labour platforms are bringing about. This article will explore how digital labour platforms are transforming the world of work by drawing on findings from the ILO report, World Employment and Social Outlook 2021: The role of digital labour platforms in transforming the world of work, and most particularly on the ILO surveys and interviews conducted with around 3,000 workers from 100 countries looking at online labour platforms (microtask and freelance) (Ibid.).

While these platforms are creating new opportunities, particularly for women, young people, persons with disabilities and marginalised groups in different parts of the world, there are also some challenges, which this article will look at while focusing on women workers.

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[1] On online labour platforms, tasks or work assignments are performed online or remotely by workers. These tasks may include translation, legal, financial and patent services or design and software development on freelance and contest-based platforms; or completing short-term tasks, such as annotating images, moderating content, or transcribing a video as a crowdworker on microtask platforms.

[2] The tasks on location-based platforms are carried out in person in specified physical locations by workers and include taxi, delivery and home services (such as a plumber or electrician), domestic work and care provision.

Gig for some... livelihood for many...

Platform work is the main source of income for about 40% of the women respondents working on online platforms, while another 18% use platforms for gig-type work. For the rest, platform work complements the income they earn from their other jobs, either as a casual worker, salaried worker or freelancer. More than half of women platform workers in developing countries are dependent on platform work as their main source of income, while in advanced economies this is the case for about one-third of women.

These workers often do not have an employment relationship, are classified as self-employed or independent contractors, and as a result are not offered employment-related benefits such as sick leave, health insurance or pensions.

The availability of work on these platforms continues to be a challenge as about 90% of women respondents indicated they would like to work more but are unable to find sufficient hours. This non-availability of work could be due to the intense global competition for jobs that exists on these platforms. There are also certain biases held by clients that restrict women from accessing certain types of tasks.

> **"I have had a male client imply that a certain task may go over my head because I am a woman."**
>
> (*Respondent on Upwork, South Africa*)

To ensure that they have a regular supply of work on these platforms, many workers are active during the evening or night, which has an impact on their work-life balance. About 78% of the women on microtask platforms work during the evening or night, and these proportions are higher in developing countries (85%). This is largely because many of the clients on these platforms are based in countries in the Global North and they outsource tasks during their business hours.

Working from home: preference or reinforcing gender roles?

Women's motivation to perform work on these online labour platforms relates to the flexibility they provide, which allows them to take care of household and care responsibilities and complement their household incomes. These motivating factors underline some of the pre-existing issues in local labour markets and society in general. Compared to women in developed countries, a higher proportion of women in developing countries preferred to work from home (see figure 1), which reveals the prevalence of stereotypical gender roles and expectations women have about their domestic care and household responsibilities.

Such expectations, even among highly educated women, play an important role in their decision to stay at home and take care of these types of responsibilities. This limits their access to formal job opportunities, while platforms can provide flexibility that allows them to engage with the labour market.

Figure 1: Motivation of workers to participate on online platforms, by gender and country development status

PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS
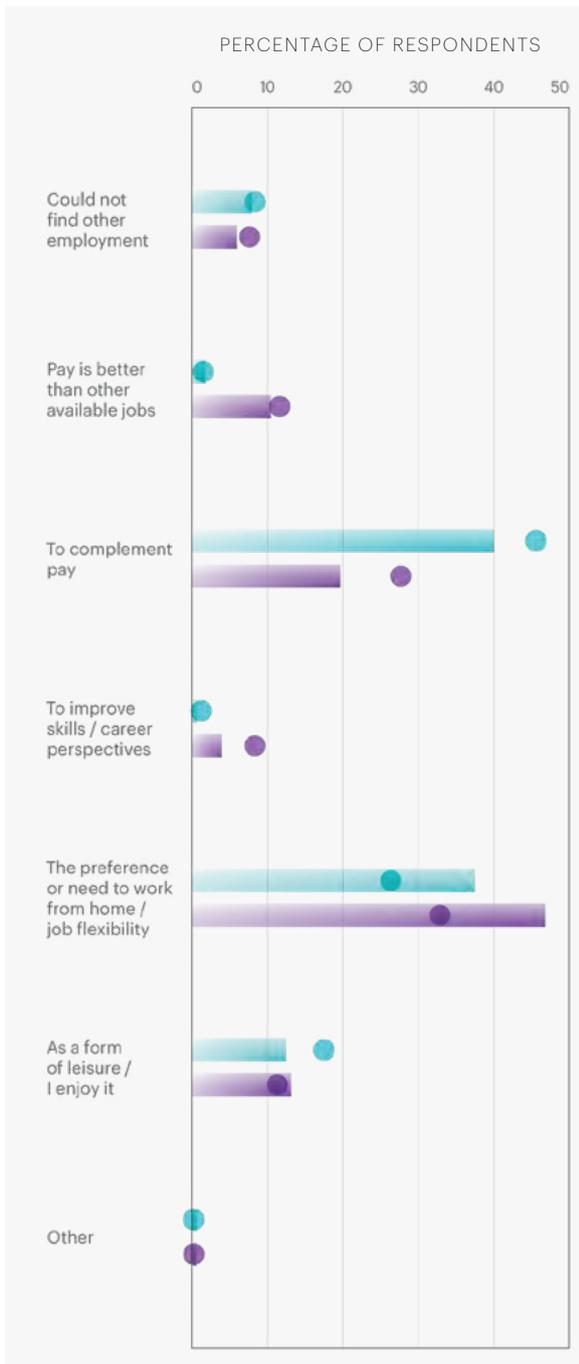
About a quarter of the women working on these platforms reported having children below the age of six years old. The high cost of childcare and limited access to childcare facilities in many countries prevent women from taking up regular jobs in the traditional labour market.

> **"I participate in freelance work as I can be available for my children, and it allows me to be a mum and at the same time provide like a breadwinner."**
>
> *(Respondent on Upwork, Philippines)*

> **"Both of my kids are currently not old enough to be in school and I could not find a job that would be worth it after covering their childcare costs."**
>
> *(Respondent on Microworkers, USA)*

However, while platforms allow women to earn some income, they face a double burden as they disproportionately take on care and household responsibilities. In addition, working through online labour platforms makes many of these women invisible as they work during the night or whenever their household duties allow it (Berg et al. 2018). Thus, working through online labour platforms is not only further reinforcing women's roles in social reproduction in new ways but also alienating women workers from social relations at work.

Image source: Digital Future Society
Source: ILO global surveys of crowdworkers (2017) and workers on freelance platforms (2019–20)

Women participating on online labour platforms are highly educated

In general, online platform workers are highly educated with more than 60% having undergraduate or postgraduate degrees. A higher proportion of women have postgraduate degrees and above, compared to men. Women in developing countries are more highly educated (80%) compared to those in advanced economies (61%) (see figure 2a). Within developing countries, the gender differences are quite stark. In Latin America, for example, more than 80% of women have an undergraduate degree and above, compared to 60% of men.

Figure 2: Educational levels of workers on online labour (microtask and freelance) platforms, by gender and country development status


Image source: Digital Future Society
Source: ILO global surveys of crowdworkers (2017) and workers on freelance platforms (2019–20)
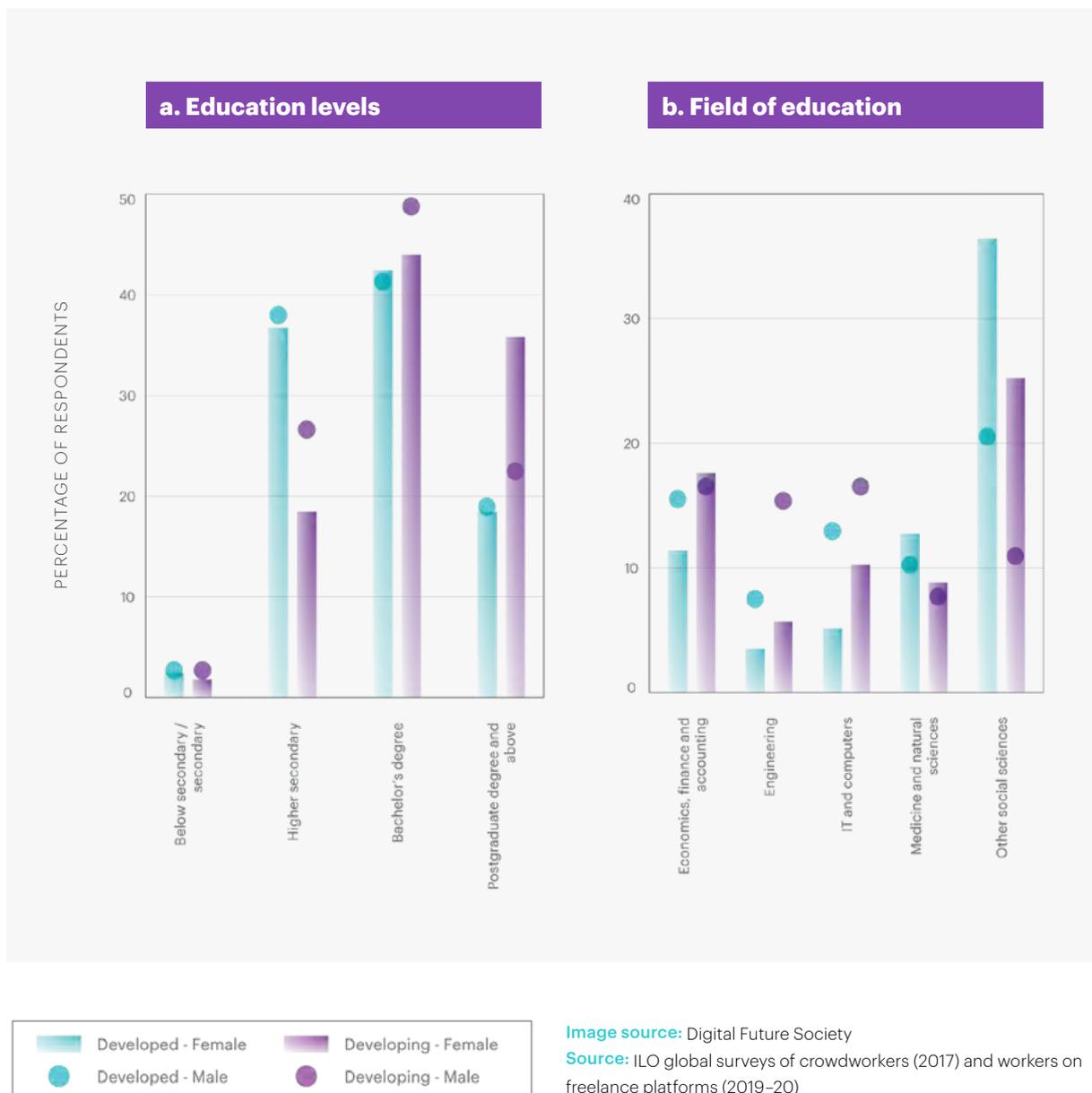
These workers are not only well-educated, but a substantial proportion has specialised STEM (science, technology, engineering and medicine) education qualifications on both the microtask (56%) and freelance platforms (43%) (see figure 2b). There are gender differences in the fields of education, with men more likely to have received education in engineering and information technology (IT) compared to women in both developing and advanced economies, while a slightly higher proportion of women have received medical and natural sciences education, compared to men.

A high proportion of well-educated women performing tasks on such platforms could be due to, as observed earlier, challenges in the local labour market regarding employment opportunities, and those related to women's household and care responsibilities.

Gender gaps persist on online labour platforms

There has been a general assumption that platform work would eliminate gender gaps and inequities in access and pay (Barzilay and Ben-David 2017). But the *participation of women* on online labour platforms resembles, to a large extent, the offline labour market. There are more men than women on these online platforms and women comprise only about 40% of all the online platform workers in the sample. In developing countries, the gender balance is even more skewed with only two out of every ten workers being women, underlining the challenges women face when trying to access work. There is some gender balance in the United States where almost half of the online platform workforce is made up of women.

Despite high levels of education among women, there is strong *gender segregation* in terms of tasks performed on freelance platforms, where tasks related to technology and creative design and multimedia were predominantly performed by men, which reflects the occupational segregation that exists in the IT sector. Similar trends are also observed in country-level surveys of Ukraine and Russia (Shevchuk and Strebkov 2021; Aleksynska et al. 2018). In contrast, women dominated tasks related to business services, and this was particularly high in developing countries (70%). Other female-dominated tasks included professional services such as in the legal field, translation, editing and writing, and sales and marketing (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Occupational segregation on freelance platforms, by gender and country development status
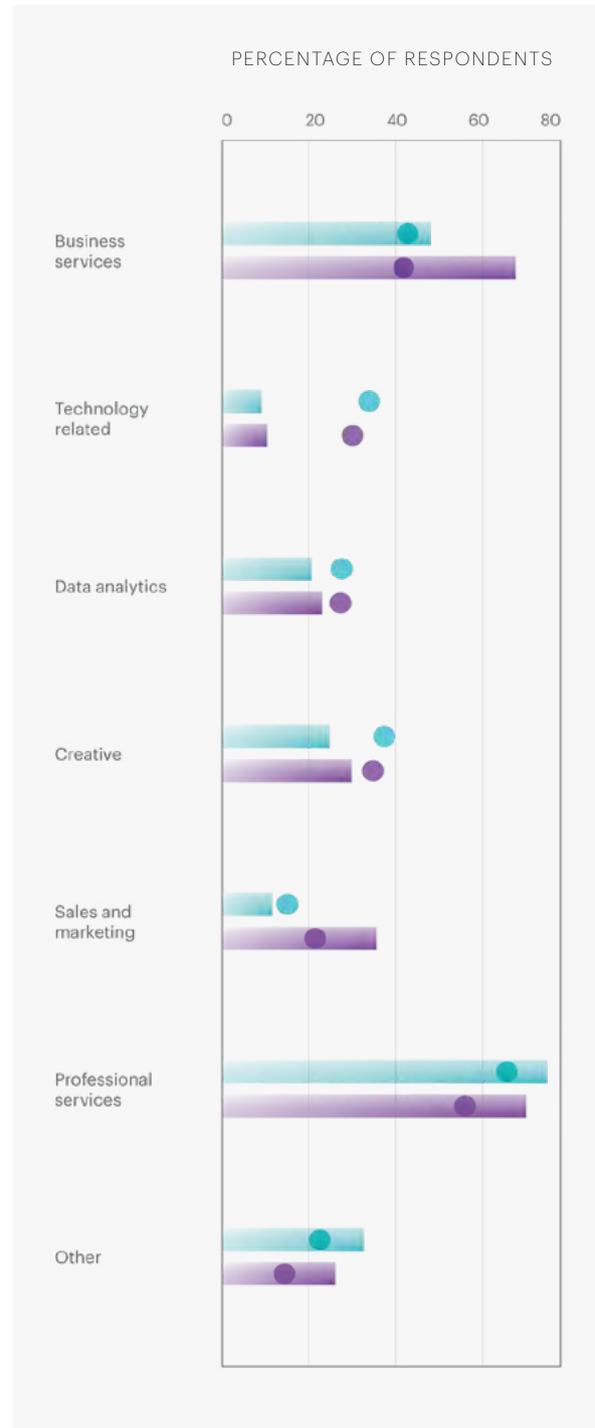

Image source: Digital Future Society
Source: ILO global surveys of workers on freelance platforms (2019–20)

Workers' earnings on online labour platforms are generally low, as half of the workers earn less than 2.50 USD an hour, and often lack access to traditional employment benefits such as social protection, paid leave, minimum wages and collective bargaining.

Gender pay gaps also exist on online labour platforms and the gaps vary depending upon the nature of the tasks performed, platform type, and if the work is taking place in developed or developing countries. The hourly average earnings of women on freelance platforms were less (10.50 USD) than men (11.80 USD) when only paid work was considered (see figure 4). These findings are in line with the existing literature, which shows higher hourly earnings for men compared to women performing similar work (Aleksynska et al. 2021; Herrmann et al. 2019a, 2019b).

These differences in earnings could stem from the gender-based segregation of tasks (Chan and Wang 2018; Beerepoot and Lambregts 2015). However, the situation reverses when we consider unpaid tasks, which account for a third of both men and women's working time. The average hourly earnings for women are higher (8 USD) than for men (7.40 USD). This, to an extent, could indicate that women spend less time searching for work, building up their profiles or doing unpaid or free tasks to build reputations than men do.

We find similar trends in developing countries. The higher earnings among women in these countries could also be due to higher levels of education over men, which might allow them to access better-paid tasks. However, in developed countries, women earn less than men for both paid (30%) and total hourly earnings (20%).

Figure 4: Hourly average earnings on online freelance platforms, by gender and country development status (USD)

		Paid hourly earnings	Total hourly earnings (paid and unpaid)
All workers	Male	11.80	7.40
	Female	10.50	8.00
Developed countries	Male	21.00	14.10
	Female	14.80	11.20
Developing countries	Male	8.60	5.10
	Female	7.80	6.10

Image source: Digital Future Society
Source: ILO global surveys of workers on freelance platforms (2019–20)

When we look beyond these averages and control for several basic characteristics,[3] globally there is no clear evidence of a gender pay gap on freelance platforms. However, there is some evidence of a significant gender pay gap when we look at country-level surveys conducted in China and Ukraine. Women in Ukraine earn 26% less than men, and in China, on one of the platforms women earned 32% less, although such significant pay gaps were not observed on other platforms (ILO 2021). The reasons for the lack of gender pay gaps is not entirely clear from the available research.

