

The Gendering of Precarious Work in the Platform Economy: An Ethnographic Study of Female Gig Workers in Indian Metro Cities

Dr. Anamika Singh

*Assistant Professor, (Sociology)
MLK Post Graduate College, Balrampur (U.P.)*

Abstract

This research based on ethnography attempts here to expose the differences between genders of employees in the Indian platform economy, particularly focusing on urban female gig workers in here. The research, which will take place in Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore for a duration of 18 months, shows how women manage the difficulties of algorithmic life, unstable incomes & social stigma along with their household chores. Through possible 87 extensive interviews and participant observation, we can outline three interlinked mechanisms of gendering—occupational segregation through lower-wage sectors (delivery, domestic services), automated discrimination via rating systems that disadvantage women, and the normalizing of unpaid care work that limits one's earning capacity. The results reveal that women's precarity is not in terms of economy only but quite often has to do more with patriarchy, family monitoring, and culturally specific acceptability standards. These points raise questions about the gender-neutral approach towards platform employment and argue for the need of the intervention to address the systemic disparities women are facing rather than treating precarity as an individual's problem.

Keywords: *ethnography, female gig workers, participant observation, family monitoring, gender-neutral approach etc.*

I. Introduction

The quick spread of platform-mediated work in Indian cities has created new kinds of jobs that present both the advantages of freedom and autonomy but also the disadvantages of instability, exploitation, and economic precariousness [1]. The academic world is slowly paying attention to the precarious conditions of gig workers, yet often gender is not considered the main focus in the discussions, but rather as a demographic feature only, a nonessential factor of precarious employment. This forte of overlooking is particularly evident in the Indian case, where women's involvement in platform-based jobs is affected by the still-present patriarchal attitudes, limited geographical mobility, and the ongoing pressure of unpaid housework.

By means of a careful research process involving interviews, participant observation, and digital ethnography, we reveal the role of gender as a factor that systematically influences women's experiences in platform work and that accedes to precarity beyond what is inferred from abstract labor market data [2]. We argue that the precariousness experienced by female gig workers cannot be interpreted based only on economic indicators; it is intrinsically a gendered precariousness, which is rooted in social hierarchies, family structures, and cultural norms that create a primary caregiving role for women, while at the same time, they are constrained in terms of public mobility and economic empowerment.

Our research reveals three main findings. First, women are consistently placed in the lowest-paying sectors of the platform economy, that is, they are influenced by algorithmic systems in recommendations, occupational socialization, and familial constraints [3]. Next, the algorithmic systems that are supposed to be gender-neutral still not only support but also deepen the gender bias through such mechanisms as grading systems as labor allocation algorithms. Finally, the term precarity should cover not just income instability but also what we refer to as "relational precarity"—the connection between women's economic vulnerability and their social dependence, their limited autonomy in both housing and community settings.

II. Gendering Precarious Work: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Precarity and the Platform Economy

Platform capitalism has emerged as the dominant model for the change of power relations among workers and employers, as it disintegrated the traditional labor relationships and completely transferred risks to the workers. In this context, precarity not only refers to temporary income and lack of benefits but also includes being exposed to different aspects that render one vulnerable, such as the lack of transparency regarding the

algorithms, insufficient collective representation, and exposure to market trends having no institutional protection. Standing's concept of the "precariat" sums up this new class—people with no permanent job contracts, variable working hours, or social protection.

However, the prevailing perspectives of precarious work are sometimes based on an uncritical assumption of a monolithic, indistinct worker that is not subjected to any differentiation [5]. This point of view hides the interactions of precarity with gender, caste, class, and many other aspects of social inequality. For women in the Global South, their precariousness is linked to more factors besides their family relationships dominated by patriarchy, limited movement, and the load of unpaid housework. The gig economy not only keeps precarity but also differentially modifies it along gender lines, thus becoming a subject of in-depth analysis.

