



Gendered Dimensions of the Gig Economy: Examining Female Workers' Experiences in India's Digital Labour Platforms

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Article information

Received: 12th February 2026

Received in revised form: 28th March 2026

Accepted: 1st April 2026

Available online: 8th May 2026

Volume:2

Issue:2

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.63090/IJSSRS/3108.1932.0015>

Abstract

The rise of digital labour platforms has transformed the Indian employment landscape, creating new pathways for women's workforce participation while simultaneously reproducing and at times intensifying historical gender inequalities. This article examines the gendered dimensions of the gig economy in India, focusing on female workers' experiences across platform-mediated sectors including ride-hailing, food and grocery delivery, beauty and wellness services, domestic work platforms, and digital freelance work. Drawing on a critical literature review methodology and feminist theoretical frameworks, the study analyses peer-reviewed scholarship, policy documents, and reports from labour research institutions published between 2015 and 2025. The analysis reveals four interlocking dimensions of gendered platform labour: structural exclusion from male-dominated gig categories, the safety and surveillance paradox in mobility-intensive work, the persistence of unpaid care work that constrains platform participation, and the algorithmic invisibility of feminized labour in policy and protection frameworks. The study draws on intersectional feminism, social reproduction theory, and feminist political economy of platforms to interpret these patterns. While platform work offers flexibility and income access for some women, particularly mothers and those with care responsibilities, it also reinforces occupational segregation, exposes workers to safety risks, and provides limited protection against arbitrary deactivation, harassment, and earnings volatility. The article concludes that addressing the gendered dimensions of the Indian gig economy requires legislative recognition of platform workers' rights, gender-sensitive platform design, accessible grievance redressal mechanisms, and meaningful recognition of the unpaid care economy that shapes women's platform participation.

Keywords:- Gig Economy, Gender, Female Workers, Digital Labour Platforms, India, Intersectional Feminism, Social Reproduction, Platform Capitalism

Introduction

The Indian gig economy has expanded rapidly over the past decade, fuelled by smartphone proliferation, the maturation of digital payment infrastructure, and the rise of platform companies offering ride-hailing, food and grocery delivery, beauty and wellness services, home-based domestic work, and a wide range of professional freelance services (International Labour Organization, 2021; Srnicek, 2017). NITI Aayog has projected that the gig and platform workforce in India will grow from approximately 7.7 million in 2020–21 to nearly 23.5 million by 2029–30, representing a substantial reshaping of the country's labour landscape (NITI Aayog, 2022). This expansion has been accompanied by significant policy attention, including the recognition of gig and platform workers as a category in the Code on Social Security, 2020 (Government of India, 2020), and the development of

state-level legislation such as the Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act, 2023 (Government of Rajasthan, 2023).

Yet the gendered character of this transformation has received comparatively limited scholarly and policy attention. India continues to exhibit one of the lowest female labour force participation rates among major economies, despite recent modest improvements (Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2024; Vyas, 2023). Women's entry into the gig economy is shaped by, and itself shapes, longstanding patterns of gender inequality, including occupational segregation, unequal distribution of care responsibilities, mobility constraints, and gendered safety risks (Kashyap & Khanna, 2022). Understanding the gig economy through a gender lens is therefore essential for both feminist scholarship and inclusive labour policy.

Female workers participate in platform labour across a wide spectrum of services, from app-based beauticians and domestic workers to food delivery riders, ride-hailing drivers, and freelance professionals on global platforms (Aapti Institute, 2022; Kashyap & Khanna, 2022). Each of these segments has distinct gendered dynamics. Platforms offering home-based services, such as beauty and wellness or domestic work, employ predominantly female workforces and often mirror the gendered structure of feminized service labour outside the platform economy (Hunt & Machingura, 2016; Kasturirangan, 2023). Mobility-intensive segments, such as food delivery and ride-hailing, remain heavily male-dominated, with women's entry mediated by safety concerns, social acceptability, and infrastructural constraints (Surie & Koduganti, 2016). Higher-skilled freelance platforms exhibit their own forms of gendered patterning, often replicating broader inequalities in technology, design, and creative industries (Graham et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2019).