Finally, there are also significant inequities in earnings between women in developed and developing countries. Women in developed countries earn almost 50% more than those in developing countries, irrespective of whether we consider paid or total earnings. This is surprising given that the nature of the tasks they perform are quite similar. The differences are much higher for men. It is possible that given the oversupply of workers on online labour platforms, there is fierce competition among workers. Those from developing countries might hence be underbidding or performing tasks for free, as many workers reported

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[3] The basic characteristics include sex, marital status, household size, having children under six years of age, experience, urban location, having a bachelor's degree, migration status and main platform, as well as undertaking certain tasks.

doing, in order to build up their ratings and reputation and gain access to work, and some might also be subsidising their work by not billing for tasks like time spent on bidding for projects (Rani et al. 2022). The evidence of a gender pay gap on microtask platforms is quite mixed (see figure 5). In general, and in developing countries, women have slightly higher hourly average earnings than men for paid tasks. When we consider unpaid tasks, these differences disappear for all workers with men having slightly higher average earnings than women in developing countries. We can observe a gender gap in earnings only in developed countries. We find some differences in earnings across genders when we look at specific platforms. The gender pay gap for total earnings ranges between 5–18% depending on the platform (AMT, CrowdFlower and Prolific). The evidence of such gender pay gaps on AMT was also observed for American workers (Adams-Prassl and Berg 2017). On the Microworkers platform, women earned more than men and earnings were almost equal on the Clickworker platform. This was largely because women were more highly qualified than men and were doing tasks that were better paid in some regions.

Figure 5: Hourly earnings on online microtask platforms, by gender and country development status (USD)

		Paid hourly earnings	Total hourly earnings (paid and unpaid)
All workers	Male	4.30	3.30
	Female	4.70	3.30
Developed countries	Male	5.40	4.30
	Female	5.10	3.60
Developing countries	Male	2.80	2.10
	Female	2.90	2.00

Image source: Digital Future Society
Source: ILO global survey of crowdworkers (2017)

While tasks on microtask platforms are short, simple and repetitive compared to specialised tasks on freelance platforms, we found that a large proportion of the women performing these tasks held undergraduate

degrees and above. This, to an extent, shows the under-utilisation of workers' skills on these platforms, which means, as a result, they are not adequately compensated for their levels of education. In addition, when we compare the tasks performed by workers on online microtask platforms and traditional firms in India and the United States, we find that they earn significantly less than their traditional counterparts and that the figure is lower for women in both India and the United States (see figure 6).

Figure 6: Hourly earnings of workers on microtask platforms compared to their counterparts in traditional labour markets

United States

ESTIMATED % DIFFERENCE IN HOURLY EARNINGS

Female: -83
Male: -79
Total: -81

India

Female: -69
Male: -62
Total: -64

Legend: Female | Male | Total
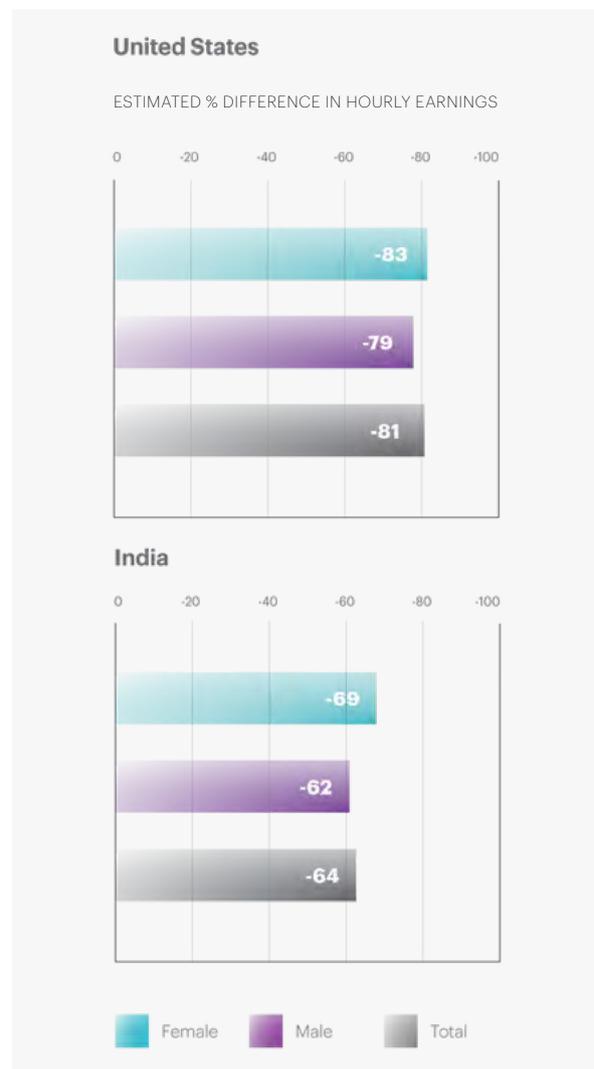
Image source: Digital Future Society
Source: ILO (2021), Figure 4.13 based on ILO global survey of crowdworkers (2017)

Finally, like on freelance platforms, we find women in developing countries earning less than those in developed countries. This could be partly due to design features of microtask platforms, which can either exclude or restrict workers from some countries and relate gender and age to certain tasks. Available evidence from qualitative responses reveals that workers from developing countries often did not have much choice and ended up with low-paying tasks while workers from developed economies performed high-paying tasks (ILO 2021; Rani and Furrer 2021).

What can we do to ensure decent working conditions on online labour platforms?

This article clearly shows that platforms have created some opportunities but that there are challenges for platform workers, especially women. The debate on employment relationships, whether platform workers are employees or self-employed directly implicates women workers as they do not get work-related and social protection benefits. The overall levels of unionisation on microtask and freelance platforms are quite low (5% and 1% respectively). In addition, as these workers are geographically dispersed it prevents any effort to collectively bargain for their rights.

It is also very difficult to prove discriminatory treatment on online labour platforms. In many jurisdictions, anti-discrimination rights have been developed in the context of employment relationships and platform work poses difficult questions for addressing discrimination issues in regulations (ILO 2021). Finally, the design and development of platform algorithms merits particular attention as they are designed by humans and can exacerbate or reproduce some of the existing structural biases.

As online labour platforms operate across multiple jurisdictions, there is a need for global policy dialogue and coordination to address these challenges and to ensure that universal labour standards are applicable to all workers. To ensure decent work on online labour platforms would require not only looking at the fields of labour law that provide labour and social protection, but also other fields of law and policy such as competition law, and the emerging law governing algorithms.

This would require ensuring that workers' employment status is correctly classified and is in accordance with national classification systems; transparency and accountability of algorithms for workers; self-employed platform workers enjoying the right to bargain collectively; adequate social security benefits for all platform workers; and providing for wage protection, fair payments and working time standards, among others (ILO 2021).

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See: https://www.ilo.org/

Assessing gender inequalities in the platform economy:

an analysis of ride-hailing and delivery workers in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area

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Article

02

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ASSESSING GENDER INEQUALITIES IN THE PLATFORM
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WORKERS IN THE BUENOS AIRES METROPOLITAN AREA

Introduction

In recent years, the expansion of the platform economy and how it affects working conditions have received increasing attention, contributing to the expansion of the literature on the subject. However, the study of how these new labour modalities affect pre-existing gender inequalities in the labour market is still an emerging line of work, which is practically non-existent in the context of developing countries.

In **Argentina** in particular, the massive entry of platforms by the end of the last decade coincided with a severe economic recession that only worsened with the Covid-19 pandemic. Although unemployment is a generalised problem, it has affected women more strongly than men, and has become an incentive for many female workers to try their luck in certain employment opportunities promoted by the incoming platforms. This has created a favourable context in which to analyse gender inequalities in this labour environment.

What knowledge is there on this topic on a global scale? The incipient line of research on occupational segregation in the platform economy shows occupations continue to be segregated by gender in this area, both with

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regard to web-based platforms and on-demand work via apps (Hunt and Machingura 2016; van Doorn 2017; Ticona and Mateescu 2018; Hunt and Samman 2019).

Also, in regard to the analysis of earnings gaps among platform workers, there are already some enquiries that show gender pay gaps among both web-based platform workers and app-based workers (Adams and Berg 2017; Barzilay and Ben David, 2017; Liang et al. 2018; Cook et al. 2019).

The latter study analyses data from more than 1 million Uber drivers in the US and documents a 7% earnings gap between male and female drivers. However, it is interesting to note that there is also evidence suggesting that such segregation notwithstanding, platform companies may increase women's entry into traditionally male sectors. This situation is documented in several countries for the particular case of the ride-hailing company Uber (IFC 2018).

This article aims to assess gender inequalities among two occupations in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area gig economy: ride-hailing and delivery services.[1] The analysis is based on fieldwork conducted between July 2020 and March 2021, which was comprised of in-depth qualitative interviews with 40 female and male workers and a quantitative survey of nearly 800 cases [2] (with an intentional randomly selected sample of 150 women for each occupation under study).

In terms of the platforms under study, the main companies offering the services in the market were selected (Uber in the case of ride-hailing; Rappi, Glovo, Pedidos Ya and Uber Eats in the case of delivery).[3]

Platforms may facilitate women entering into some traditionally male activities

Although the two occupations under study — ride-hailing and delivery services — are highly male-dominated activities, available data suggests that platforms are facilitating an emergent increase in female participation. In fact, while in traditional employment female participation is almost non-existent, currently, women represent around a fifth of all platform workers involved as either app-based (delivery) riders or (ride-hailing) drivers.

This phenomenon is due to three main factors. Firstly, impersonal recruiting mechanisms help to avoid direct discrimination. Female workers point out that the discrimination they might face in entering highly masculinised occupations is neutralised by an entry mechanism that does not require direct interaction and is usually limited to the fulfilment of certain online requirements. Secondly, female workers emphasise time flexibility, which allows them to combine paid labour with the bulk of the care responsibilities socially assigned to them. Thirdly, the local labour context also plays an important role. As stated before, the rate of unemployment in Argentina has been on an upward trend in recent years (a problem that only worsened during the pandemic) and it has affected women to a greater extent than men. Therefore, the impossibility of finding other work is another key reason that encourages women to venture into the new job opportunities offered by platforms.

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Platforms reproduce gender gaps

Even if the entry of women into traditionally male-dominated occupations can be assessed as a positive trend — as it opens new occupational opportunities and facilitates a source of income — it still implies significant gender gaps, marking a line of continuity with what happens in the general labour market.

Female Uber drivers work on average 5 weekly hours less than male drivers and their monthly and hourly income are lower than that of men — 11% and 8% respectively. Female delivery riders, in turn, work 8 weekly hours less than men. The gender gap is even deeper in this occupation: female monthly earnings are on average 24% lower than those of men and their hourly income is 17% lower.

Figure 1: Gender gaps in hours worked and hourly earnings platforms riders and drivers in Buenos Aires 2020/2021

Weekly hours

Riders: 38 HS (Female), 46 HS (Male)
Drivers: 41 HS (Female), 46 HS (Male)

Hourly income

Riders: $ 161 (Female), $ 195 (Male)
Drivers: $ 362 (Female), $ 391 (Male)

Female / Male

Image source: Digital Future Society

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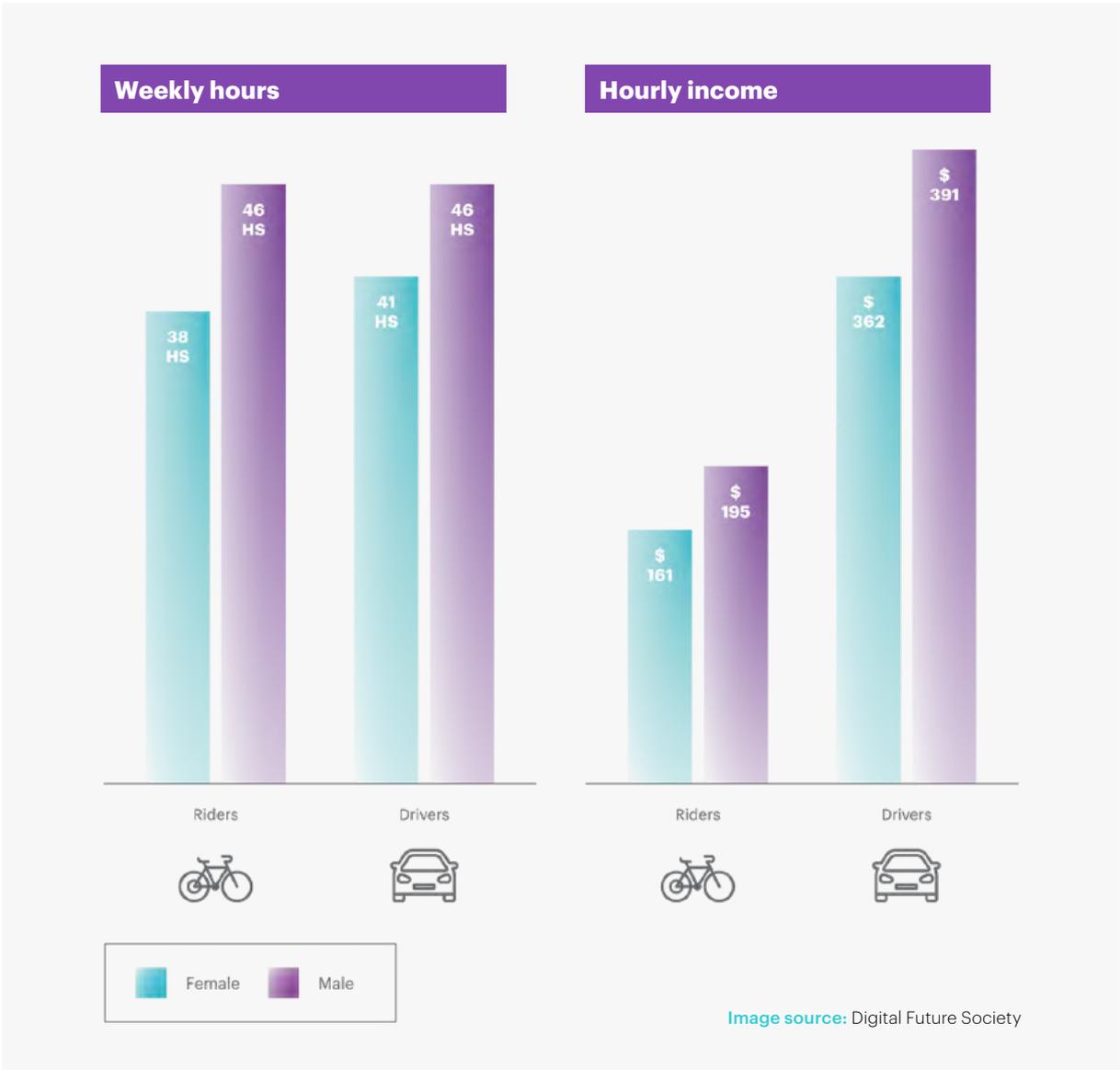
Behind the gender gaps: structural gender inequalities combined with platform policies

The flexible schedules platforms offer imply more opportunities for female participation in these occupations, although there are still fewer opportunities when compared to males: women still adjust their paid labour time according to their socially assigned unpaid domestic and care responsibilities. Indeed, unlike men, women tend to declare themselves most responsible to provide care to the dependants in their households. Therefore, on average they work fewer hours than men meaning they earn a lower monthly income.

Another factor that influences the economic performance of male and female platform workers is that women do not have access to fast or more efficient vehicles to the same extent as men. This is particularly true in the case of delivery, where a higher proportion of men have motorcycles instead of bikes, compared to women (40% versus 21% respectively). The situation implies that, in the same number of hours, female riders can make fewer deliveries than males.

In addition, workers report that platforms tend to assign more delivery requests to workers who signed up with motorcycles. There are multiple reasons behind women's more limited access to motorised vehicles. Significant factors include a lack of the initial capital required to acquire them, or difficulty sustaining the fixed costs attached to this type of transportation when unable to give full-time dedication to the job. Furthermore, broader cultural patterns surrounding the relationship of men and women to vehicles (and motorcycles in particular) shape the decision to use these productive assets. In fact, many men owned or had used motorcycles prior to joining the platform, whereas women lack this experience and perceive them as a riskier form of transportation.

Another important consideration is that female workers experience more restrictions in terms of when and where they can work.

In regard to when to work, our analysis suggests that many female workers deliberately avoid the most profitable days and working hours, as determined by the dynamic pricing feature. The situation mostly relates to the fact that female workers work fewer night shifts than their male counterparts (51% versus 33%), and at that time there are more delivery and travel requests. This is because during the night women feel more exposed to violent thefts and sexual harassment. Women's participation is also slightly lower than that of men (80% versus 86%) during the more profitable weekend days as many of them cannot leave their children at school on these days.