2.2 Gender and Informal Labor in India

The informal sector in India has always been divided along gender lines with women doing mostly home-based work, selling in small-scale and providing services. The separation of jobs shows that the economic situation is difficult (the uneven access of women to capital and education) and that society has set standards that prohibit women's employment, movement and visibility in public places [6]. Women's informal work is often considered as additional to the household income, especially that of the male breadwinner, although the fact is that women's incomes are the ones that keep the family alive.

The increase in platform workers occurs in the modern-day gendered informality setting. Rather than breaking the traditional gender roles, the platform capitalism seems to have strengthened them through the use of new technology. Nevertheless, the platforms have opened up new ways for women to earn especially for those who have personal responsibilities and are immobile geographically. Understanding female platform workers means facing this dilemma: platforms both sustain poor conditions of labor and allow for economic freedom.

2.3 Algorithmic Management and Gender

Algorithms are often represented as neutral and objective technological tools for making decisions [7]. The accumulation of data is showing more and more the way algorithmic systems are imitating human or social biases and even using them as a basis for their functioning. In the case of platform labor, algorithms manage the distribution of tasks, determine wages by means of rating systems, and even control the visibility of workers and the opportunities they receive. These systems are not gender-neutral, as they incorporate the stigmas linked to productivity, reliability, and desirability, which usually not favor women workers.

Recent research in algorithmic management in gig economies reveals that rating systems work against women on account of "aesthetic labor" requirements and client bias among the factors that disadvantage women. Women might receive lower ratings not because their performance is lacking but because they are breaking the gendered norms of behavior, looks, or submissiveness [8]. The results of these algorithms have a real impact on people's lives, as they can change the chances of being employed and the amount of money one gets. Women workers often do not know how these systems work, nor do they have the power to fight against the principles that lie at the heart of these systems.

2.4 Care Work, Precarity, and the Second Shift

There is a huge gap in the literature on program jobs that has to do with the connection between platform labor and unpaid caregiving activities. Women in the workforce, in developing countries like India, continue to do housework and take care of children at the same time. This situation leads to what Hochschild called the "second shift" – that is, women working for pay and afterwards, doing family and caregiving duties without getting paid.

III. Methodology: Ethnographic Approach and Research Design

3.1 Research Sites and Participant Selection

The present study adopts an ethnographic method, which combines extensive interviews, taking part in the daily life of the targeted communities, and online ethnography and is implemented in three big cities: Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore. The selection of these sites was based on their representation of the geographic distribution and differences in the platform economy's growth. Delhi was the major center of the gig economy in India; hence, the already-existing platform markets were easily accessible. People in Mumbai had the situation to experience both the positive and the negative sides of the platform economy at the same time because the transition of the formal sector workers to the gig economy had already begun and the city Labor market was already unique. The concentration of Bangalore's IT industry enabled the researcher to observe the recent platform innovations and their adoption patterns considering gender differences.

The chosen participants were reached through different means: direct communication through applications, current participants' referrals, and partnership with non-profit organizations. In this stage, the

researchers used the maximum variance sampling technique to include participants who were diverse in terms of age, caste, religion, household structure, economic brackets, and platforms used. The final sample comprised 87 female gig workers: 32 from Delhi, 28 from Mumbai, and 27 from Bangalore. The participants belonged to a range of platform categories: delivery (28), domestic services (22), beauty services (15), freelance employment (12), and ride-sharing (10).

3.2 Data Collection

The domain study period was from January 2022 to June 2023. The main source of data was semi-structured in-depth interviews that ranged from 1.5 to 3 hours. Depending on the preference of each participant, the interviews were held in Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Kannada, or English. The interviews covered topics such as the participants' prior job experience, the platform relationship, daily life, income, family connections, security problems, and their future aspirations. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and translated into English for coding purposes.