Against this backdrop, the article asks:

- What are the gendered dimensions of women's participation in the Indian gig economy, and how do they reproduce, intensify, or potentially mitigate longstanding gender inequalities in work?
- Three subsidiary questions structure the inquiry. First, what structural conditions shape women's access to and segregation within different platform sectors?
- Second, what risks and protections characterize female platform workers' experiences, particularly with respect to safety, harassment, and algorithmic management?
- Third, how does the unpaid care economy interact with platform participation to shape women's working lives?

The article makes three contributions. It synthesizes dispersed scholarship on Indian platform work through a feminist analytical lens. It identifies four interlocking dimensions of gendered platform labour that organize the empirical landscape. It articulates implications for legislative reform, platform design, and gender-responsive labour policy. The remainder of the article is organized as follows:

- Section 2 reviews relevant theory and evidence;
- Section 3 outlines the methodology;
- Section 4 presents the findings;
- Section 5 discusses implications; and
- Section 6 concludes with directions for future research.

Literature Review

Feminist Theoretical Frameworks

Several theoretical frameworks ground a feminist analysis of the platform economy. Feminist political economy of work, developing the insights of Marxist and socialist feminism, attends to the structural conditions under which gendered labour is produced, valued, and devalued in capitalist societies (Chen et al., 2022). Social reproduction theory, articulated by scholars such as Silvia Federici (1975) and developed in contemporary form by Tithi Bhattacharya (2017) and others, foregrounds the unpaid and underpaid labour, predominantly performed by women, that sustains households and reproduces the labour force. This framework draws attention to the ways in which platform work is embedded in, and shaped by, the household-level division of care.

Intersectional feminism, building on the work of Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000), insists on the simultaneity of gender, caste, class, religion, and other axes of difference. In the Indian context, women's platform participation cannot be analysed in isolation from caste-based occupational segregation, regional inequalities, and the differential gendering of urban and rural mobility. Finally, recent

scholarship on platform capitalism, including the work of Nick Srnicek (2017), illuminates the structural features of platform business models, their dependence on data extraction, their algorithmic management of workers, and their tendency to externalize risk onto the workforce (Wood et al., 2019).

The Indian Gig Economy: Scale and Composition

Recent estimates from NITI Aayog (2022) and various labour research institutions document the rapid growth of the Indian gig economy, with significant variation in the gender composition of different platform sectors (International Labour Organization, 2021). Beauty and wellness platforms such as Urban Company report that their workforce of service partners is predominantly female (Aapti Institute, 2022; Kasliwal, 2020). Domestic work platforms similarly draw on a female labour pool with strong continuities to the wider domestic work sector, which is itself heavily gendered and casteized (Hunt & Machingura, 2016; Kasturirangan, 2023). By contrast, ride-hailing and food delivery sectors remain heavily male-dominated, with women's share of the workforce often below five per cent (Centre for Internet and Society, 2022; Surie & Koduganti, 2016). Freelance and creative platforms exhibit greater gender diversity at the entry level but show familiar patterns of gender pay gaps and category segregation as one moves up the skill and earnings ladder (Wood et al., 2019).

Empirical Studies on Women in Indian Platform Work

A growing body of empirical scholarship has begun to document women's experiences in specific Indian platform sectors. Research on app-based beauty and wellness workers has documented long working hours, considerable physical strain, the costs of consumables and travel that workers themselves bear, and the constant pressure of customer ratings (Aapti Institute, 2022; Kasliwal, 2020). Studies on domestic work platforms have noted both the visibility and standardization that platforms can introduce to historically informal work, and the new forms of surveillance, contractual precarity, and platform commission structures that reshape the working relationship (Kasturirangan, 2023; SEWA, 2022). Research on women in ride-hailing has emphasized the particular safety considerations that shape participation, including night-shift access, customer screening, and the limited adoption of women-only ride options (Surie & Koduganti, 2016). Studies of freelance and remote work platforms have documented both new opportunities for women, particularly in urban professional households, and the persistence of gendered pay gaps and project allocation patterns (Anwar & Graham, 2021; Wood et al., 2019).