In terms of where they can work, women are more prone than men to reject trips or delivery requests when they perceive the area is dangerous. This implies a loss of income for each rejection since the system usually establishes a waiting period each time the workers decline a ride or delivery.

As a result, female workers see their rating affected since many companies tend to assign higher scores to workers who offer the most intense hourly dedication, are able to travel faster and have low service rejection rates. An insufficient score, in turn, can negatively impact the possibility of accessing the most profitable job offers (reserved for the best-ranked workers), and can even result in a temporary or permanent deactivation.

Platforms can adopt gender-sensitive policies

Many of the problems described above do not go unnoticed by the platform companies themselves, which are able to adopt gender-oriented policies. The platform Uber has recently implemented a very promising initiative to address female work restrictions related to street insecurity, violence and harassment. With this aim, the platform has launched a new function for the App (Uber Ellas/She Uber). This tool is available only to female drivers and allows them to filter travel requests to receive only those from passengers identified as women (an initiative that also gives confidence to the female clients themselves).

This new tool is optional and can be activated and deactivated at any time of the day and for as long as the driver wishes. In this way, the function may allow women to take advantage of dynamic night rates, as they can activate it when they feel most exposed. This is only an example that demonstrates the capacity that

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platform companies have, to come up with creative ideas in order to tackle the barriers preventing women from making full use of the platform, a good practice that should be further encouraged by public policy and regulation.

Future platform regulation should consider the gender dimension at its core

Although there are already some draft bills, as in most parts of the world, regulating platform work is still a pending task in Argentina, especially when it comes to issues related to gender inequalities.

First, regulatory frameworks that enhance flexibility in schedules should be favoured, since this is one of the key factors that allows women to participate in platform work. Regulating to this end would directly or indirectly benefit women in the wider labour force, and not only platform workers, as they still also suffer from structural gender inequalities related to the social distribution of care.

Second, platform policies should be designed with an explicit gender-sensitive approach. This would involve including a gender perspective in the definition of the service provision and the system for allocating requested services, and service delivery, as well as in the management of any algorithmic bias generated in the process — including establishing privileges or penalties associated with hourly engagement, speed or job rejections.

Third, initiatives aiming to increase safety for female platform workers and users would promote a higher female participation in these occupations. However, while encouraging companies to adopt gender-sensitive measures is important, these should be developed in the context of a broader regulatory framework and public policy agenda. These should be aimed at reducing street insecurity, which affects women more intensely and restricts their job opportunities and well-being.

With a gender-sensitive approach to future platform regulation in Argentina, policymakers will have the opportunity to provide frameworks for a more inclusive and fair contribution of an incoming female labour force to the platform economy, while also enabling platforms to better deliver their services to a growing market.

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The experience of women platform workers in Kenya

"I feel empowered, but you have to have a thick skin"

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Article

03

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN,
WORK AND DIGITAL LABOUR PLATFORMS

Introduction

"Working online brings freedom — I can spend more time with my loved ones. But being a woman and running a business online is not an easy thing."

Platform work (including earning as a host on Airbnb, freelancing or working as a ride-hailing driver, among others)[1] offers promise to many young people, particularly in economies where informal work proliferates. The findings presented in this article build on our previous research on the "platformisation" of livelihoods for young people in Kenya (Qhala and Caribou Digital 2021). That research, echoing global findings on platform and labour dynamics, showed that women still needed to overcome many pre-existing social norms and barriers in order to favourably compete with men online. This paper probes that inequality further.

Our research goes beyond the commonly termed gig economy and deploys the term "platform livelihoods", which refers to the ways people earn a living by working, trading, renting, or engaging in digital marketplaces (Donner 2021). This includes categories like entrepreneurs who sell goods and services on social media and e-commerce websites (online commerce), a majority of whom are women.

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[1] This article goes beyond the concept of platform work as defined in the other articles of the series, to include other ways of earning livelihoods through digital platforms, as the research discussed shows that challenges relating to gender empowerment exist across multiple types of platforms.

Our qualitative research (interviews, focus groups, conversations on WhatsApp groups) demonstrates three key tensions:

1. Platforms offer potential empowerment, namely financial and social independence, which is valued by women. Yet, for many of the women interviewed, this empowerment comes with narratives of exploitation, harassment by customers, safety and security concerns, and unpaid work. Social norms and gender roles mean both barriers to entry and empowerment for women.

2. There is a myth that online work offers flexibility. Yet some women reported waking up as early as 03:00h to accommodate both domestic and online work in their days (Natabaalo 2021). While male interviewees believed 'gig work' to be a boon to women, female interviewees said it simply reflected offline biases.

3. The pandemic has caused both positive and negative changes. On the one hand, labour platform work (e.g., freelancing) is now more acceptable as more people are beginning to work online from home, which was previously seen as 'not real' work. On the other hand, many women earn less and struggle to find work or manage professional assignments alongside domestic work, which disproportionately falls on their shoulders.

This article shares a brief overview of Platform Livelihoods' landmark study of women and platform livelihoods, exploring the three key tensions identified. It then explores the Gender at Work framework and how the key tensions relate to it (Gender at Work 2021).

Women and Platform Livelihoods

Some themes (and contradictions within them) that have consistently emerged around gender and platform work in the past few years include:

Platform work seems to offer women opportunities they may not have found elsewhere. A recent survey of 4,900 gig workers across 15 countries found that 11% of women said they did not have a job before joining a platform, compared to 8% of men (Siddiqui and Zhou 2021).

However, gendered work patterns continue on platforms. According to Bama Athreya, the platform economy is subject to the same patriarchy that affects offline work (Athreya 2021). This is reflected in types of work, pay, and challenges. For example, women are more likely to be engaged in domestic work online than ride-hailing. Online trolling and harassment are more likely to happen to women than men.

Flexibility for women is often one of the key benefits of working on/through platforms. However, often, women are pressured into juggling paid and unpaid care work (domestic/reproductive labour).

Platform work can make work more 'professional' for women, as shown by Raval and Pal's analysis of platform beauty work, but can also translate into increased surveillance (Raval and Pal 2019; Anwar et al. 2020).

Themes and contradictions in Kenya

Initial findings from our research in Kenya indicate three major contradictions related to empowerment, flexibility, and the penetration of social norms to online platforms.

1. "I feel empowered, but you need to have a thick skin"

Interviewees spoke of how digital platforms provide a much-needed lifeline enabling them to become more independent and able to cater for their families. But they also spoke of how they have to navigate several challenges ranging from sexual harassment, verbal abuse, and safety issues.

We spoke to women who have broken barriers and overcome stereotypes to join the ride-hailing and delivery industry that is mostly dominated by men. The delivery drivers, for example, reported being sexually assaulted, careful about certain locations, and turning down jobs that were after dark or too far from home.

Olivia, a Nairobi-based delivery person reported, "Some customers pretend that they are afraid of the motorbike, and they hold you and, in the process, they start caressing you. They take advantage and sexually assault you." Olivia also said she stops riding at 19:00h for fear of being physically assaulted.

Another delivery rider complained of a customer who showed up half-naked to receive the order. "He told me to come inside the house and get money from there but I refused. I had to go back with the food to the point of dispatch and so I never completed the order. So, after that, they put that bill on my side."

Freelancers have also reported online abuse from male clients. Hellen told us, "It was a man. He came to my inbox and as he had ordered from me in the past, he requested I write an erotic story, which goes against the terms and conditions of Fiverr. When I refused, the guy started becoming very violent and using abusive words." The client reported Hellen to management claiming she had failed to deliver the work.

Women running small businesses on social media face their own set of challenges. Fiona is a single mother who sells fried bread and other snacks online. Her day begins at 03:00h when she does housework before waking her two children up for school a little later. After the school bus picks them up at 06:00h, she gets to work. In between cooking, she checks orders on social media every three hours.

Fiona told us, "Working online brings freedom — I can spend more time with my loved ones. I have earned respect, I feel better about myself, I feel more independent". But she added, "Being a woman and running a business online is not an easy thing [...] it can honestly be very, very heart-breaking and one must have or develop a thick skin."

2. "In the end, you are still a woman": the myth of flexibility

Often, using platforms means working from home, which is a departure from more traditional office work in Kenya. We wanted to understand what this means to women working on platforms.

The myth of flexibility is often associated with 'platform empowerment'. While platform work affords a woman the opportunity to work from home, flexibility often means a 'double shift'. Jenks, a freelance transcriber who works at night, lives with her partner, Peter who is also a transcriber. She is the one who must do the housework around her paid work. She states, "at the end of the day you are still a woman and have to look after the house because that is how it is".

Other women reported the challenges of managing a home, often missing out on work because they simply were not online at the time. This also relates to the impact of algorithmic bias against women (that they are less likely to be matched with future work as they are less visible online). Flexibility, in many cases, puts an additional burden on a woman as she is expected to fit in paid work alongside domestic work, simply because she is working in the same environment.

3. The pandemic is slowly challenging social norms

Siddiqui and Zhou report a female gig worker in Pakistan as saying, "I thought freelancing and entrepreneurship were empowering women — which they are, certainly [...] But they are changing nothing about the society and the culture we live in" (Siddiqui and Zhou 2021). In our research, while there were many voices similar to the previously mentioned transcriber, Jenks, we also found social norms were slowly coming into question, and that Covid-19 had played a role in this.

Some female interviewees stated that working from home was not seen as a 'real job' before the pandemic. It was either seen by families as something providing pocket money or even something shady. During the pandemic, as more people began working from home, families became more accepting of platform work, including husbands of their wives.

In the words of Ella, an online writer: "The perceptions I think are slowly changing. Yeah, they are because people have now started seeing the benefits of online businesses. [After Covid] almost everybody started moving online, so they see that there is some potential in it. They stopped having so many negative perceptions about it, especially toward women. The negativity is still there but it is just gradually changing."

Applying the Gender at Work Framework

Several frameworks have been proposed to analyse gender empowerment, including the UN's Gender Related Development Index and Gender Empowerment Measure, both as part of the Human Development Index and the Gender Equality Mainstreaming framework (Schüler 2006; Krainer et al. 2018).

Andrea Cornwall presents another, very accessible Gender at Work framework (Cornwall 2016; Gender at Work 2021). The two-by-two framework states that change can be institutional/systemic or individual; it can also be formal or informal. The framework suggests all these factors are enablers (or not) to empowerment. The interrelationship between gender equality, organisational change, and institutions or 'rules of the game' is held in place by power dynamics within communities:

Figure 1: Gender at Work Framework
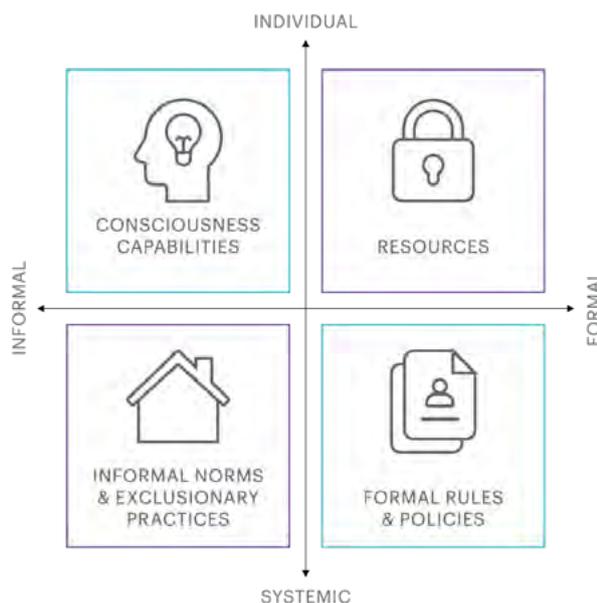
Image source: Digital Future Society
Data source: Gender at Work (2021)

Under this framework, true empowerment for women transcends mere facilitation of access to assets or provision of enabling laws and policies. It includes overturning the limiting normative beliefs that leave women in dependency and subordination, challenging the restrictive social norms, and contesting everyday life institutions that sustain gender inequality.

If we apply this to some of the experiences above, it seems that some change (empowerment) is happening on the top right-hand side of the framework in relation to the findings from Kenya, but that change is slow on the left-hand side (consciousness and informal norms) as well as the bottom-right (formal laws and policies). For Jenks, for instance, even though platforms have given her the flexibility to work from home, restrictive gender norms, that tie her to care work, limit her from achieving her potential on the platforms, unlike her partner Peter.

Social norms are also context specific. Just because a woman may be public facing in her platform work, does not mean she has freedom in her private life. This became apparent when we asked three women in our study to self-shoot videos of themselves and their lives as platform workers.

Daisy was one of these women. Daisy's husband was happy for her to work as a delivery driver (even through her pregnancy), which meant regularly interacting with strangers. However, he was unhappy about her participation in the video aspect of the research. When he found out, he confiscated the equipment, demanded she stop filming, stopped her from working and eventually sold the bike he had bought her to start the work in the first place. Video was too intrusive of the home, whereas delivery driving was acceptable as it was outside the home. This example illustrates how empowerment is precarious and constantly negotiated.[2]

Finally, the research suggests that changing social norms is made easier when the path has previously been charted by others, such as older siblings. Online writer Ella posits that societal expectations still stand,

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[2] See also Masika and Bailur 2015's work on women applying adaptive preference and bargaining in the context of technology use in Uganda and India.

and women are still expected to abide by them but that her brother's previous experience as an online writer helped her father understand better.

Conclusion

> **"I cannot stereotype my children by telling them that a woman is supposed to do this, and a man is supposed to do that. I even told my dad it reaches a point where one has to go out and look for a job and especially us as women who are married, you can't call your dad all the time telling him to help you."**
>
> *– Lyn, Motorcycle Driver*

Lyn's quote illustrates some of the tensions faced by the workers we spoke to. The current discourse on platform work is often seen in binary terms — empowering or exploitative. Indeed, this applies even to the distinction of gig work (exploitative) and social commerce (entrepreneurial).

However, our research in Kenya suggests that empowerment is more nuanced than this and that challenges exist through all types of platform work for women (the left-hand side of the Gender at Work framework). These social norms are constantly being redefined by all actors in multiple ways as part of the larger feminist vision for the digital empowerment of women workers. Supportive laws and policies are one way to achieve this. However, social change, outside the platform workplace, is just as important.

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Caribou Digital, based in the United Kingdom, works with governments, foundations and companies across geographies and sectors to help shape the future of digital finance, the future of work, skills development, identity, data, policy and more. Caribou Digital has done extensive research into the real impact that platform work has on the livelihoods of young men and women in Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana.

See: www.platformlivelihoods.com and www.cariboudigital.net #platformlivelihoods

About the authors

Qhala, based in Kenya, is a digital transformation company whose goal is to catalyse Africa's digital future. Over the past 18+ months, Qhala has worked on a wide range of projects focused on digital platforms ranging from understanding the experiences of the youth in the gig economy and platform livelihoods for women to the digital health sector and especially the use of digital and data interventions relating to Covid-19 responses. These projects include partnerships with government institutions, academia, multilateral organisations, non-governmental organisations and private sector enterprises.

See: www.qhala.com

Digital labour platforms in highly feminised sectors:

home care in Spain

Words by   **Olivia Blanchard**

Digital Future Society, Spain

Article

04

Introduction

An ageing population and a high incidence of chronic disease in old age represent a major challenge for **Spain**. Estimates say that by 2050, the country will have one of the oldest populations in the world (OECD 2017).

In Spain, like in other Southern European countries such as **Italy**, the 'familiarist' welfare system heavily relies on families. Traditionally, female relatives such as wives, mothers and daughters have provided the care of children and the elderly and dependent in the private sphere of the home.

However, the 1980s and 1990s presented a challenge for this system with the mass entry of women into paid employment.[1] This phenomenon, together with an ageing population, the limited advances made by men in taking up their share of domestic work and care responsibilities at home, and insufficient public social care services have resulted in the present day's 'social care crisis'. The need for long-term care has grown at a faster pace than the political capacity to respond, in the context of an already fragile, familiarist welfare system.

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[1] This is not to say that women were not in the labour market prior to this time. Working class women especially have always been in paid employment.

The law 39/2006 *Ley de Promoción de la Autonomía Personal y Atención a las Personas en Situación de Dependencia, LAPAD* (Promotion of the Autonomy and Care of People in a Situation of Dependency Law, LAPAD) introduced in 2006, represented a major step forward with the universal recognition of the right to care. Unfortunately, subsequent funding cuts have affected the law's implementation, and there continues to be a widening gap between the supply and demand of care services. Today, institutional public services do not reach all who need them, and private care options remain unaffordable for many. The home continues to be promoted as the ideal place for long-term care. Female relatives often either do the caring themselves or employ a domestic worker — usually another woman, often foreign — to do the job.

In fact, Spain has almost a third of Europe's domestic workers, second only to Italy (UGT 2019). However, in contrast, Spain has a much smaller volume of workers involved in care-related occupations, such as institutional care work, compared with other countries like **Germany** or **France** (Ibid.). Thus, in Spain, it is common practice for families to employ domestic workers (informally through the underground economy or formally under the Special Social Security System for Domestic Workers[2]) to cover the care needs unmet by public services.