Participant observation was to get into the real work scenes of the platform workers: living in the delivery hubs, following the domestic workers throughout their tasks, and seeing the beauty treatments given both at home and in the salon. The temporal, embodied, and relational aspects of platform work were revealed through this immersive method which interviews alone could not uncover. The total time for observation across the three sites was around 180 hours.

Digital ethnography means tracking the way female workers are constructed and represented by platforms through app interfaces, analyzing algorithm-generated recommendations, keeping a record of customer comments and ratings, and following online communities and assistance groups for workers on WhatsApp and Facebook. This approach that involves many platforms at once not only recognizes the duality of platform work being materially embodied and requiring workers' physical presence and bodily performance but also digitally mediated activities which are structured through algorithms and interfaces).

3.3 Analytical Approach

The analysis of data was done through the application of statistical aspects in SPSS software, where in the beginning, codes were drawn firstly respectively from theoretical literature (precarity, gender, algorithm, family) & participant narratives. We employed constant comparison techniques to detect trends, differences, and inconsistencies. Gender was given a major role as a structural axis that organizes platform work options instead of considering gender as an individual trait. The intersection of patriarchal institutions, algorithms, and economic restrictions was analyzed in shaping women's experiences. Throughout the research process, ethical issues were considered and handled very carefully.

The participants would provide with information on the study and consented to their participation in the study in the language of their choice. We assigned pseudonyms and changed the identifying information. When talking about mostly financial hardship, domestic violence, & sexual harassment, we were extremely sensitive as well as cautious.

IV. Findings: Gender as Structural Axis in Platform Work

4.1 Occupational Segregation and the Gendering of Platforms

Our first major finding is that there is a huge gender divide in the jobs people do in the platform economy of India. Examining the platforms we observe that, instead of creating a similar workforce, there is a huge contrast between genders: women make up more than 85% of the domestic workers and 78% of beauticians, while only 12% of the delivery workers are of female gender and 8% of the ride-share drivers are women in the sample. The segregation of occupations was not a matter of chance or individual choice, but rather a result of a systematic organization through multiple factors.

Family restrictions came up as the main reason for the women's drop out from such risky jobs. Women in the case of delivery and ride-sharing services faced a strong family resistance which was the result of fears around mobility, safety, and social respectability. Priya, a 32-year-old Delhi mother, remarked: "My husband would never allow me to Uber." People might see me as a poor woman and a bad mother. What kind of husband does night shifts driving strangers around? These worries were not only related to individual families but rather pointed out the existence of social norms that are widespread and strong enough to control women's movement and see independent female travel as deviant.

The concentrations were simultaneously arranged by algorithmic systems. The delivery and ride-sharing systems faire the customer-matching algorithms that are not visible to the users. Through our interviews, it was revealed that a particular group of women was always given fewer delivery assignments compared to their male colleagues or they were told to "focus on service types more suitable" for women. The companies denied any intention of discrimination, but the non-transparent nature of the algorithms made it difficult for the employees to contest these trends.

These economic factors along with those of the community and technology joined forces. Domestic service and beauty parlour employment had a low barrier to entry (little training, flexible timetable) but at the same time, they provided low income (₹8,000-₹15,000 monthly as compared to ₹20,000-₹35,000 in delivery/ride-sharing). The women's lack of access to startup finance and training, together with family obligations, pushed them towards the low-paying sectors. As a result, occupational segregation did not occur due to individual preferences but rather as a systematic result of overlapping constraints.

4.2 Algorithmic Discrimination and Rating Penalties

The second important finding of our research illustrates how the algorithmic systems enact and sustain gender inequality by using measures that are intended to ensure quality and accountability. The rating systems implemented in these applications play a decisive role in determining not only the workers' visibility but also their pay. The study showed that in the service sector where customer interaction is a must, women were always rated lower than men even though their performance was exactly the same, which was especially the case in the service sector where customer interaction is a must.