Gendered Risks and Protections

A recurring theme in the literature concerns the specific risks faced by women in platform work and the limited protections available to them (Centre for Internet and Society, 2022; SEWA, 2022). Safety, harassment, and the absence of physical workplace community feature prominently. Maternity, menstrual health, and care responsibilities further differentiate women's platform experiences from those of men. Algorithmic management practices, including rating systems, deactivation thresholds, and incentive structures, can have gender-differentiated impacts that are not always visible in aggregated platform data (Graham et al., 2017; Wood et al., 2019). The Code on Social Security 2020, while providing the legal recognition of gig and platform workers as a category, has been criticized for incomplete operationalization and insufficient gender-specific provisions (Centre for Internet and Society, 2022; Government of India, 2020).

Research Gap

Despite this expanding scholarship, gaps remain. Much of the literature remains sector-specific, with limited cross-sectoral synthesis. Theoretical engagement with feminist frameworks is uneven, with some studies privileging descriptive accounts over critical analysis. Comparative work that situates Indian female platform workers in relation to other South Asian and Global South contexts is limited. The relationship between platform participation and the unpaid care economy, although recognized in the literature, has not been systematically theorized within Indian platform studies. The present article seeks to contribute to filling these gaps.

Methods

This study employs a critical literature review methodology informed by feminist scholarly principles. Such an approach is particularly suited to a topic where empirical evidence is dispersed across disciplines and policy reports, and where critical theoretical engagement is essential for interpreting findings.

The review proceeded through four stages. In the first stage, a structured search was conducted in Scopus, Web of Science, JSTOR, ProQuest, the Indian Citation Index, and Google Scholar. Search terms combined gig economy, platform work, digital labour, women, gender, female workers, India, ride-hailing, food delivery, domestic work, beauty services, and feminist political economy. The window was January 2015 to August 2025, with selected earlier theoretical works retained for grounding.

In the second stage, inclusion criteria specified peer-reviewed empirical or theoretical work engaging with platform labour from a gender-sensitive standpoint, with priority given to scholarship focused on India and comparable contexts. Reports from labour research institutions including the International Labour Organization, the Centre for Internet and Society, the Aapti Institute, the Indian Institute for Human Settlements, and the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) were also reviewed. Exclusion criteria filtered out studies focused exclusively on technology design without labour analysis, and non-peer-reviewed materials. After screening, sixty-five publications were retained.

In the third stage, supplementary materials were drawn from public policy documents including the Code on Social Security 2020, the Rajasthan platform workers' legislation, NITI Aayog reports, and judicial decisions relevant to platform employment. In the fourth stage, thematic synthesis through a feminist analytical lens generated four interlocking dimensions of gendered platform labour. As a literature-based study using publicly available secondary materials, the research did not require formal ethics approval. Standards of accurate citation, transparent reasoning, and reflexive engagement with feminist scholarly conventions were maintained throughout.

Results

Structural Exclusion from Male-Dominated Gig Categories

The first dimension concerns structural exclusion of women from male-dominated gig categories. Mobility-intensive sectors such as ride-hailing and food delivery remain heavily male-dominated, with women's representation in many cities below five per cent of the workforce (Centre for Internet and Society, 2022; Surie & Koduganti, 2016). The reasons for this exclusion are not primarily individual preference but structural. They include safety considerations associated with night work and customer interaction, gendered access to vehicles and licences, family and community attitudes towards women in mobility-intensive public-facing roles, the relative absence of female-only or female-friendly platform options, and the cumulative effects of caste, class, and religion on women's presence in particular urban occupations (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2000).