For the families, there are advantages to employing domestic workers directly themselves rather than through a company. For example, it is significantly less expensive, as they do not have to pay Value-Added Tax (VAT). Furthermore, the Special System for Domestic Workers is more flexible and allows for a greater working time than the Social Security General Regime, under which workers can only work a maximum of 40 hours a week (Díaz Gorfinkiel and Martínez-Buján 2018). By law, therefore, families contracting live-in carers need to employ them as domestic workers under the Special System as it is not possible for companies to offer this service.

Much like the overlapping field of domestic work, home care is characterised by having an overwhelmingly female workforce and being highly precarious and socially undervalued. In Spain, a large proportion of carers and domestic workers are foreign, and many receive cash in hand and work without a contract or social protection.

Against this backdrop and within the frame of a growing global digital platform economy, new digital intermediaries connecting families with carers and domestic workers have emerged in Spain, tapping into the need for long-term care services. This phenomenon has been described by some in the media as the "uberisation" of the care sector (Magallón 2020).

Home care platforms in Spain

Like in other countries, the growing body of literature on the platform economy in Spain has until recently paid little attention to home care and domestic work (Digital Future Society 2020). To help fill this gap, Digital Future Society (DFS) conducted some exploratory research and published a report called Home care and digital platforms in Spain (Digital Future Society 2021). For this, we conducted desk research and interviews with key informants including platform founders.

The research identified two types of digital labour platforms operating in the home care sector. The first type, 'multi-service' platforms, offers care services (including child and elderly care) as well as a range of other services connected to the household including care of pets, maintenance and repairs, private tuition, personal training and so on. They appear to operate with an 'on-demand' model similar to platforms in other sectors. Some, like Clintu[3] and Cronoshare,[4] were founded in Spain while others, like Yoopies,[5] were founded abroad and operate internationally.[6]

The second type offers home care services exclusively. Some of these platforms, such as the Dutch platform

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[2] In 2011, Law 27/2011 integrated the Special Social Security System for Domestic Workers into the General Regime of the Social Security System albeit under a separate system (the Special System for Domestic Workers).

[3] See: www.clintu.es/es

[4] See: www.cronoshare.com

[5] See: www.yoopies.es

[6] There are also other platforms such as MyPoppins (www.mypoppins.com/es/) that focus exclusively on offering cleaning services to individuals and offices.

Sitly[7] or the Spanish app Babysits,[8] specialise in childcare or, as in the case of Depencare,[9] in the care of the elderly and dependent. Within this group that focuses on care of the elderly and dependent, the research identified nine platforms founded in Spain. Digital Future Society's report focused on these platforms, identifying two different operational models: the digital placement agency model and the on-demand model (Ibid.).

Seven of the nine businesses identified follow the **digital placement agencies model** and examples include Depencare, Cuideo[10] and Aiudo[11]. They specialise in mid- to long-term care and act in a similar way to a traditional placement agency. The platforms charge users an initial fee, which includes assessing the client's needs and selecting a carer. The platforms also offer the option of doing the required legal and administrative work, such as contract signing and registering the carer in the Special System for Domestic Workers. For a monthly fee, the platform also offers to manage the payroll, find a substitute carer during the holidays or sick leave, be in regular contact with the worker and family to follow up, and arrange any contractual changes that might emerge.

The other two digital platforms, focusing on care of the elderly and dependent and that were identified at the time of the study, Familiados[12] and Joyners[13], follow an **on-demand model**. They specialise in short-term, one-off services. Typical client needs would include someone needing a carer to accompany their elderly parent home from the hospital, someone whose regular carer cannot come at the last minute, someone whose child is sick or on school holiday while they have to work, or parents going out for dinner with friends. In this case, an independent worker provides the care, and the platform takes a cut of the hourly rate.

Although both the on-demand and digital placement agencies have features in common, they are different in several key aspects. In the case of the digital

placement agencies, the matching process is still supervised by a human being, even if the system is highly automated and algorithms facilitate the job. Given that these services tend to be for mid- to long-term care, the relationship between the client and carer is also long-term and therefore the matching takes place sporadically. In the case of the on-demand care platforms, the majority of services are for more urgent, one-off cases. In a matter of minutes, a client can search for carers in their geographical location and get in touch with them. The process in the on-demand model is fully automated.

The profile of workers tends to differ depending on the platform model. In the case of digital placement agencies, carers are employed as domestic workers and usually come from that sector. Whereas the workers finding work through on-demand platforms like Familiados tend to come from the health and social care fields. In fact, in interviews, the platform founders described how they target professionals who might already be working part-time for a care home or health centre and are looking to earn an extra income. Lastly, another key difference between the digital placement and on-demand model is that in the case of the former, the family contracts the carer (or is supposed to) under the Special System for Domestic Workers. That is unless they are employed directly by the business (which only happens in a small minority of cases because, as explained above, it is more expensive for the family to employ a carer contracted by the business than to employ her themselves as a domestic worker).

The sector is highly volatile and fast-evolving, as is typical for start-up companies. All the home care platforms identified by DFS began as start-ups, with the founders fitting the profile of a typical entrepreneur in Spain (predominantly male, in their mid 30s or 40s, from consultancy and business backgrounds). Only in a small minority of cases were the platforms co-founded with women.

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[7] See: www.sitly.es

[8] See: www.babysits.es

[9] See: www.depencare.com

[10] See: www.cuideo.com

[11] See: www.aiudo.com

[12] See: www.familiados.com

[13] Joyners closed in between the time the interview took place and the publication of the report in 2021.

It should also be noted that the oldest of the platforms identified by the DFS research were founded in 2015 with not all having survived over the years or having ever become profitable. Between the time DFS interviewed the founders in the summer of 2020 and the report's publication in early 2021, Joyners, one of the on-demand platforms, closed. Also, since publishing the report, other platforms like Senniors[14] have emerged and are gaining traction while Familiados has developed its business model to now offer childcare services (Familiados Kids) as well as a premium paid subscription for both carers and workers.

The ambition to professionalise and formalise the sector: just rhetoric?

As seen in other articles in this series, the rise of these new digital intermediaries in care poses several questions. These questions mainly relate to the way digital labour platforms are impacting the sector, in terms of how they affect working conditions, average wages, client-worker dynamics, workers' negotiation capacities vis a vis the clients, entry barriers, etc.

Another further question is the role platforms play or could play in formalising and professionalising home care; two ambitions often championed by the platform founders during interviews with DFS, on their websites and in marketing materials. These concepts need unpacking, though, and should be treated with caution.[15] After all, attempts to formalise and professionalise the sector pre-date these new actors and have proved challenging in the past. Spain has made significant attempts at professionalising home care work, and this is one of the pillars of the LAPAD law that was passed in 2006. However, a lack of financial investment over time and an over-reliance on economic benefits for relatives (family caregivers) has hindered

attempts at building a professional labour force.

Platforms with the on-demand model do not appear to be contributing to the professionalisation or formalisation of home care services (as is also the case with platforms specialised in cleaning services and operating under the on-demand model). At present, those working under the on-demand modality have no way of paying contributions to the social security for the hours worked, and those hours are, in that sense, "invisible".[16]

In the case of platforms with a digital placement agency model, for some, selecting the carer and then formalising the working relationship with the family (contract and registration of the carer on the Special System for Domestic Workers) are indivisible services. In other words, these companies would not work with clients who only wish to use the platform to select a carer. In other cases, however, the platform only prepares the contract paperwork and registers the carer on the social security system upon the request of the family.

It could be said that digital platforms enforcing the formalisation of the user-carer relationship as a prerequisite for taking advantage of platform services are helping to reduce the number of informal work arrangements. This is a cause for celebration. Given that estimates say one-third of domestic work in Spain is undeclared, the entrance of new actors that positively contribute to the formalisation of working arrangements is of vital importance.

In itself though, formalisation does not guarantee further professionalisation of the sector or the regulation of working conditions. And even in the case of the platforms operating a digital placement agencies model, families continue to employ workers under the Special System for Domestic Workers, often to provide care in a full-time or live-in situation. Strictly

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[14] See: www.senniors.com

[15] See section 4 of Home care and digital platforms in Spain for a deeper analysis of platform ambitions to professionalise and formalise the sector (Digital Future Society 2021).

[16] To date, the social security system allows for working as an employee at the same time as working as an independent contractor elsewhere. It is also possible to work as an independent contractor in multiple

professional activities at the same time. However, something the current social security system does not allow for is the possibility to pay contributions for the real hours worked and income earned. Instead, there is a minimum threshold of hours and income for which contributions are made. Traceability is a key element of formalisation. On-demand platforms interviewed for the DFS report expressed support for making the social security system more flexible to allow for the payment of ad hoc hours.

speaking then, there is still no professionalising impact on the home care sector itself in the sense that there is no increase in the actual numbers of carers employed as *professional carers* (i.e., those employed by local authorities or companies themselves and recognised as professional carers by the LAPAD law, and therefore registered as professional carers under the General Regime of the Social Security System).

Moreover, professionalisation involves formal training, accreditation and a periodic revision of professional skills by the authorities. Aside from what the platforms can do individually, they do not have competencies in any of these areas and appear to have a limited impact on the overall professionalisation of the workforce. In interviews, founders would often express a common ambition to professionalise the sector, yet there was little consensus on what that meant or how to go about it. When asked whether they offer training, they were quick to answer they have rigorous entry requirements and only accept a small percentage of applicants who are the best, most qualified and professional workers with certifications and at least three years of experience. In addition, none of the platforms certify or systematically endorse the experience or skills after a certain time on the platform.

One could argue that platform selection processes requiring workers to fill out extensive forms and take psychological tests etc. contribute toward some form of professionalisation. On the other hand, this also raises questions regarding the power and role that platforms have, as new actors in this sector, both in establishing standards and defining narratives around what it means to be a professional carer, and how this might impact other non-platformised areas of the sector.

Conclusion

A crucial issue following the rapid expansion of platforms into the home care sector relates to the role they can play in promoting decent work. Even in the cases where a contract formalises the working relationship, this does not, by definition, go hand-in-hand with decent working conditions. Ensuring home carers are valued socially and can enjoy full rights and decent working conditions requires the participation of all social actors involved, including both the government and the platforms, but also and especially the workers themselves, both within and outside the platform economy.

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Digital Future Society (DFS), based in Spain, is a programme supported by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Digital Transformation of the Government of Spain in collaboration with Mobile World Capital Barcelona. DFS connects experts, policymakers, civic organisations and entrepreneurs with the mission of understanding and engaging with the legal and ethical challenges and opportunities of digital transformation.

See: https://digitalfuturesociety.com/

Gender and collective bargaining in the platform economy:

experiences of on-demand beauty workers in India

Words by

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Article

05

Introduction

In October 2021, women beauty workers from Urban Company (UC), India's premier platform providing at-home personal services, organised outside their head office in Gurugram to protest their unfair working conditions and lack of social security. Among their demands were the need to reduce and stabilise exorbitant platform commissions, remove arbitrary workforce management practices, reinstate control over working hours, and develop effective grievance redressal and support helplines to aid workers' safety.

This was a first-of-its-kind resistance led by women workers in India's booming platform economy. Many of the demands put forth by these workers are reflective of issues that commonly impact women's labour force participation.

Women face considerable entry barriers in the platform economy, which is reflected in their low participation in ride-hailing and delivery — sectors that engage a majority of the gig workforce (ILO 2021). Instead, women are predominantly employed in historically feminised sectors such as domestic work, healthcare services, beauty work, and online tutoring.[1]

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[1] For example, it is estimated that over 30% of workers engaged by UC (out of a total of 35,000 across India) are women (Dewan 2021).

However, even in some of these sectors, platformisation is accompanied by the 'professionalisation' of work, which has been correlated with men taking up tasks that were previously performed by women (Rathi and Tandon 2021). Studies also suggest a persistent gender wage gap in these sectors (Kar 2019).

Within this context, this article discusses how historical challenges faced by women in collectivising continue to deepen within the platform economy. Using primary data gathered through interviews with workers and representatives from platform workers' unions, we highlight the challenges that workers, particularly women, face due to platform-based surveillance and the isolated nature of work.[2]

We also focus on the strategies deployed by platforms to artificially segment workers and manage the flexible matching of demand and supply. We argue that these digital management techniques aggravate worker alienation and limit the development of collective consciousness. In response to these constraints, workers are adopting novel methods and techniques to organise, resist platform dominance, and demand accountability. The article concludes by drawing attention to some of these methods and the overarching benefits they offer in terms of countering information asymmetry and sustaining networks of care and solidarity.

Women's work and collective bargaining: summary of persistent challenges

The women workers' movement in India entered mainstream organising in the 1980s, with the recognition that women were not well-represented in existing trade unions (Agarwala and Saha 2018). Gender inequality was a central concern — visible in women-only organisations that started organising workers in sectors such as domestic work and garment manufacturing (Ibid.). What brought these various sectors under a single umbrella was the dominance of women, who faced similar issues — exploitation resulting from gender inequality, pay gaps, lack of workplace safety, and their absence in positions of power.

However, women workers have consistently faced challenges in organising because of their concentration in sectors marked by rampant informality. As a result, women have to inordinately deal with a lack of legal recognition as workers and negligence from mainstream unions. Patriarchal notions which restrict women's mobility pose further challenges (Ghosh 2004).

Literature from the Global South suggests that women's perceived aversion to unionisation stems from a range of factors. These include a dearth of fallback options due to limited labour market opportunities, time poverty caused by the need to balance paid work with unpaid care work, and a preference for incrementally accruing benefits as against the confrontational tactics commonly adopted by unions (Agarwal 1997; Chakravarty 2007).

These issues are exasperated by the increasing feminisation of casual labour evidenced by the growth in women's employment in highly invisible, informal and vulnerable sectors including domestic work, home-based work and street vending (Ghosh 2004). The dynamic nature of worker identities in the informal economy runs counter to notions of a neatly defined industrial work relationship (Routh 2016).

Owing to the limited scope of industrial relations legislation, women disproportionately face barriers in collectivisation. Historically, definitional limitations have arisen out of the failure to consider informal work arrangements, including non-traditional and sometimes multiple work relations, particularly in women's work. While the long-standing struggles of workers in the informal economy have claimed some collective bargaining power, workers' organisations have largely pivoted towards using this against the state with limited success in bolstering employer accountability.

Organising in the platform economy mirrors this gendered history of organising in the informal economy. Trade unions first gained prominence in the ride-hailing and delivery sectors, representing the concerns of largely male workers. Within sectors marked by significant women's employment, none except domestic work have a marked presence of workers' collectives.

This has shifted with the spontaneous organising efforts by beauty workers on platforms, where the concerns raised reflect continuities with 'legacy issues' of workplace safety, wage theft, and exploitation. What has changed is how such exploitation is affected, moving from direct denial of wages to algorithmic control and the manipulation of workers' payments.

Collectivisation initiatives in the platform economy face dual barriers due to continual non-recognition by the state and platforms. Formal collective action is also constrained by the misclassification of platform workers as 'independent contractors'. This not only complicates the identification of a bargaining counterpart but also conflicts with competition and anti-trust legislation that prohibits collective bargaining by independently competing parties (Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2019).

Recent legislative reforms in India subsumed laws governing trade unions and industrial disputes into the Industrial Relations Code, 2020. While the provisions of the Code include workers from the unorganised sector, they do so only in reference to the registration of trade unions with no prescriptions for furthering the bargaining power of these workers. In fact, the Code is stated to methodically dilute collective bargaining power (Cox and Singhvi 2020). Attaining the legal status of a trade union is instrumental for collective bargaining through strikes, picketing, and the determination of minimum wages and working time.

Within the broader context of the prevailing misclassification of platform workers, they have also not been considered as 'workers' under the Code, effectively curtailing their rights to unionise and raise industrial disputes.

Women on the platform: segmentation, isolation, and precarity

Gig work has been compared to domestic work due to the similar structuring of work relationships with multiple 'part-time' employers (Rathi and Tandon 2021). Issues around employer contributions to social security programmes, certification of proof of employment, and abdication of responsibility by employers due to the self-employed status of domestic workers have been featured in union agendas for decades (Agarwala and Saha 2018).

The 'independent contractor' status accorded to workers by platforms masks their status as full-time workers spending long hours labouring for platforms, whose labour they profit from. Social security legislation for gig workers relies on hourly calculations of how much time they spend on platforms to determine their eligibility for benefits. These calculations suffer from similar issues faced by women workers in the informal economy — how to calculate and regulate work hours across multiple employers or platforms, and how to calculate and enforce minimum wages given piecemeal payments.

In addition to these challenges, issues pertaining to labour market segmentation and deskilling have followed women into the platform economy and are often instrumentalised through algorithms. Managing flexible production in the face of excess labour supply is one of the central tenets of platform operations. While oversupply of labour allows platforms to maintain low reservation wages and subsidise consumers, platforms also develop their own cartographic logic to match supply with demand with an aim to maximise profits.

Platforms artificially demarcate cities into service hubs or surge zones and strategically located warehouses and fulfilment centres. Across these zones or hubs, workers face varying pay structures and lead generation rates, which contributes to difficulties in building consensus on baseline issues. Efforts to coordinate across hubs compound the already difficult task of locating and organising platform workers working in isolation.