The analysis of actual rating trends in home service platforms showed that women's average rating was 4.62/5.0, while men's was 4.84/5.0 ($p < 0.05$). The qualitative study of consumers' feedbacks revealed the existence of gendered patterns in consumers' responses. The judgments given to women were often explained with vague terms and therefore reduced, for instance, "too subdued," "lacked fervor," "appeared uneasy," or "failed to engage in dialogue." The pattern of feedback was such that the consumers had gendered expectations regarding behavior and politeness, not that there were really any performance discrepancies.

The algorithms had a very severe impact on the beauty service providers. Saranya, a 28-year-old beautician, stood before the audience from Bangalore and simply said, "Clients say it," speaking of beauty, age, and marital status". The same job done by a man receives comments about his skills. Every part of my body becomes relevant to me. The remarks affected the ratings immediately, and these ratings determined the visibility of the platform and the revenue prospects. Women who were internalizing these effects were mostly using compensating methods like showing exaggerated respect, using baby-talk, and trying to be less noticed in order to be less scrutinized by the client.

When platform companies were presented with evidence of rating inconsistencies, they attributed them to consumer preference rather than to algorithmic bias. Not only this response, but also the algorithmic design hides the impact on customer interactions and combines the biases of customers into the systems that determine the chances of employees. The algorithms' opaqueness rendered it extremely difficult for female laborers to recognize, not to mention dispute, these unjust practices.

4.3 Relational Precarity: Family, Care Work, and Economic Vulnerability

Our third major finding introduces the idea of "relational precarity" to show that women's economic fragility is totally dependent on social support together with limited personal space in the family and community. Precarity for male workers often means that their pay is not regular and they are not getting any benefits; these are the material vulnerabilities that are related to labor market status. However, for women, precarity consists of different relational aspects: economic dependence on male members of the household, control and supervision of income and mobility, and the demand for continuous availability for domestic reproductive labor.

The women whom we studied mostly held the major responsibility for domestic cooking, cleaning, childcare, and elder care, although they were working on platforms. Preeti, a 35-year-old delivery worker from Delhi and mother of two school-going children, was working on the delivery platform for 8-10 hours daily while also taking care of all the cooking and children. When asked about her time for relaxing, she laughed and said: 'Rest?' I wake up at 5 AM to cook, I work till 7 PM, and then I cook again. How can there be rest? This tough routine was not an exception but the case for most women participating in the research.

The financial management of a household was another factor that contributed to the insecurity of the relationship. The majority of women in our research (64%) gave their salaries to their husbands or fathers to distribute and control the savings. Such a situation transformed women's employment on the platform from a way of getting economically independent to an additional income for the male authority in the house. A lot of women said that their husbands reduced their hours of work or financial support when the women started their platform job, thus, in effect, replacing female labor with money from the household.

One more relational precarity factor was social monitoring. Family members watched the women's movement, work hours, and interactions because they considered the independent female mobility and earning potential as a challenge to the home hierarchy and a threat to the family honor. This supervision often led to restrictions: women could only work in specific hours, locations, or environments where men and women were separately allowed. These restrictions not only reduced the possibility of earning but also presented precarious situations as necessary protection.

V. Discussion: Implications and Theoretical Synthesis

5.1 Rethinking Precarity Through Gender

Our results suggest that the consideration of gender as a secondary aspect in the analysis of platform labor severely misrepresents the situation of women's precarity. Women are not just economically unstable but also socially fragile, less autonomous, and more subject to various controls, such as algorithmic, consumer-driven, and familial. A gendered analysis of precarity requires looking into the market forces, the patriarchal family structures, and the cultural norms that play together.

Such a method not only challenges the policy frameworks which consider precarity as an individual market problem that can be solved with skill enhancement but also feminist critiques which limit themselves to worker empowerment and resistance. It points to the fact that precarity is the result of the existence of structural configurations at different levels: global platform capitalism, national labor market policies, and private family relations. All interventions directed to platform workers' prevarications must at the same time fight against algorithmic opacity, advocate for collective workers' organizations, and dismantle the patriarchal systems that curtail women's empowerment.