Where women do participate in such sectors, they often do so through specialized programmes (women-only ride options, daytime-only deliveries) or as a small minority within male-dominated worker communities, with attendant difficulties of solidarity, mentorship, and informal information-sharing. The result is a persistence of occupational segregation in the platform economy that closely tracks broader patterns of gendered labour markets.

The Safety and Surveillance Paradox

The second dimension involves a paradoxical relationship between safety and surveillance in women's platform work. Platforms typically present features such as GPS tracking, customer verification, and rating systems as safety measures benefiting women workers (Aapti Institute, 2022). In some respects, these features do provide meaningful safety enhancements compared with informal sector equivalents. However, the same surveillance technologies also intensify the monitoring and disciplining of workers, with implications that are themselves gendered (Wood et al., 2019). Continuous tracking can erode boundaries between work and home time, restrict bathroom and rest breaks, and produce stress for women managing visible work alongside care responsibilities (Graham et al., 2017).

Furthermore, safety mechanisms within platforms remain uneven. Anti-harassment provisions for in-home services, escalation procedures for customer abuse, and post-incident support structures are often less robust than feminist labour scholarship would consider adequate (Hunt & Machingura, 2016; Kasturirangan, 2023). The asymmetry between the surveillance to which workers are subject and the protections available against customer or platform abuse is itself a gendered feature of contemporary platform labour (SEWA, 2022).

The Persistence of Unpaid Care Work

The third dimension concerns the unpaid care economy and its persistent shaping of women's platform participation (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 1975). Time-use surveys consistently demonstrate that Indian women perform several times the volume of unpaid domestic and care work performed by Indian men (Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2024; Vyas, 2023). Platform work's purported flexibility is often celebrated as enabling women's participation, and indeed it does open opportunities for women whose care responsibilities preclude standard full-time employment (Hunt & Machingura, 2016; Kasliwal, 2020). However, this flexibility is often achieved through the absorption of risk and unpredictability by individual women, who must continuously coordinate paid platform shifts with the inflexible timing of childcare, eldercare, and household management.

The result is what some scholars have termed a flexibility paradox: platforms market flexibility to women, but the structural inflexibility of care responsibilities, combined with the high temporal demands of

platform work for adequate earnings, often produces a doubled burden rather than meaningful balance (Bhattacharya, 2017; Hunt & Machingura, 2016). Earnings from platform work are typically calibrated for full-time engagement, leaving part-time workers, who are disproportionately women, with disadvantageous economics (Kashyap & Khanna, 2022).

Algorithmic Invisibility in Policy and Protection Frameworks

The fourth dimension concerns the algorithmic invisibility of feminized platform labour in policy and protection frameworks. Despite the recognition of gig and platform workers in the Code on Social Security 2020, operationalization has been slow, and gender-disaggregated data on platform workforces remains sparse (Centre for Internet and Society, 2022; Government of India, 2020). Where platforms produce diversity reports, the methodology and granularity vary widely, and feminized platform sectors such as beauty services and home-based domestic work are sometimes underrepresented in policy discussions that focus on more publicly visible male-dominated sectors (Aapti Institute, 2022; SEWA, 2022).

The invisibility extends to algorithmic management itself. Algorithms that allocate work, set prices, and manage ratings are not transparent to workers or regulators, making it difficult to identify or address gender-differentiated impacts (Srnicsek, 2017; Wood et al., 2019). The lack of mandated audit and reporting on gendered algorithmic outcomes is a regulatory gap with significant implications for women platform workers (Centre for Internet and Society, 2022).

Discussion

The findings carry several important implications. Theoretically, they support an integrative feminist analysis of platform labour that combines feminist political economy, social reproduction theory, intersectional analysis, and platform capitalism perspectives. Each of the four dimensions identified, structural exclusion, the safety and surveillance paradox, the persistence of unpaid care work, and algorithmic invisibility, illustrates how platform technologies interact with prior gender inequalities to produce new configurations of gendered labour rather than escaping them.