Platforms also stratify workers based on ratings, which is yet another tool to control, surveil, and discipline platform labour (De Stefano 2015). Emergent forms of workforce stratification in the platform economy further fragments the workforce and alienates women across artificially created categories.

For instance, one of the primary contentions of UC beauty workers during their protests was against the categorisation of workers into five new categories based on their ratings. Availability of work, lead generation, earnings, incentives, and deductions, all varied based on workers' positions within this schema. When demand is low, workers in lower categories are automatically assigned fewer leads or are temporarily restricted from picking up high value leads that are assigned to workers with higher ratings. Our conversations with women workers revealed that these divisions made collective negotiations harder, as each category had its own specific (sometimes contradictory) experiences with platform policies.

Emergent tactics for organising women platform workers

It is against the backdrop of these challenges that we can begin to understand the ongoing protests by UC's women beauty workers. Narratives from these workers revealed their frustrations with the management and policies pertaining to commissions, penalties and the rating system.

Workers stated that along with high commissions and policies that mandate workers to purchase equipment and products from the company at unilaterally determined prices, many were forced into long re-training sessions if their ratings fell below unreasonable standards. Not only did workers incur unfair recurring expenses due to these training sessions but they were also unable to manage paid work alongside unpaid care work at home. The training lasted for over three days (up to eight hours per day), with workers given only half-hour breaks every day, making it impossible for several workers to continue. Moreover, the platform deactivated workers' accounts during these training days which prevented them from taking up paid work.

Another prominent issue was the unavailability of support in resolving disputes with customers or during medical emergencies. Several workers noted that they were forced to organise due to their inability to reach the middle management at UC, which comprises circle managers (CMs) responsible for overseeing workers within specific hubs and resolving grievances.

The UC workers' protests followed previous instances of self-organised collective action among platform workers, a crucial development being a logout strike in 2020 called by a group of food delivery workers against indiscriminate pay cuts. These also mirror the broader pattern of logout strikes gaining traction globally as an unofficial form of labour withdrawal (Trappmann et al. 2020).

Following these initial protests, the All India Gig Workers' Union (AIGWU) began coordinating with the workers and formulated a list of demands which was presented to the platform after a two-day logout strike (AIGWU 2021b). UC workers' self-organising tactics were significant in allowing the AIGWU an entry point into formal organising among women platform workers.

A representative of the AIGWU stressed the importance of formal organising for coordinated and effective collective action, especially in light of the deliberate attempts by platforms to use geographical and hierarchical worker segmentation to thwart efforts towards fostering solidarity beyond zonal and company affiliations.

AIGWU's involvement with the beauty workers has played a key role in sustaining their engagement on grievances and demands. In December 2021, more than 50 workers, some of whom travelled from a neighbouring state, organised another sit-in protest after their initial demands were left unmet (AIGWU 2021a). The protests saw an emergence of cross-sectoral solidarity, as well as the inclusion of newer pressure groups such as digital media publications and customers of the platform (AIGWU 2021c).

Given the nascency of collective action and the hitherto absence of formal organising in the beauty sector, cross-sectoral solidarity among unions and activists contributed towards amplifying the protests through engagement on social media platforms, particularly Twitter.

Algorithmic management and opaque terms of work augment information asymmetries between platforms and workers, which negatively impact their bargaining capacities to raise disputes and demand accountability. Even as platforms claim to empower women workers and facilitate their labour force participation by providing flexible work, research has shown that such flexibility may be severely limited in the case of those whose primary source of income is platform work (Kasliwal 2020).

In the beauty sector, workers are coerced into maintaining low cancellation rates, high acceptance rates, and following unilaterally assigned target systems through different forms of algorithmic and managerial control mechanisms, all of which contribute to curtailing women's abilities to structure their paid work alongside significant unpaid care burdens (Anwar et al. 2020).

Our interviews revealed that women are utilising online groups to navigate these vulnerabilities, including constraints on flexibility, information asymmetry, and workforce fragmentation. These groups serve as information hubs where workers post queries, verify rate cards and discuss other work-related policies pertaining to the purchase of equipment, subscription charges, and deductibles.

In many ways, such groups become significant in countering the information asymmetry and bias that structures work relationships within the platform economy. Workers are also able to use them as repositories where they publicly share grievances and seek resolution. They also serve as extended networks of care and support that substitute the absence of such provisions from the platform. Workers can seek help in case of medical emergencies, threats to safety, or when in need of financial aid, particularly during crisis times such as the pandemic.

Conclusion

The organisation of platform workers is at a watershed moment in India. On the legal front, the Code on Social Security, 2020, albeit with limitations, recognises platform workers as eligible for social protection, and mandates platforms to make annual contributions to the social security board for workers. This has been followed in 2021 by a writ petition filed by the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) in the Supreme Court, which argues for the recognition of platform workers as unorganised sector workers, making them eligible for protection under the current legislative framework (Kavia 2021).

Alongside these efforts, workers are increasingly taking up action (both online and offline) to demand accountability from platforms and raise awareness among consumers regarding their exploitative working conditions. Organisations such as the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) are also developing models for platform cooperatives led by women, which in addition to the benefits of collective ownership, also reject features such as ratings and surveillance (Gurumurthy 2020).

Despite these growingly diverse models of collective bargaining, platforms remain steadfastly opposed to engaging with worker collectives and unions. In UC's case, the platform has resorted to filing an injunction at a District Court seeking relief from the protests which they deem to be "illegal", "despicable" and "a criminal conspiracy" (Barik 2021). While we continue to follow these developments, it is noteworthy that a platform employing over 35,000 workers across India and valued at $2.1 billion has been rattled by the collective voices of 100 workers (Tyagi and Manchanda 2021). This speaks to the central role that women workers are playing in shaping the landscape of bargaining relations within the platform economy.

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The Centre for Internet and Society (CIS), based in India, is a non-profit organisation that undertakes interdisciplinary research on internet and digital technologies from policy and academic perspectives. The areas of focus include digital accessibility for persons with disabilities, access to knowledge, intellectual property rights, openness (including open data, free and open-source software, open standards, open access, open educational resources, and open video), internet governance, telecommunication reform, digital privacy, and cybersecurity. The research at CIS seeks to understand the reconfiguration of social processes and structures through the internet and digital media technologies, and vice versa.

See: https://cis-india.org/

Domestic work and platformisation in India and South Africa:

a look at enablers and barriers

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Article

06

Introduction

Globally, the domestic work sector is both highly informal and highly feminised. This article will compile learnings from the domestic work sector in two countries of the Global South — **India** and **South Africa** — concerning the emerging digital economy and its effects on workers. To do so, it will explore the rise of the platform economy in the context of a digital gender divide and highlight initiatives from India and South Africa seeking to improve access to the opportunities offered by digital platforms as well as empowering platform workers through the development of platform cooperatives.

In **India**, while official data states that the country has 4.75 million domestic workers, of which 3 million are women, these are predicted to be gross underestimations. Researchers and experts have suggested that there are probably about 50 million domestic workers in India (WIEGO 2014). The regulatory environment, including wage policies, social protection, and occupational health and safety, has largely excluded domestic workers. Furthermore, India has not ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers.

In **South Africa**, there are currently 856,000 domestic workers (Stats South Africa 2021). Of these, 96.4% are women and the overwhelming majority are Black, the majority population in South Africa. Domestic workers make

up 6% of the total workforce and 13.4% of the female workforce and although covered by the specific labour law, Sectoral Determination 7 for Domestic Workers, issued in terms of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, No. 75 of 1997, it could be argued they remain one of the most poorly paid,[1] unorganised, and disempowered sections of the workforce.

In both countries, the disadvantaged bargaining position of domestic workers in the employment relationship and conditions of poverty compel them to accept unfair labour practices, including unduly low wages, late payments, underpayment or non-payment of wages, extremely long hours, and, sometimes, more extreme forms of abuse and exploitation.

The digital gender divide

According to the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021, there is a 19% gap in women's mobile device ownership in South Asia (GSMA 2021). In **South Africa**, about 60% of adults use a smartphone while 95% use a mobile phone of any type — providing basic empowerment tools that can facilitate better organisation among especially precarious workers. Globally, in low- and middle-income countries, women are 15% less likely than men to use mobile internet. This gap has reduced from 27% in 2017 (Ibid.).

The rise of platform work

The digital platform economy represents a further 'disruption' that has significantly impacted how work is organised in some sectors, by offering the possibility of remote access to a practically unlimited range of services. The Covid-19 pandemic has further facilitated this digital transformation, including through an acceleration of e-commerce. However, given the digital gender divide in smartphone ownership and access to the internet, this has also led to a widening gap between passive users of technology and those able to use it to improve multi-level access (Research ICT Africa 2020).

In **India**, the growth of digital platforms in the domestic work sector has been substantial — order books of digital platforms providing domestic and care work services were reported to be growing by up to 60% month-on-month in 2016 (Rathi and Tandon 2021). Furthermore, catalysed by the pandemic, the consumer market is increasingly shifting online and prioritising convenience, marking the digital economy on a growing trend (Puri 2022).

In **South Africa**, although the platform economy is in its formative stage, growing numbers of workers have gravitated towards platform work, especially in blue-collar services such as transport, food and delivery (Genesis Analytics 2019).

These digital platforms have effectively taken the place of middle agents in the domestic work sector, operating in various styles and forms — as online marketplaces, digital placement agencies and on-demand platforms. Across these operating styles, platforms use algorithmic management methods to match workers with employers, based on their requirements and preferences. Wage negotiations, complaint management and salary disbursement are all functions that the platforms continue to play through the life-cycle of the work arrangement, all while (mis) classifying workers as 'independent contractors' (Rathi and Tandon 2021).

Self Employed Women's Association's (SEWA's) research, based on pilots and secondary research in conjunction with the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF), shows that workers value the benefits these platforms promise to provide such as flexible working hours, finding work closer to their home, and the potential to earn more income. These aspirations led to many domestic workers signing up to 'Uber-like' platforms for domestic work in the Chinese and Korean markets in early 2015.

Studies commissioned to understand the impact of this rise of platform-matched work revealed that domestic workers end up working extreme hours, to fulfil all their

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[1] A recent submission by domestic worker trade unions is arguing for the inclusion of domestic workers in the National Minimum Wage.

orders or risk 'punishment' for rejecting orders. In summary, the rise of platforms has led to more control over worker behaviour, which has had consequences on their health, and the shift from informal markets to formal platform-matched work has not necessarily translated into better social security outcomes.

Women's journeys on existing platforms and barriers to entry

During a one-year pilot study in 2018, SEWA Delhi shared the data of 25% (10,000) of its union members with the digital platform Helpers Near Me[2] to help them sign up and gain access to more and higher quality opportunities. The year-long study, including multiple attempts at worker onboarding strategies (calling card distribution via union organisers,[3] information and onboarding through SEWA centres, proactive telephone calling and full-time staff helping with registration), has helped us consolidate insights into women's journeys on existing platforms as well as the barriers to entry they face:

1. **The mobile access gender digital divide makes it very difficult to contact women for onboarding to online platforms.** Most women in India do not own a mobile phone so when calls are made, they are usually received by family members. Also, there is a lot of invalid data due to manual error or, in most cases, the fact that many workers regularly change their mobile SIM cards meaning registered contact details are often out of date.

2. **Most platform registrations were of younger, relatively inexperienced workers or those unemployed at the time of registration.** Around 40% of registered members were between 30-35 years of age, which is not representative of the wider SEWA Delhi membership. Around 70% of those registered on the platform were not working at the time of registration. Most SEWA members who did take the calling cards did not register themselves on the platform due to mistrust. As expressed by one member, "We get told a lot of times to call a number for work, but such numbers usually end up taking money from us".

3. **Workers look to platforms primarily to find work closer to their home, and to earn more income.** Most domestic workers said they wanted to work within 4.02 km of their home when asked by the platform to set work location preferences. This geographical definition is misleading in densely populated urban areas, where workers use distances as a proxy to define their hyperlocal areas, most aptly defined by selecting areas. Sadhnaben, the first worker matched with a work opportunity on the platform, declined to go because she did not want to travel outside her local area. Many workers are motivated by the idea of being matched with work that pays more and reduces the workload of multiple households down to just one, or at least a smaller number of households that are near to each other.

4. **Connecting with newly matched customers includes many steps that can cause fear for women workers.** The platform made police verification of worker identity mandatory to gain

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[2] Helpers Near Me is a digital platform based in India, which, according to its website, "enables millions of underprivileged and unorganised blue-collar workers to find local employment, free of cost, directly from nearby employers, and without middlemen."

[3] This calling card served as a simple advertising tool. SEWA union organisers would distribute the card containing information for a helpline number and a referral code. Any interested SEWA members or members of their families could call the number and receive assistance to onboard onto the platform. During onboarding, when asked who referred them to the platform, the worker could mention the code written on the card. Helpers Near Me set up a dashboard for SEWA Delhi to identify the number of workers who called the helpline number through the union effort and understand how many of them got work opportunities through the platform.

access to work opportunities. Most SEWA Delhi domestic workers in the area of New Ashok Nagar are migrants, sometimes disputed, from West Bengal, India or Bangladesh and are extremely hesitant to go to the police for fear of harassment. Also, when matched to an opportunity, the first visit to a stranger's house in an unknown area can be uncomfortable for some women, causing them to travel there for the first time with their husbands or friends. These visits may not result in paid work and cause an added out of pocket expense. This is because the platform only facilitates matching the customer and the worker and does not play any role after it has taken place.

5. **Customers on the platform were mostly young professionals, without children, living in affluent neighbourhoods.** In India, this demographic was still the primary user of smartphones seeking services through apps in 2019. They were primarily looking for convenient matching with service providers, trained/experienced workers, good service quality and fixed prices. One disconcerting trend was of customers expressing dissatisfaction with workers matched via the platform and expressing interest in being matched with workers of a certain gender or religion.

Organising for empowerment: are platform cooperatives a viable alternative?

As well as efforts to help workers overcome barriers to enter and onboard digital platforms, there have been domestic worker initiatives in **South Africa** and **India** that have attempted to empower them by combining cooperative principles with platform work. These initiatives have respectively explored models that enhance the benefits of platform technology as both a source of and marketplace for dignified employment on one hand and social security on the other.

The following section summarises key learnings from two such initiatives, the Social Law Project in South Africa and the SEWA Cooperative Federation in India, that have been ideating and implementing platform-based models with women workers and their cooperatives/collective enterprises.

Creating an alternative platform model: lessons from South Africa

The Social Law Project is a unit at the Centre for Transformative Regulation of Work at the University of Western Cape that conducts applied research focused on marginalised workers. In 2020, due to sectoral research and the recognition of the innovative potential of labour platforms, the Social Law Project, focusing on domestic workers and supported by the domestic and migrant worker unions, initiated the development of a worker-owned platform, We Care — Digital Platform Cooperative Project (DPCP).

The DPCP employs a cascading model development approach, involving the training of future trainers, and consists of 60 domestic workers from the urban centres of Cape Town and Johannesburg. It has the objective of building a platform cooperative from scratch. The project is the first platform cooperative in South Africa and is distinct from private commercial platform offerings in several ways.

First, the platform is redistributive in nature and not a for-profit enterprise, though it is economically viable. The 60 founding members are involved in the co-design of all processes, which has led to worker-focused features. These include the inclusion of geolocation factors and the setting of a minimum duration of hours for each service to ensure the time spent commuting is worthwhile for the workers. The second major difference is that employers, as well as workers, will have to go through a vetting process, to help protect platform workers from unsafe working environments. Another key difference is that all workers on the platform will be classified as workers, which means they will be afforded all the requisite rights that come with the classification, such as a minimum wage, holidays, and access to social security benefits.

The project Is still working to answer key questions, such as the nature of the legal entity it will become and how it will manage the employer/employee question. The project's constitution, currently being drafted and due to launch in 2023 will enshrine the answers to these questions as well as the nature of the project as outlined above. The platform's back-end technical side should be ready to launch for testing with the 60 founding members in the second half of 2022.

Key lessons from the DPCP include a clear need to help workers develop the skills that will empower them to take advantage of the innovative potential offered by labour platforms. These include the digital skills required to run the platform itself but also more traditional education and training to enable workers to access the employment the platform will offer. Another key lesson relates to the professionalisation of the domestic work sector through the grading of workers based on skill and work experience.

Domestic work requires different skillsets depending on the task (e.g., care, cleaning, cooking, driving). The platform can both help set professional standards and facilitate access to work through onboarding training. Finally, a key lesson from the project is that most workers simply want jobs and are not interested in becoming entrepreneurs. The labour attached to domestic work is taxing enough without having to think about yourself as a business. Finding workers interested in the project and sustaining their interest and engagement over time has been a challenge.

Creating an alternative platform model: lessons from India

Members of SEWA Homecare[4] a 12-year-old cooperative in Ahmedabad city, expressed an interest in creating a digital platform to facilitate both market linkages and enterprise management. Through a series of workshops conducted by the SEWA Cooperative Federation, members articulated their design preferences for such a platform, summarised here:

1. **Transparent information systems for workers to access customer profiles:** While traditional platforms have a way for customers to see workers' profiles, cooperative members expressed a need to view customer profiles too.