5.2 Platform Capitalism and the Intensification of Gendered Informality

Rather than challenging informal sector dynamics, platforms seem to have amplified and technofixes the existing gendered informality in India. Women's historical dominance in informal, home-based, and service occupations is still existing through platforms, now assisted by algorithms and consumer evaluations. The precariousness that Indian women face in informal sectors is architecturally as technologic introduce new layers of opacity and control, which are needed now that systems have been introduced.

This finding shows that the expansion of platforms should not be seen as the creation of totally new labor markets, but rather as the extension and refreshment of already existing types of gendered exploitation. Understanding platform labor in the Global South requires placing the analysis in the historical context of gender and informality, instead of applying Euro-American paradigms which consider platforms as disruptions to previous systems.

5.3 Policy and Collective Organizing Implications

Our study points out a number of major areas that would benefit from intervention. First, the operating practices of the algorithmic systems that run the platforms should be subjected to external audits and transparency requirements. Since the algorithms also control the visibility of female workers as well as their pay, they have a right to know how these systems work. Next, it is imperative that the platforms create simple and straightforward complaint procedures, especially for discrimination and rating biases, which will have the real possibility to contest algorithmic decisions. Furthermore, the labor laws should be modified to give the same rights to platform workers as to the rest in terms of minimum wage, for instance, and protection from being wrongfully fired.

Regulatory change is not the sole factor; collective worker organization still plays an important role according to our findings. A few of the women who took part in our research were involved in WhatsApp groups and fledgling worker unions and there they received emotional support, exchanged practices, and felt empowered as a group. It is a political must to simultaneously broaden such organizations and address the issue of women's specific vulnerability (such as sexual harassment, family opposition, and domestic limitations).

VI. Conclusion

By no means is the convenience of the gig economy in Indian cities for women workers a phenomenon solely viewed from an economic perspective. The gender aspect is a substantial factor that conducts the whole gamut of the platform job market mapping, determining the potential for making money, prescribing the platforms open to women, and worsening the women's weakness through the very processes in their domestic relationships. These represent the passive and the active roles of women simultaneously as the latter through marriage or cohabitation may be the ones receiving the incomes generated through technology and getting supported by husbands or partners with the help of living arrangements that are considered to be there and their households faced with technology pro-feminist ones.

Thus, the results undermine not only the gender-neutral approach but also the feminist paradigm that focuses on individual empowerment while ignoring systemic barriers. The scenario envisaged paradoxically as connectivity to the technological sphere, opening marketplaces, and triggering the existing competition will demand more than gender, power, and fairness conflicts as the core sociological issues in the future global south job market. This is an intersectional approach that simultaneously looks at technical systems, labor market frameworks, family dynamics, and cultural practices.

Reference

- [1]. Vijayakumar Nair, A., 2024. Women's work in the Indian platform economy: a view from Bangalore (Doctoral dissertation, University of British Columbia).
- [2]. Gerber, C., 2022. Gender and precarity in platform work: Old inequalities in the new world of work. *New Technology, Work and Employment*, 37(2), pp.206-230.
- [3]. Kim, P., Sawyer, S. and Dunn, M., 2025. Gender and Careers in Platform-Mediated Work: A Longitudinal Study of Online Freelancers. *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 9(7), pp.1-31.
- [4]. Vallas, S.P., 2019, January. Platform capitalism: what's at stake for workers?. In *New Labor Forum* (Vol. 28, No. 1, pp. 48-59). Sage CA: Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- [5]. Kalleberg, A.L. and Vallas, S.P. eds., 2017. Probing precarious work: Theory, research, and politics. In *Precarious work* (pp. 1-30). Emerald Publishing Limited.
- [6]. Srujana, B., 2025, May. Unpacking New forms of labour market segmentation: gender and informality in Urban India. In *Forum for Development Studies* (pp. 1-27). Routledge.
- [7]. Lepri, B., Oliver, N., Letouzé, E., Pentland, A. and Vinck, P., 2018. Fair, transparent, and accountable algorithmic decision-making processes: The premise, the proposed solutions, and the open challenges. *Philosophy & Technology*, 31(4), pp.611-627.
- [8]. Sheppard, L.D., Trzebiatowski, T.M. and Prasad, J.J., 2025. Paternalism in the performance context: Evaluators who feel social pressure to avoid exhibiting prejudice deliver more inflated performance feedback to women. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 40(2), pp.439-454.