For policy, the findings underscore the need for legislative and regulatory frameworks that go beyond the formal recognition of gig workers to address gender-specific risks and protections. Implementation of the Code on Social Security 2020 should include gender-disaggregated data collection, platform-level reporting on workforce composition and earnings, and gender-sensitive grievance redressal mechanisms. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 should be clarified and operationalized in relation to platform work, including in-home services where the conventional workplace model does not apply. Maternity benefits, paid sick leave, and accident insurance need design adaptations for the irregular work patterns of platform labour.

For platform design, the findings point to several areas of intervention. Safety features should be co-designed with women workers and supported by robust post-incident response systems, not merely promoted as risk-mitigation marketing. Algorithmic management systems should be subject to gender impact assessment, including audits of work allocation, deactivation patterns, and earnings outcomes. User interface and rating systems should be reviewed for gendered bias, particularly in services where customers may evaluate female workers through gendered expectations not directly relevant to service quality.

For broader social policy, the findings emphasize the centrality of the unpaid care economy. Public investments in childcare infrastructure, eldercare services, and accessible public transportation directly affect women's capacity to engage in platform work on terms that do not entrench the doubled burden (Chen et al., 2022; Vyas, 2023). Recognition of unpaid care work, in time-use surveys, in the Periodic Labour Force Survey (Periodic Labour Force Survey, 2024), and in social policy more broadly, is a precondition for designing platform regulation that supports rather than exploits women's capacities (Bhattacharya, 2017).

Several limitations of the present analysis warrant acknowledgment. As a literature-based study, it depends on the quality and coverage of available scholarship, which remains uneven across platform sectors and Indian regions. The voices and experiences of women platform workers themselves are mediated through researcher framings, and primary qualitative studies, particularly those grounded in worker-led research traditions, are essential to enrich the analytical picture. Caste, religion, and regional diversity within women's platform experiences require more sustained intersectional treatment than the present synthesis provides. The pace of platform sector change also means that some findings will require updating as platforms, regulations, and worker organizations evolve.

Conclusion

This article has examined the gendered dimensions of women's participation in India's platform economy. Through a critical literature review informed by feminist theory, four interlocking dimensions were identified: structural exclusion from male-dominated gig categories, the safety and surveillance paradox, the persistence of unpaid care work, and the algorithmic invisibility of feminized platform labour. Together, these dimensions reveal how platform technologies interact with established gender inequalities to produce a distinctive, and in important respects worsened, configuration of gendered work.

Three broader conclusions follow. First, platform work is neither uniformly liberatory nor uniformly exploitative for women. Its effects depend on the platform sector, the worker's caste, class, and family situation, and the regulatory environment within which the platform operates. Second, addressing the gendered dimensions of platform work requires coordinated intervention across legislation, platform design, social policy, and the broader infrastructure of the care economy. No single regulatory or technological fix will be sufficient. Third, feminist scholarship has a critical role to play in making the gendered structure of platform labour visible, in advocating for gender-disaggregated data, and in centring the voices of women platform workers in policy and design conversations.

Several directions for future research are warranted. Mixed-methods studies that combine sectoral surveys with ethnographic depth would enrich the empirical base. Comparative analyses across Indian states with different regulatory environments and across South Asian and other Global South platform contexts would clarify what shapes outcomes for women workers. Research that systematically engages caste, religion, and regional diversity in women's platform experiences is particularly needed. Longitudinal studies tracing women's career trajectories within and across platforms would illuminate whether platform work serves as a stepping stone or a holding pattern for different categories of women. Finally, worker-led and participatory research approaches, particularly those built in collaboration with organizations such as SEWA and emerging platform worker collectives, can ensure that future scholarship addresses the questions women workers themselves consider most pressing. By pursuing such an agenda, gender studies scholarship can contribute meaningfully to the construction of a more equitable digital labour future.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the contributions of platform workers, women's collectives, and labour rights organizations whose advocacy and research grounds the literature reviewed here. We thank colleagues in gender studies, labour economics, and platform research for productive discussions, and anonymous reviewers for their constructive feedback. No external funding was received for this research.

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