2. **Female worker identification documents:** With the domestic work sector being so highly informal, domestic workers usually have no form of identification as workers. Cooperative members saw digital identification, offered through their platform, as being useful for enabling domestic workers to have some documentation marking their work status.

3. **Facilitating new member onboarding:** Cooperative members saw an opportunity to bring more domestic workers into their collective by creating an easy way for potential worker-members' information and contact details to be passed to the cooperative manager.

4. **Expanding platform management tools:** Digital platforms also allow for the automation of various management functions such as leave applications and approvals, meeting notifications, worker replacement, salary notifications and more. SEWA Homecare believed that by incorporating these systems, they would make their management more efficient.

5. **Using social media and other marketing platforms to increase customer outreach:** SEWA Homecare members saw potential in the power of social media, particularly for marketing. They were eager to share workers' voices, customer stories and other information through social media to grow their visibility as a women-owned cooperative and increase their outreach.

Recommendations

Experiences highlighted in this article show that an alternative model for precarious workers in the digital economy requires partnerships and support. Particularly, in a sector like domestic work that predominantly employs women who are low-skilled and disempowered in an environment dominated by patriarchy and patronage. Creating an enabling environment requires the necessary investment in skills

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[4] A cooperative of domestic workers in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

development for the digital economy, as well as access to connectivity and infrastructure.

Key lessons from these collective experiences also form the basis for the recommendations below, which may be useful for policymakers (locally, nationally and internationally), workers' cooperatives and civil society organisations that support such cooperative ventures:

- **Organising and mobilising workers for empowerment is key** to any sustainable, viable livelihood generation. Worker cooperatives and collective enterprises act as conduits that link workers with decent work and social protection, facilitate knowledge and technology transfers and give workers decision-making powers.

- **Investments in women-owned cooperatives and collectives** can enable these small businesses to grow. Worker-owned collectives can register as contractors on online platforms, which will increase worker bargaining power and bring focus to developing features that will address worker requirements.

- **There is a need for meaningful digital inclusion**, including access to technologies, access to the internet and capacity-building in the productive use of technology through digital literacy programmes.

- **Research and evidence-building** on the role of women-owned enterprises in creating strong local economies, contributions to the national economy and reducing inequalities.

- **Voice and representation** of women workers in policy spaces to ensure that their voices are at the centre of design and implementation of programmes.

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The Social Law Project (SLP) was established in 1993, on the eve of South Africa's watershed first democratic election, as a unit in the University of the Western Cape Law Faculty. It was formed to strengthen the movement for social and workplace justice through knowledge production that enhances institutional capacity and facilitates dialogue, giving voice to especially marginalised workers.

See: https://www.facebook.com/Social-Law-Project-932379126831391/

The Centre for the Transformative Regulation of Work (Centrow), incorporating the Social Law Project, was established in November 2020 as an area of academic excellence focusing on the intersection between law and new forms of work in a rapidly changing environment, both in South Africa and globally.

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SEWA Bharat, formed in 1974, is a national federation that has promoted SEWA organisations in 14 states, incubated and supported 15 collective enterprises, advocates for informal economy women workers on a national and global scale, and supports multilateral organisations with scaling their work at the grassroots level.

See: https://sewabharat.org/

SEWA Cooperative Federation helps collective enterprises, owned, managed and used by informal women workers grow and scale. For the past 30 years, the organisation has promoted 110 collective enterprises across different sectors of the economy.

See: https://www.sewafederation.org/
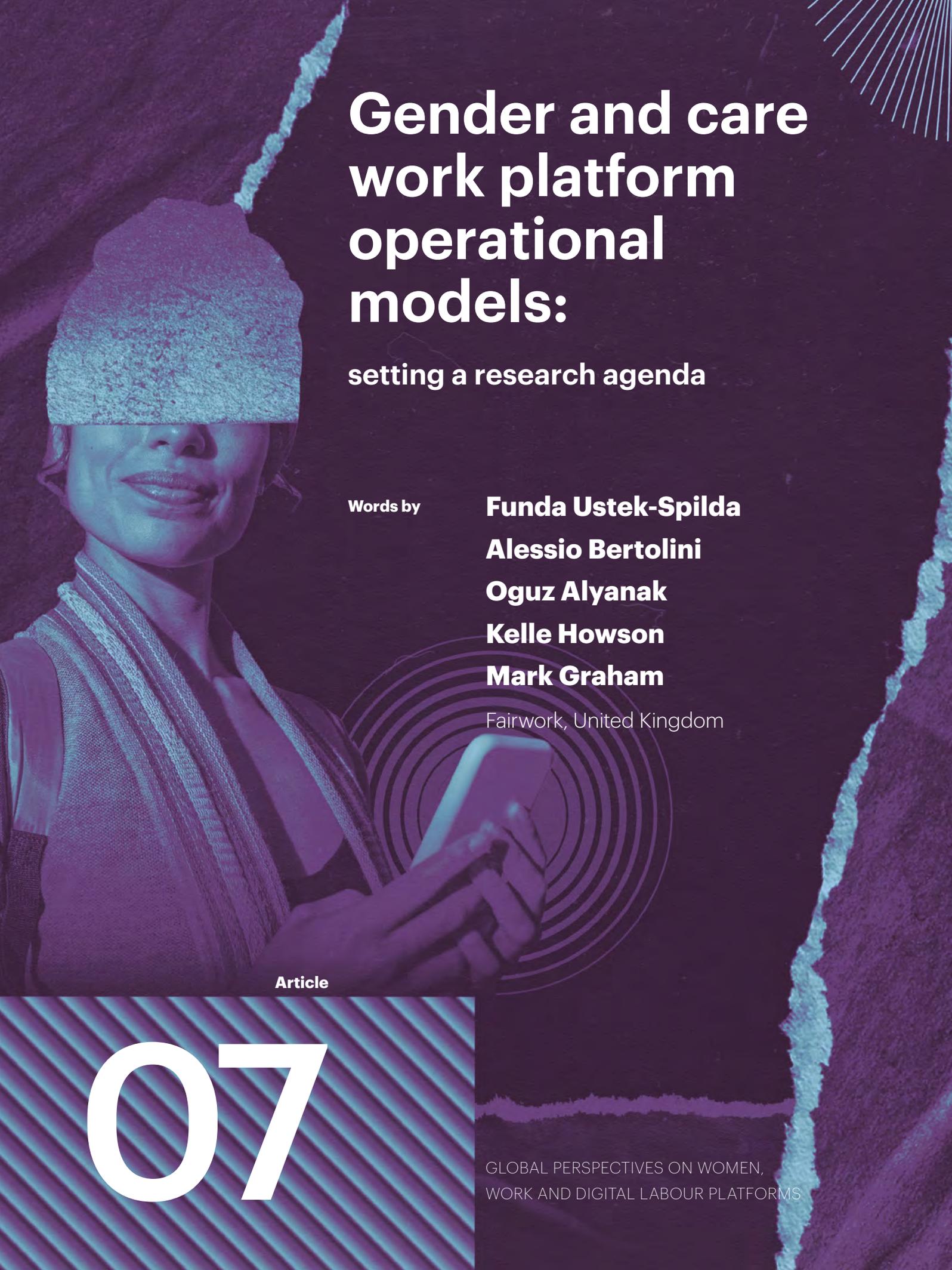
Gender and care work platform operational models:

setting a research agenda

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07

Introduction

Despite platform claims of disrupting traditional labour markets, across the world care work continues to be performed by women workers. There is a growing literature that highlights the similarities and parallels between care work both in the gig economy and its non-digital counterpart, explaining the continued gendered nature of the work, yet there remains an important gap in these studies. There is a lack of scrutiny of platform operational models, even though these models play an important role in sustaining and perpetuating the gendered nature of care work. Thus, in this article, we argue that unless the operational models of care work platforms are challenged, it is difficult to expect working conditions in this sector of the platform economy to improve, or the gendered exploitation of workers to diminish.

Although there are a variety of digital platforms, this article will only focus on digital labour platforms: any company that utilises digital technologies to mediate value-creating interactions between consumers and service providing workers (Woodcock and Graham 2020). In this context, care work platforms are digital labour platforms that mediate transactions of labour in domestic or house-related services, including, but not limited to, cleaning/housekeeping, babysitting, childcare, elderly care and household tasks.

There are several distinct operational models, or business models, with which platforms operate that see them raise funding and drive revenues for their income stream. Some platforms work entirely on piece-rate, where workers are paid only per task/job they complete, and then pay a commission rate for each job they are assigned via the platform. Other platforms provide an employment model that sees workers receiving a base salary which they might then top up with extra piece-rate incentives or other payments. And finally, some platforms operate on a subscription-based model. Here, workers and/or clients are expected to pay a subscription fee to the platform in return for the privilege of using the platform with its full functionalities. Some platforms also utilise a mix of some or all of these models, depending on their location, type of service offered and their expansion/growth targets.

It goes beyond the capabilities of this paper to examine all platform operational models or provide a gender analysis of these different models. We consider this article to be a conversation starter to document the variety of operational models that exist among the care work platforms and how they imply different working conditions for workers. As such, our intention is to bring to light how there seems to be a link between the operational models, working conditions and gender, and provide a direction for future studies to explore this link.

We decided to focus on care work in this article, because there continues to be a research gap in the platformisation of care work, as studies often focus on ride-hailing, courier, or food delivery services. This is also reinforced by the fact that care work platforms themselves claim they are not platforms per se, but rather marketplaces matching workers with clients who look for care services (Ticona and Mateescu 2018). Our analysis comes from an international study into global platform working conditions, which is highlighted below.

Study methodology

Our study on care work platform working conditions is part of a much larger Fairwork[1] investigation into working conditions in the platform economy that covers 26 countries across the world. Besides care work platforms, Fairwork is investigating the working conditions in platforms operating in a broad range of sectors, including food and grocery delivery, logistics, transport and cloudwork.[2]

For each platform, we evaluate working conditions based on the five Fairwork principles (fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management, and fair representation). Data are gathered through a mixed-method approach, involving desk research, interviews with platform managers and interviews or surveys with platform workers. Data from each source are triangulated in order to assign a fair work score to the platform. For each Fairwork principle, a basic point and a more advanced point can be awarded, so that each platform can score from 0 to 10. The results presented in this article are based on research Fairwork has carried out in **Germany** in 2020 and in **India, South Africa** and the **UK** in 2021 (Fairwork 2020, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c).

Platform operational models

Compared to digital labour platforms in other sectors, care work platforms are keener to portray themselves as simple digital marketplaces, providing a simple match between clients and workers. Many of the platforms analysed for this article operate on a subscription-based model where both clients and workers are charged to use the platform with its full functionalities.

Technically clients and workers can communicate using the platform without paying a subscription fee, but, usually, the functionalities are so restricted

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[2] Cloudwork platforms mediate jobs where work can, in theory, be performed anywhere via the internet (e.g., online freelancing). Cloudwork should not be confused with crowdwork which is the completion of small tasks such as data categorisation by a large geographically distributed workforce.

it becomes nearly impossible to arrange jobs via the platform. Some of these limitations include putting a hard limit on the number of messages one can send out or the amount of correspondence one can have with a particular person, and blocking/filtering phone numbers, email addresses or any other addresses which could facilitate off-platform communication.

Many also charge a commission on any financial transactions that take place via the platform. Subscription rates are more expensive for clients than for workers. The reason it is cheaper for workers than clients is not merely because of the different levels of purchasing power clients and workers have; but rather that workers are expected to subscribe to the platform for longer because it is likely they will look for jobs for a longer period of time and search for multiple clients; whereas clients are likely to leave the platform once they have found a candidate that suits them.

In order to incentivise workers to keep using the platform, platforms have introduced several mechanisms, which have contributed to the gamification[3] of work (Krzywdzinski and Gerber 2021). The more jobs a worker finds on a platform, the bigger their network will be, giving them access to more clients in the future. Also, on certain platforms, such as Helpling in Germany and the UK, the platform takes higher commissions for the first three jobs the worker takes from the same customer, meaning keeping regular customers pays off in the long run. Each time a worker finds a new client, they must pay the highest commission rate, which then lowers substantially for consecutive work undertaken with the same client.

In other cases, such as Careship in Germany, the platform pressures workers to hold onto clients because changing clients requires a whole new process of recontacting the customers and matching them with potential workers, a process which can be lengthy, and possibly, costly for the platform. Finally, some platforms in Germany enable the sharing of phone numbers only after subscribing to the premium package.

Workers face a number of issues when working through these platforms. Some of the main issues are described below.

Non-Payment

As with many other types of platform work, payment security is one of the main issues affecting workers on care work platforms. Particularly, as the vast majority of these platforms are not paying workers directly, non-payment is a pressing issue as there is no accountability mechanism for the payments made by clients. Because the payment might also happen outside the platform (e.g., cash-in-hand), it is very difficult for workers to prove whether they have been paid or not, with platforms often taking the side of clients in disputes.

In all the countries we studied, the majority of the care work platforms failed to monitor whether the workers were paid in full and in a timely manner. One of the workers interviewed had almost 2,000 EUR of income that was not paid by a client in Germany. When the worker approached the platform to intervene, they were told to consult a lawyer, without any further advice. While the platform's proposition may well be legal, it is important to underscore that workers usually have neither the legal understanding nor financial means to take legal action.

Even in cases where workers are paid via the platform, workers might still not be paid for their work, as clients might complain that the service was not up to standard and refuse to pay the worker. Platforms do not have monitoring mechanisms and clients are not held accountable, meaning there is very limited scope for workers to contest non-payment in these cases.

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[3]   Gamification refers to initiatives that aim to motivate participation and action through the inclusion of fun and competitive elements to environments where they wouldn't normally exist, for example, work.

Low rates

Although workers may set up clear hourly rates on the platform, clients may try to push those rates down. Either they ask to lower the prices when they are messaging workers on the platform, or they do so when they meet the worker in person for the job. In the latter, workers have reported feeling ambushed and finding it difficult to decline the job offer as there are important opportunity costs[4] involved. For instance, if workers turn up at a job and then turn down the lower rate the family offers them, they not only lose out on the travel fare they already paid for, but also other potential customers they could have accepted in the meantime.

Platforms might also directly contribute to pushing rates down. For example, in the UK, some platforms invite new workers to start at a low rate in order to attract clients. This rate, after considering work-related costs and platform commissions, can often end up being below the national minimum wage. Worker evidence suggests this to be a poignant problem especially in the case of platforms charging high initial commissions. On some platforms, workers get a warning message saying they have set their hourly rate too high, and that at their current rate, they are unlikely to find many jobs. On other platforms, the worker profiles are ordered by their hourly rates from low to high, which means that those advertising lower rates are shown to clients first.

These problems are made more acute by the significant information asymmetries that exist between workers and clients on the platforms. Workers often do not see how much other workers are charging in their area and this means that they try to go with as low rates as possible, as suggested by the platform, to make their profiles attractive to potential clients. Even on platforms where there is some level of comparative information on other local workers, these are only averages, and not actual rates, which means workers might still be misinformed about the range of prices other workers might be charging.

Uncertain income

The lack of transparency relating to platforms' commissions constitutes another relevant issue affecting workers' payment security. The way commission fees are calculated is often not clear and transparent to the workers, and it makes it difficult for workers to estimate how much they would be paid at the end of a job.

Moreover, the subscription model widely used by care work platforms obliges workers to pay a fee even before (and without the security of) obtaining a job. Because of their operational model, platforms limit the ability of workers to use the platform without a subscription, for instance by filtering client phone numbers, limiting the number of messages workers can send out in a particular week, or capping the number of responses workers can send to a client.

This does not mean workers are completely powerless facing these practices. Workers may find workarounds, but this requires significant technical ability, and an understanding of the way platforms organise and mediate work. Or it requires workers to be well-connected to other workers who have already figured out these platform workarounds. Another strategy used by workers is to actively use the platform during the span of months when they are subscribed to premium packages. They aim to contact and work for as many clients as possible and select the ones they prefer to work with in the long run. The caveat here is that the worker still does not enjoy any longer-term income security, as the client can still choose to terminate the worker's employment and seek other workers at any time.

Unpaid working time

Issues related to payment insecurity are complemented by the important issue of unpaid working time. Workers spend a lot of time on the platforms looking for work and answering messages, time which is not easily quantifiable even by the workers themselves. The workers we spoke to could not give a definite answer as to how many messages it would take to secure one

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[4] The rewards offered by alternative opportunities that are given up to pursue a particular course of action.

job, because the individual experiences differed. For instance, in London, two women domestic workers joined the platform Care.com at the same time. They shared a lot of similar characteristics, including their work history in the UK, spoken languages, location, availability, and tasks they would be willing to perform around the house. Even though one of them found several jobs through the app, the other never got any responses to her messages.