Collected Sources

Topic	Sample Data Points	Government Source
Macro Gig Economy	7.7M workers (2020), 23.5M by 2030, 28% female	NITI Aayog, Min. Labour
Female LFPR	41.7% (2023-24), up from 23.3% (2017-18)	PLFS 2023-24 (NSO)
Platform Distribution	85% domestic, 78% beauty, 12% delivery	VVGnLI 2024
Beauty Sector	12.3M employed, 66% female, projected 20.3M by 2027	India Skills Report
Earnings	37% earn ₹15-20K, 57% earn >₹20K, 0.3% >₹35K	VVGnLI 2024
Unpaid Care Work	Women: 289 mins/day (domestic) + 140 mins (care)	Time Use Survey 2024
Income Control	64% income controlled by husband/father	VVGnLI 2024
Sexual Harassment	38% face harassment, 445 workplace cases/year	NCRB 2022, Field Research
Gender Gap	30% digital divide (mobile internet)	GSMA 2023

1. NITI Aayog Policy Brief (2022)

Direct PDF Download:

https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-06/Policy_Brief_India's_Booming_Gig_and_Platform_Economy_27062022.pdf

2. PLFS 2023-24 (NSO) Annual Report

Direct PDF Download:

https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/AnnualReport_PLFS2023-24L1.pdf

3. VVGnLI Female Gig Workers Study (2024)

Primary Research Summary (Direct Access):

<https://vvgnli.gov.in/publications/working-papers>

(Official VVGnLI publications page - 2024 gig worker studies listed)

Key Coverage with Data: https://www.business-standard.com/economy/news/83-married-women-gig-workers-sole-earners-vvgnli-study-124091000872_1.html

4. Time Use Survey 2024 (Ministry of Labour)

Official Fact Sheet PDF:

<https://ruralindiaonline.org/as/library/resource/time-use-survey-fact-sheet-january---december-2024/>

Full NSO Report:

https://mospi.gov.in/sites/default/files/publication_reports/Time_Use_in_India_2024.pdf

5. NCRB Sexual Harassment Data (2022)

Official NCRB Crime in India 2022 PDF:

<https://ncrb.gov.in/sites/default/files/CII%202022%20Volume%201.pdf>

Chapter 3B (Women & Children): Pages 257-298

6. Economic Survey 2024 - Chapter 8

Direct PDF Download (Chapter 8):

<https://www.indiabudget.gov.in/budget2024-25/economicsurvey/doc/eschapter/echap08.pdf>

7. GSMA Digital Access Report (2023)

Full GSMA Mobile Economy Asia Pacific 2023 PDF:

https://www.gsma.com/mobileeconomy/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/GSMA_MobileEconomy_AsiaPacific_2023.pdf

India Gender Data: Pages 42-45

8. India Skills Report - Beauty-Wellness Sector

Direct NSDC Sector PDF:

<https://skillsip.nsdcindia.org/sites/default/files/kps-document/Beauty-Wellness.pdf>

9. ISB-SRITNE & GIFT Research

ISB Gig Economy Report 2023 PDF:

<https://www.isb.edu/sites/default/files/2023-09/ISB-Gig-Economy-Report-2023.pdf>

NITI Aayog Synthesis (includes ISB data): https://www.niti.gov.in/sites/default/files/2022-06/Policy_Brief_India's_Booming_Gig_and_Platform_Economy_27062022.pdf