Unpaid working time is also related to the time workers are expected to keep an active profile on the platforms. They receive emails if they have not logged in for a long time (defined by the platforms), and notifications that if they do not respond to the messages quickly enough, their rating might go down or they might be offered fewer jobs in the future. Workers complained about how they were constantly active to check the platform for new job ads in order to react to them quickly and also to be able to respond promptly should they receive any messages from clients. Workers also stated that the amount of time they spent on the platforms equalled another job on its own, yet it was all unpaid.

Notes for further discussion

We have attempted to start a research agenda with this article to examine the relationship between the gendered nature of care work and how platforms have been utilising this in their respective business models. This is because just like in traditional forms of care work, the amount of time workers spend establishing relationships and networks on the platforms is expected to be performed unpaid, and similarly, workers are not equipped with any means of redress if they are not paid or face health and safety risks at work.

Furthermore, our analysis shows that despite care work platforms charging subscription fees and taking a commission from workers' earnings, they don't give much back. Workers remain unprotected against harms, despite significant risks to their health and safety. Moreover, the operational models these platforms use further exacerbate the poor working conditions found in the care sector, as the amount of unpaid work time, issues of (unaccounted for) non-pay and exposure to volatile and unreliable sources of income increases substantially for workers who try to depend on the platforms for their livelihood.

As some workers we interviewed told us, care work platforms are somewhat like a "ghost": while they seem to be there, as there might be a telephone number or an email address, nobody picks up the phone or responds if a worker needs anything.

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Fairwork is committed to highlighting best and worst practices in the emerging platform economy. By evaluating platforms against measures of fairness, Fairwork hopes to not just show what the platform economy is, but also what it can be.

See: https://fair.work/

Gender out of focus:
methodological reflections on work in India's platform economy

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Article

08

Introduction

A complex language has developed around assessing the gender responsiveness of policies, institutions, and projects. Is a budgeted programme going to allocate funds where women need them most? Do institutions see differences in how genders relate to them? These questions have animated gender research for decades. To study platform labour, we bring similar questions to the table with our gaze turned toward platform companies. Do tech platforms see differences in gender? Who and what are behind the company policies that represent these points of view?

In this article, we explore how to bridge a conceptual and empirical understanding of how labour platforms relate to women's work. The empirical insights offered in this article are based on interviews with operators of platform companies. Particularly looking at women's work in **India**, we offer an overview of how we identify a firm's understanding of gender.

This impetus is embedded in the fact that women's labour force participation in India is low in the formal sector and high in the informal sector, implying that when women do work in India they do so in poor working conditions and for low wages. Scholars make the argument that, in India, there has been a feminisation of poverty because of where women work, and how they are kept out of the labour market (Rustagi 2006). High numbers of

women continue to participate in schooling, graduate education, and skilling initiatives but this has not translated into greater labour force participation (Chatterjee et al. 2018).

Insights and hypotheses on the phenomena described above have not been able to capture the causes behind them. Some studies indicate that women work less in India because many are young and in education (Ibid.). Others suggest that women choose to be educated in disciplines or professional fields where there are fewer job opportunities (Ghai 2019). Some research explores how cultural mores and social taboos restrict women's mobility, keeping them out of working in factories, and even certain offices (Mondal et al. 2018). Where women do work, there is plenty of evidence to show that their labour is concentrated in sectors like domestic work, education, garments and tailoring (Soham and Klasen 2018). There is enough evidence to assume that all these factors are at play in explaining where and how women work in India. There have been decades of policy and development sector interventions that have tried to upturn this trend and encourage more women into the labour force.

Digital labour platforms have proliferated in India across sectors. Their entry has brought with it calls to suggest that platform work, through its flexible work and nonstandard working hours, can offer women more opportunities in a culturally constrained labour market (OECD 2017; ILO 2020).

This raises the following questions: has this added flexibility for women workers been an unintended positive outcome of platform working conditions or have companies acknowledged women workers as economic actors when designing their platforms? What are the implications of one over the other for the economic empowerment of women?

Study methodology

Understanding how a platform firm sees women, whether this view affirms that women fare differently at work than men or is neutral to this and is accordingly responsive or transformative, allows us to project whether platform work can be part of a larger movement to encourage women to work in a bid to economically empower them. Labour platforms, after all, are imbued with infrastructural and governance

qualities apart from setting working conditions and conditions of payment (Cohen 2017; Dieuaide and Azaïs 2020). The corporate entity sets the agenda and designs for the ways in which its policies, incentives, rules, behaviours and conditions operate on the labour market.

From this position, our research seeks to unpack how features of platform design and strategy interact with women's economic and social conditions. As a methodological offering to the burgeoning field of platform studies, this research question allows us to draw a relationship between a company's recruitment strategies, the product offered to workers, app design, working conditions and wage scales, and trends in female employment by sector, city, and across the country. This includes, where do these match up and what gaps exist in a company's understanding of how and where women work?

Also, platform strategy implies a mix of technological tools and labour policies that create the contours of how a worker fares on a digital platform. A host of professionals working at the platform companies make these decisions; they are the platform operators. In early-stage platform companies, especially, this is crucial as decisions they make alter the course of a worker's experience and potential earnings on a platform. This facilitates pinpointing 'who' is behind company decision-making that can drive good or poor working conditions.

This qualitative approach to the study of platform companies allowed us, as researchers, to use moments of hesitation, confusion, and clarity in interviews as signals. Studying the orientation, personal, and professional characteristics of the teams responsible for operating platforms and who animate platform design and strategy is a useful entry point to unpack the moral and economic mindsets that can drive gender-based strategy. Signals in interviews were useful in exploring the unsaid boundaries of economic morality and mindsets.

Data on women platform workers

There are innumerable platform companies in India. In the Indian economy, companies using platform-based business models to offer location-based work are

present in several sectors such as ride-hailing (Ola Cabs), food delivery (Swiggy, Zomato), grocery delivery (BigBasket), concierge and delivery services (Dunzo), and personal services (Urban Company). Outside of sectors that require workers to be present at a specific physical location, companies have also expanded the use of platform-based models into remote work such as in education technology, known as EdTech (Unacademy, Vedantu), telecalling (GigIndia) and social commerce[1](Meesho).

Our study focused on companies that offer services that had a high labour value, with a spectrum of skills required, from highly cognitive tasks to manual work. Also, we purposively studied firms that had an obviously large female workforce. Companies operating in location-based work such as delivery, ride-hailing and logistics reported workforces almost exclusively populated by men. Whereas platform companies operating in the personal services space, offering beauty and care work services, for example, and social commerce companies that enable persons to resell goods reported that women workers made up significant numbers of their workforce.

We interviewed operators of 15 platform companies across various sectors including education, retail, commerce, logistics, delivery, mobility and marketing. All of the platforms were from India and relatively new. Some were set up in the last 2 years, while others have been operating for close to 10 years. To unpack and investigate what it means for a platform to be embedded in women's work and what gender means to a platform company, we interviewed senior employees at platform companies in roles such as product manager or operations manager.

In our semi-structured interviews, we asked platform operators if they knew the gender breakdown of the workers on their platform, if this information was collected while recruiting a worker, or if workers had to declare this information when signing up on the app. During the interviews, many respondents emphasised

that their responses were anecdotal or based on few interactions with workers, and that they did not always have hard numbers to back up what they were saying. Gender-disaggregated data was not a priority for most firms. Platform operators stated that they often did not keep a gender disaggregated track of this information but had a general sense of the gender composition and breakdown because of their team's interactions with their workforce.

Assessing the total number of women workers companies engage was the first challenge. Being unable to do this made it difficult to analyse gendered breakdowns of workers to understand who the platforms are creating job opportunities for, and if they in any way exacerbate the gender gaps that exist in their workforces.

The platform firms that participated in our study are at different stages of their developmental evolution. All companies were founded between 2013 and 2019. Three are very new, and systems within them seemed ever-changing and experimental. Three companies reported being in the 'growth' phase of the startup trajectory and are valued between 25 and 250 million USD. Five other companies have achieved unicorn status, having a valuation greater than a billion dollars, and two companies are close to this valuation. These firms have been around for longer and have business processes that are more structured and stable than newer companies, and yet, even in these cases, interviewees reported that gender disaggregated data was either unavailable, or in cases where it was available, not being monitored closely enough to observe the differences between how male and female workers fared on their platforms.

"This is not Fast-Moving Consumer Goods (FMCG)"

We asked platform operators if they observed any differences in the experiences of male and female workers affiliated to their platform during the different

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[1] These are firms that facilitate e-commerce but specifically take the approach of using resellers who then sell to their social circles. It is a term borrowed from how such firms are referred to in the industry. These models are gaining popularity in the Global South.

stages of a worker's experience with the company: onboarding, training, and everyday work. Furthermore, we asked them if their internal systems are set up to collect and analyse data based on gender.

> **"This [EdTech] is not an industry where we actually study that [data breakdown by gender]. I mean if it is something like a cosmetic industry, or an FMCG we would do that because it is necessary to come up with a new product but the very nature of [our] product is *gender neutral* so there is no requirement per se to have that classification."**

A senior operations manager from an EdTech platform said that such a set up and breakdown of data was not necessary. In this line of thinking, a business only needs to see gender if the products are women specific — makeup, sanitary products, etc. — as a measure of consumer needs and power. This market orientation seems to turn a blind eye to the need for gender-based reporting, analysis and strategy. It belies decades of market-based and public research that shows gender influences educational outcomes, impacting access to the labour market, family formation and health outcomes for women (Buchmann and Edmunds 2020). It also does not take into account how much of women's work is concentrated in the education sector in India (Secretariat Commonwealth 2011).

It is possible that respondents were not at liberty to share gender disaggregated data or simply did not want to do so. Yet, the statement of intent towards being gender neutral rather than gender affirmative is enough to show where companies lie on a spectrum of gender, blind to gender transformative services.

Neutral until it is good for business

Several platforms that we interviewed did target women workers within certain service verticals such as beauty work, care work and telesales. These companies are platformising work in sectors that have historically been dominated by women workers. Drawing on press releases and business reporting data on companies, we asked platforms what factors motivated them to specifically target women workers.

A category manager from a social commerce reselling company who manages a workforce that is almost entirely composed of women resellers said that this approach is just better for business:

> **"This is a business decision that we want to focus on women and *women are just better customers than men.* They tend to have higher retention, they tend to have a bigger group [to sell to] and because they are focused on building trust, they tend to have less bad returns or you know, RTOs (return to origins). So, *we know that women are better customers when it comes to our business model* so that's a business call that we have taken that we will be focusing more on acquiring women."**

This has also been observed in other studies which have investigated how firms react to women workers. Women tend to be regarded as more loyal workers, who change jobs at a less frequent rate than male workers (Erickson and Pierce 2005). These responses show platforms focusing on bringing in women workers only so long as it aligns with the growth of their business metrics, or pressures from customers. They are responsive to market pressures rather than the particularities of women's work.

Data on work, not on workers

We asked platform operators to what extent data on gender informed the decision-making taking place at their company, for example: had a data point about worker usage led to a product or operations change, or had a difference in the earning levels of men and women workers for the same task led to a deeper investigation of their platform design? Platform operators that worked in the operations team that manage the day-to-day experience of workers were best able to respond to our questions, especially in cases where they were directly handling service lines that were dominated, or fully comprised of women workers. An operations manager at an at-home personal services firm said:

> "We don't go deep into the data analysis on the service provider in terms of day-to-day operations. *I mean, we have a pool of service providers with expertise in particular services.* Somebody has expertise in 'Salon at Home', they are working there, somebody has expertise in 'Plumbing', he is working there. We do a certain amount of data analysis but that is of different requirements. We do check their service rating, which services [they offer]. There are a lot of other things which are in play, but gender wise we don't go deep."

These responses show that platform operators are attuned to how women workers are performing according to the defined business metrics set by the firm: it is the work being done that matters, and not that it is women doing the work in that service line.

Reflections for further research

This article offers brief reflections gained while performing empirical research into platform-mediated work in India, particularly platform design, and development impetus and motivation to intervene in female labour force participation in India. The research was designed to understand the barriers and opportunities, both intended and unintended, that exist within this matrix. Platform firms, as economic actors, have set ideas about who their workers are, and the article shows that studying this idealised imagined worker is as important as it is to study the ways in which workers interact with platform technology and business models.

These set ideas about the imagined worker get reified through recruiting, everyday operations, and product design choices. A company-level study can show whether processes of the worker lifecycle account for (or not) the differences in women/men's experiences. Gender mainstreaming calls for data collection, observation, and analysis to be made in a gender-disaggregated manner from the get-go. Systems that respond to different contexts are the first step in being able to observe how genders fare differently in the platform economy.

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Women gig workers, policymakers and platforms:

the pandemic's impact across several G20 economies

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Article

09

Introduction

'Gig work' has no official definition. It can refer to contingent or alternative employment arrangements without any long-term contract. It is usually characterised by greater flexibility, contrasted against low pay, few employment benefits and no job security.

'Digital gig work' relies on mobile apps and online platforms to connect workers to customers of their services. It provides workers with more flexibility in timing and location.[1] This flexibility is attractive to women who typically perform most unpaid care duties and therefore face restrictions when accessing traditional employment.

However, digital gig work has also reinforced existing gender divides in the labour market, with more women, for example, in domestic work than in the transport and delivery sectors of the digital economy. The Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated these divisions as lockdowns and social distancing dried up demand for gig work such as cleaning houses but increased demand for the types of e-commerce and delivery services predominantly carried out by men.

This article presents Oxford Analytica's research on the experiences of women digital gig workers during the pandemic across a diverse range of G20 economies, primarily the **United States**, **China**, **India**, **Mexico**,

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[1] This article is based on cross-regional research and analysis produced by the global political risk consultancy Oxford Analytica in its flagship analysis service, The Daily Brief. All presented materials here have been produced with Oxford Analytica's permission.

Indonesia and **South Africa**. It focuses on the impact of Covid-19 induced disruptions on women workers and their response to them. It also compares the approach of policymakers and digital platform owners towards women gig workers and reflects on the long-term impact their responses are likely to have on women in the digital economy.

1. The Covid-19 pandemic and women gig workers

The digital economy was only a modest employer of gig and non-gig workers before the pandemic, with at least 97% of gig work taking place outside the digital economy in 2019 (Schwellnus et al. 2019). With the Covid-19 pandemic increasing economic digitisation, the number of digital gig workers is set to rise sharply.

For example, in **India**, the number of digital gig workers has already increased from 15 million in 2018 to 130 million in April 2021. This is equivalent to 27.5% of India's workforce of nearly 472 million workers according to 2020 World Bank data (World Bank 2021). A 2021 report by India's Association of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, states that the domestic digital economy will account for 350 million gig jobs by 2025 (Oxford Analytica 2021e).

In **Indonesia**, the government has projected that by 2022, e-commerce could account for 20% of the country's workforce of about 28 million people, up from 3% or 3.7 million in 2015 (Oxford Analytica 2021f). A significant share of this e-commerce workforce will be employed as gig contractors for transporting people and parcels.

This employment growth has been facilitated by and is reflected in the proliferation of digital labour platforms over the last decade: by 2020, at least 777 such platforms existed globally, up from 142 in 2010 (ILO 2021).

Yet the proliferation of digital gig work has benefitted women significantly less than men due to gender-based divisions in this labour market. Child and elder care, household cleaning and cooking, and other domestic services are traditionally seen as 'women's work' in most countries. Consequently, digital platforms that facilitate domestic services tend to disproportionately employ women, whereas men dominate transportation

and delivery work. Due to these divisions, lockdowns and mobility restrictions during the Covid-19 pandemic have had a disproportionately negative impact on women compared to men.

For example, **China's** app-enabled domestic services sector employs an estimated 30 million workers, most of whom are women. In early 2020, women who returned to their homes in rural areas for the Lunar New Year were unable to return to their work in the cities either because of restrictions on mobility or because there was no work. This is in contrast to the increased demand seen in the parcel and food delivery sectors, where most of the workers are men (Oxford Analytica 2021d).

Some women responded to pandemic-induced employment dislocation by shifting to app-based transport and delivery services. However, the gender balance remains heavily skewed. For example, in the **United States**, as of August 2020, 75% of delivery drivers for platforms such as Uber Eats, DoorDash and Shipt were men, and only 23% were women, according to a report by Gridwise, which is a platform dedicated to helping rideshare and delivery drivers improve their profitability (Gridwise 2020).

In emerging economies, the gender imbalance is even greater. In **Mexico**, women account for only 8% of those employed through delivery apps, and not even 5% of the country's app-based transport workers (Oxford Analytica 2021g). In China too, the delivery sector remains heavily male-dominated. Meituan — one of China's largest internet firms — has nearly 70% of the domestic food delivery market and employs over 2.7 million contracted delivery riders, yet less than 10% of these riders are women (Oxford Analytica 2021c). Nonetheless, during the pandemic, employment in the ride-hailing and delivery service industries in China has become slightly more balanced. There are, for example, several million female truck drivers, either driving alone or working in husband-and-wife teams (Ibid.).

Besides gender-based divisions in the work carried out by men and women, digital gig employment appears as divided as traditional employment in another area that disproportionately hurts women, namely pay gaps. For example, a 2020 study of more than 1 million Uber drivers in the **United States** reported that male drivers earn about 7% more per hour on average than their female counterparts. This gap was attributed to

factors such as men having greater experience with the platform, but also to their greater willingness to drive at higher speeds and in areas with high crime rates (Cook et al. 2020). In **India**, according to a 2019 survey by the employment advisory company TeamLease, there was an earnings gap of 8-10% between men and women working on digital platforms in the country (The Economic Times 2019).

Digital labour platforms increased the vulnerability of women workers to workplace sexual harassment during the pandemic. In an August 2021 survey of US digital gig workers by the Pew Research Center, one in five respondents reported that they have often (7%) or sometimes (12%) experienced unwanted sexual advances while completing jobs. Some 36% of women reported feeling unsafe often or sometimes (compared to 33% of men), while 22% of women reported experiencing sexual harassment often or sometimes (compared to 15% of men). Younger workers (18-29 years) are significantly more likely to have been harassed, compared to older cohorts (30-65+ years) (Anderson et al. 2021).

Women workers of Rauda, which provides messenger services in **Mexico City**, have reported similar experiences of harassment, as have female employees of Uber Eats (Oxford Analytica 2021g).

Workplace harassment can carry additional risks for women workers on top of the loss of safety and bodily integrity. Workers that resist unsafe environments by filing complaints risk receiving low ratings and having their accounts suspended or deactivated if clients report them for self-protective behaviour (Oxford Analytica 2018). This could have knock-on effects on their rate of pay and their likelihood of being assigned other jobs. Although clients can also be reported to the platform company, there is little clarity on how these complaints are processed.

Therefore, the pandemic's impact on women gig workers in the digital economy has been largely negative, even though some have been able to transition into new areas of employment. Moreover, women gig workers continue to earn lower wages compared to men while facing an increased risk of workplace sexual harassment.

2. Policy response to women digital gig workers

Despite this situation, systematic gender-sensitive policy interventions are not a priority in any of the economies examined in this study. This apathy is a product of and reflected in the lack of quality data. There are no official, comprehensive employment data on digital gig workers in **China**, **India**, **Mexico**, **Indonesia** or **South Africa**.

The Bureau of Economic Analysis in the **United States** last updated its digital economy employment data in 2018. This statistical lacuna means that policymakers lack insight into the number of women (as well as men and children) employed in the app-based gig economy and knowledge of their wages and working conditions. This, in turn, impedes better policymaking.

Some interventions are taking place, but not in every country. Following the election of President Joe Biden, the US Labor Department in early May 2021 withdrew a rule of the preceding administration that made it easier for employers to designate employees as independent contractors under federal law. The department will likely also revise its worker classification system, which would provide women gig workers with legal protections for issues such as maternal leave and zero-tolerance policies on harassment (Oxford Analytica 2021b).

In **Mexico**, civil society activists are pressuring the government to get domestic gig workers, most of whom are women, to affiliate with the Mexican Social Security Institute in order to access healthcare and be provided with a written contract specifying job details such as wages, maximum working hours, overtime, and paid leave (Oxford Analytica 2021g). These reforms, if enacted, will improve the employment conditions of women gig workers in the two North American economies.

However, in sharp contrast, in **China** and **India**, most women gig workers can expect their conditions to either stagnate or worsen. Governments in these countries want the digital economy to absorb their surplus workforces, regardless of the quality of that employment.

Such non-responsive policy towards gig workers, coupled with poor accounting, will exacerbate disparities in the working conditions of women digital workers across different G20 economies.

3. Digital labour platforms and their female contractors

Given the policy apathy, it is not surprising that most digital labour platforms face no internal business incentive or external political pressure to adopt gender-progressive employment practices.

Across the **United States**, **China**, **India**, **Mexico** and **Indonesia**, the response from platform operators to worker demands for change has been largely reactive and limited. Several labour platforms offer their service providers/contractors cash (in the form of tips, for example) crowdsourced from consumers. Some domestic services platforms also offer customers the option to pay their cleaners for cleans they skipped due to social distancing rules, sickness and lockdowns. However, these incentives are voluntary and do not guarantee even basic pay or workplace protections.

During the pandemic, very few platforms were proactive in supporting women contractors who saw their work reduce or disappear. A particularly notable exception is SweepSouth, which provides on-demand domestic cleaning services in **South Africa**. When the Covid-19 pandemic began to undermine demand for household cleaning services, the platform launched a fund to pay its workers 450 SAR (South African Rands) or 32 USD per week to cover basic living costs (Oxford Analytica 2021a). The company has also taught some of its cleaners how to make videos to provide customers with information about how to clean their own houses. However, few other platforms provided systematic monetary coverage to women workers affected by the pandemic.

Given that digital labour platforms tightly control labour costs in order to remain viable, they are unlikely to voluntarily provide employment benefits such as maternity leave and workplace protections against sexual harassment to their gig workforce. This transfers the social cost of the 'gigification' of the female workforce onto governments, who must either extend the social security net to cover women for events such as childbirth, generate employment in other sectors, or impose minimum employment regulations on platform operators.

Conclusion

Oxford Analytica's analysis of digital gig work across the **United States**, **China**, **India**, **Mexico**, **Indonesia** and **South Africa** shows that pandemic-induced disruptions have, by and large, had a detrimental impact on women workers. Only in some cases have women transitioned to other areas of employment, such as parcel delivery and transportation.

Yet policy remediation has been uneven. While the **United States** and **Mexico** are considering some gender-sensitive reforms that could improve women gig workers' job security and employment conditions, the net of existing labour protections is shrinking elsewhere, particularly in the labour-surplus economies of **China** and **India**.

This policy apathy has reduced the political and regulatory pressure on platforms to take steps towards gender parity in their employment practices. As a result, during the pandemic, gender progressive moves by labour platforms were few and far between — and entirely voluntary.

Absent a concerted policy push, women workers of digital labour platforms will experience gender-based discrimination in hiring practices, lower wages than men and a higher risk of harassment. Such low quality 'gigification' of the global labour force will make it impossible to achieve the 2030 UN Sustainable Development Goals on gender equality and, longer-term will prevent the digital economy from fully harnessing women's potential as workers and consumers.

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Oxford Analytica is an independent geopolitical analysis and advisory firm based in the United Kingdom, drawing on a worldwide network of experts to advise clients on strategies, operations, policies and investments. The firm's flagship analysis service, The Daily Brief, has helped senior decision-makers across government and businesses navigate the complex global political economy since 1975.

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Gender and the gig economy:

critical steps for evidence-based policy revisited

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Article

10

GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN,
WORK AND DIGITAL LABOUR PLATFORMS

Introduction

'On-demand' gig work refers to services that are provided physically, with the purchaser and the provider in geographic proximity. It typically provides jobs deemed to be lower-skilled and therefore lower-remunerated than crowdwork, in which tasks are carried out online. In 2018, we reviewed the evidence as part of an Overseas Development institute (ODI) research project on gendered experiences of on-demand work, situating the gig economy within wider technological, economic and labour market trends (Hunt and Samman 2019).

In this piece, we offer some rapid reflections on how the landscape has shifted, highlighting three critical — and linked — areas: the huge and unforeseeable impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, access to social protection, and the need to fulfil platform workers' right to organisation and collective bargaining. We previously concluded that while the gig economy exhibits some new features, overall, it represents the continuation and, in some cases deepening of long-standing structural and gendered inequalities besetting labour markets. Our present scoping suggests that the pandemic has exacerbated these inequalities.

Critical area 1: the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic

The pandemic has had deep and disproportionate effects on women's economic security (O'Donnell et al. 2021). Globally, women have lost nearly twice as many jobs as men, in part because they have been more likely to reduce their hours or leave the workforce entirely to fulfil unpaid care responsibilities (Madgavkar et al. 2020). Women were more affected in the poorest contexts because of a higher likelihood of being in informal work and because they are over-represented in many of the hardest-hit sectors — for example, hospitality (accommodation and food services), retail, and elements of care work (notably domestic work).

Pre-pandemic reports put the share of gig workers (both on-demand and crowdworkers) at less than 0.5% of the active labour force globally, ranging from less than 0.3% in low- and middle-income countries to 3% in several OECD countries (World Bank 2019; Schwellnus et al. 2019). Information on the pandemic's effects on gig workers is scarce, not least as platforms tend to closely guard their data (Tandon 2020). An April 2020 report indicated that half of the world's estimated 50 million gig workers lost their jobs, that those working had lost two-thirds of their income on average and that 'many face the impossible choice between destitution and infection, as summed up by one worker: "either I'm starving or I'm dying of coronavirus"' (Fairwork 2020).

However, gig work is likely to have increased subsequently: "recurring lockdowns and the financial downturn undoubtedly [caused] many around the world to lose secure employment and seek alternatives in platform work" (Howson et al. 2021). Indeed, in **India**, Gupta reports that lockdowns "pushed the full-time workforce towards gig work, especially women" (Gupta 2021).

However, while some female-dominated sectors of the gig economy may have grown — e.g., care provision — others contracted sharply, notably domestic work and beauty and wellness services. Conversely, certain male-dominated sectors such as ride-hailing and food delivery experienced surges in demand.

The increased tension between domestic responsibilities and paid work may also have driven more women to take on gig work. Indeed, a popular discourse stresses the flexibility of gig work — that platforms enable women to balance better-remunerated activity with unpaid care and domestic work by allowing them to engage in paid activities at their preferred time.[1]

In our own research, we interrogated this claim through study of the experiences of women on-demand workers in Kenya and South Africa (Hunt et al. 2019). This suggested that despite ways in which gig work can specifically affect working conditions and how women manage work and unpaid care, the context in both countries is one in which economy-wide constraints harm the overall working conditions of marginalised and disadvantaged workers and the supportive infrastructure available to carers. Under the prevalent model, gig work is unlikely to provide a meaningful way to overcome these constraints.

Critical area 2: social protection

Access to social protection is an inalienable pillar of decent work, yet many platform workers experience significant coverage deficits. Indeed, the gig economy can be distinguished by a lack of worker protections being built in *by design*, given that a lack of formal employee status serves to exclude platform workers from many public social insurance systems, which hold the most potential to guarantee adequate and sustainable protection (Hunt and Samman 2020; Behrendt et al. 2019).

Women platform workers are among those most in need of protection; for example, immediately before the pandemic, only a minority of on-demand domestic workers in **South Africa** reported living in households receiving social grants (Hunt and Samman 2020).

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[1] See literature review in Hunt and Samman 2019, and Chaudhary 2021.

Yet the pandemic exposed the long-running issue that gig workers' classification by platforms as independent contractors often exempts them from both support offered to employees and that directed at micro-entrepreneurs (Howson et al. 2021).

Before the pandemic, some platform companies had started to provide limited protections to workers, in the place of the contributions to public social protection that employers would normally provide — such as the domestic work platform SweepSouth in South Africa facilitating privately-provided microinsurance for accident and disability coverage.

Various platform-led measures emerged during the pandemic. For example, SweepSouth instituted measures to allow clients to contribute funds for cancelled bookings and launched a Covid-19 fund to provide food and necessities to their workers and families. In **Pakistan**, Uber and Careem announced sick leave and insurance for workers at risk of contracting Covid-19, while in **Indonesia**, the GoJek platform launched the Yayasan Anak Bangsa Bisa (YABB) programme aimed at supporting drivers, clients and the wider community affected by the pandemic (Dawn 2020; GoJek 2020).

However, our scoping suggests that such initiatives largely took place among platforms operating in male-dominated sectors, notably ride-hailing companies, perhaps because these enjoy a relatively larger market share in the platform economy and therefore have higher company revenues to support such measures.

Furthermore, some have questioned the intentions of these measures and their value to workers, positing that many appear focused on allaying clients' fears about the virus and lack adequate income support — a challenge acutely felt by many domestic workers in particular, who saw their livelihoods decimated almost overnight with the emergence of the pandemic, for reasons including clients fearing these workers would be 'transmitters' of the virus (Tandon 2020; WIEGO 2020).

While undoubtedly better than nothing, the juxtaposition of these company-led initiatives against the success of several Government Covid-19 social protection measures in reaching previously excluded women and informal workers reinforces the case for including platform workers in public protection

systems (see Alfers et al. 2020; Holmes and Hunt 2020; ILO 2020).

Critically, new avenues appear to be opening to support this. Perhaps as an unintended consequence of companies' Covid-19-influenced steps to protect workers (and clients) by providing health and safety equipment and income replacement, gig companies risk contravening the de jure conditions associated with the independent contractor model underpinning their business models (Howson et al. 2021; Tandon 2020).

Policymakers have also recently initiated shifts in worker categorisation — draft legislation published by the European Union in December 2021 marked a fundamental rupture transferring the burden of proof of employment status to companies rather than the individuals who work for them. The implication is that workers would by default be entitled to standard labour and social protections associated with employment unless companies can prove that they are genuinely self-employed.

In September 2020, the Indian government introduced The Code on Social Security, 2020 bill to register gig workers and set up a fund to support the extension of social security benefits to them, including maternity leave, disability insurance, gratuity, health insurance, and old age protection (Gupta 2021; Atal 2020). While promising, these reforms are long from being realised universally and put into practice, and instituting such approaches is likely to require strong worker organisation and collective bargaining, an issue to which we now turn.

Critical area 3: organisation and collective bargaining

The growth of the gig economy has unsurprisingly been accompanied by concerted worker-led collective action aimed at improving conditions. Platform workers remain largely outside formal collective bargaining mechanisms, including as a result of their de facto independent contractor status. Yet several notable examples of the incorporation of platform workers into formal trade union structures and the establishment of bargaining agreements have emerged.

For example, in 2020, in **Italy**, the three main union confederations signed a protocol with a key employers'

organisation to extend a sectoral bargaining agreement to food-delivery drivers, while in **Spain**, the delivery platform Just Eat signed a collective agreement with the CCOO and UGT trade union confederations (Marà and Pulignano 2020; Rodriguez 2022). However, such agreements have been concentrated in traditionally male-dominated gig economy sectors, and it remains unclear if this is a direct legacy of historic — and persistent — marginalisation of non-standard/informal workers and women workers from many forms of formal trade union organising and collective bargaining.

Nonetheless, some exceptions exist. Perhaps the best-known example is that of the world's first collective agreement in the platform economy signed in 2018 by trade union 3F, with the **Danish** online domestic work platform Hilfr.dk. This enabled the platform's self-employed workers to choose to be reclassified as employees following 100 hours of service provision, thereby entitling them to minimum wage and other protections including employee pension contributions, paid holidays and sick leave, rest breaks and mandated worker dismissal processes (Vandaele 2018). However, after almost two years, it was reported that only 36 workers had benefitted, owing to the platform workers being largely non-unionised and an apparent lack of mandate from workers' organisations, which is attributed to the agreement being government (not worker) led (Sedacca 2022).

Other promising initiatives include a pilot agreement between the Handy cleaning platform and National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA) Gig Worker Advocates in the **US**, with provisions for negotiation, paid time off, a guaranteed wage of $15 per hour (higher than federal and relevant state minimums) and health/disability insurance for occupational accidents. Although not a formal collective bargaining structure, the agreement includes mechanisms for workers to express views to the company and advances the conditions of workers excluded from the National Labor Relations Act (Ibid.).

In October 2021, in **South Africa**, SweepSouth committed to recognising any trade union or other worker organisation, albeit with the stipulation that they "prove to SweepSouth that they have sufficient representation amongst SweepStars" (SweepSouth 2021). Other examples of worker organisation in female-dominated sectors have not yet secured such gains.

For example, in India, beauticians working through the Urban Company platform have organised since 2019 to dispute low wages, high commissions and poor health and safety conditions — first through WhatsApp and later leading 'India's first women-led gig workers' strike' and protests outside the company's office. However, they met with threats of lawsuits from the company, following which the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers urged the workers to join their organisation (Mehrotra 2022).

Finally, platform cooperatives are emerging as an alternative form of worker organisation outside the company-controlled model, including in women-led initiatives. These include the Digital Platform Cooperative Project (DPCP) for domestic workers in **South Africa** and the SEWA-led initiative discussed in this article series, as well as Up&Go — a highly successful women- and minority-led domestic work platform cooperative in **New York City** (Participedia N.d.; Cannon et al 2020). These models perhaps offer the most promising route to securing worker-ownership and quality working conditions given persistent decent work deficits in the mainstream gig economy. As one domestic worker involved in the DPCP project has noted: "In this platform, it will be ours, we won't pay anyone. … we won't need a middleman […] Working together as domestic workers it makes us feel that we have been listened to" (worker interviewed in Hunt and Binat Sarwar to be published).

Conclusion

Since our initial review, a great deal of scholarship has focused on the gig economy. Yet, research on gendered aspects of gig work remains scarce, particularly in the Global South. Moreover, despite some interesting (and largely isolated examples), policy has not kept pace — the pandemic has starkly exposed the shortcomings of the gig model for workers, and disparities associated with gender, age and other sites of intersecting inequality and discrimination. Our hope is that the spotlight shone on the challenges women workers disproportionately face and the extension of measures to support precarious and previously excluded workers will outlast the pandemic and pave the way for fundamental and gender-responsive policy reform.

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