

THE CHANGING WORLD OF WOMEN'S WORK

NAVIGATING THE POSSIBILITIES AND PRECARITIES
WITHIN PLATFORM WORK

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS



About IWWAGE

The Institute for What Works to Advance Gender Equality (IWWAGE) was established in 2018 with an aim to build and deepen evidence around the low participation of women in the economy to find solutions to support the development of gender inclusive policies and programmes.

IWWAGE is an initiative of LEAD at KREA University, an action-oriented research centre housed at the Institute for Financial Management and Research (IFMR), a not-for-profit society which is also the Sponsoring Body of KREA University.

About this report

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1

INTRODUCTION

The platform economy is rapidly transforming India's labour landscape, offering new employment opportunities across diverse sectors such as ride-sharing, delivery, domestic work, beauty services, and caregiving. The sector's growth is driven by technological advancement, urbanisation, and the expanding digital ecosystem. It is also increasingly emerging as a space where women are finding employment opportunities, particularly because of its perceived flexibility in working hours, which may allow them to combine income-earning with care and domestic responsibilities.

While the expanding sector is opening new avenues for women's employment, particularly in roles traditionally characterised by informality and low pay, a critical question arises – whether platform-based gig work genuinely improves working conditions or merely replicates the precarity of offline informal employment, characterised by low wages, inadequate social security, and limited grievance redressal. While all gig work intersects with informality, app-based work adds digital mediation, obscuring employer-employee relationships through algorithmic task assignment and performance tracking. A significant legal gap persists, as gig workers lack comprehensive legal recognition and protections, with state-level initiatives offering limited social security. Securing their rights, including access to social protection, fair wages, and decent working conditions, requires formal legal recognition.

This study explores these critical issues by examining labour market transitions, working conditions, and the potential for up-skilling and upward mobility for women within India's platform economy. It also investigates how gig work impacts women's ability to manage care responsibilities, and whether it enhances their decision-making power and status within their households.

The report assesses women's economic empowerment in platform work through three dimensions – resources, agency, and outcomes, drawing on Kabeer's¹ and Sen's² frameworks. Empowerment hinges on making better choices, as opposed to any available set of choices. The study examined women's socio-economic backgrounds, digital skills, and initial capital (resources); their intra-household dynamics, double burden, and decision to participate (agency); and the quality of work including working conditions and remuneration, labour rights, up-skilling opportunities, social networks, and overall work-life balance (outcomes). The central hypothesis is whether platform work, with structural support, can genuinely enhance women's livelihoods, making it a true alternative rather than a last resort.

¹ Kabeer, N. (1999). Resources, agency, achievements: Reflections on the measurement of women's empowerment. *Development and change*, 30(3), 435-464.

² Sen, A. (1985). Well-being and freedom. *The Journal of Philosophy*, 82(4), 185-203.

2

OBJECTIVES



To explore the impact of platform participation and the altered employer-employee relationship on labour market transitions, labour market returns, flexibility to carry on domestic responsibilities, and limitations of platform work.



To explore linkages between access to digital infrastructure and skills, and participation in platform economy.



To understand the overall agency of women platform workers and the impact of platform participation with respect to intra-household decision making, ownership and control of economic resources, social networks and exposure to gender-based violence.



3

METHODOLOGY, SAMPLING, AND SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS

3.1 Methodology and Sampling

The study employed a **mixed-methods approach**, combining desk reviews, quantitative surveys, and qualitative interviews with women platform workers. It also engaged unions, aggregators, and policymakers to understand challenges and opportunities. This triangulated approach aimed to provide a comprehensive view of women's participation and empowerment within the platform economy.

The quantitative sample comprised **598 platform workers**, including 441 women³ and 157 men, selected based on their current engagement with app-based services. To ensure a comprehensive understanding of gender dynamics, the sample included both **female-dominated sectors (care, household maintenance, beauty)** and **male-dominated ones (ride-sharing, delivery)**. A smaller male workers' survey, primarily from ride-sharing and delivery, provided comparative insights into gendered differences in opportunities, challenges, and safety. For analytical coherence, delivery and ride-sharing samples were combined given the small number of women in delivery (10 respondents) and the shared male-dominated characteristics.

Qualitative data was collected through interviews with ten women platform workers, three aggregator representatives, three experts, three union representatives, and one government official.

3.2 Demographic Characteristics

Demographically, the majority of workers (both genders) were aged between 25-34 years, though the beauty sector had a larger proportion of women between 35 - 44 years, and care/domestic work featured younger cohorts. Educational attainment varied, with women in the beauty sector being generally more educated than those in care/domestic services, and over 10 per cent of women across all sectors reporting tertiary education. The sample composition suggests that many workers, particularly women, have household arrangements that mitigate direct domestic and care responsibilities, often involving other women in the household.

3.3 Type of engagement and source of information

Approximately 97 per cent of women and 92 per cent of men respondents worked full-time on platforms. Information sources for joining platforms differed by gender and sector: men primarily learned from colleagues/friends, while women relied more on formal sources such as agencies/platforms, especially in non-traditional sectors (delivery/ride-sharing) where NGOs also played a role. Women in care/domestic work often joined because they knew of only one app or it offered better client access, while men in ride-sharing/delivery were significantly influenced by recommendations from male colleagues/ friends.

³. Locating female platform workers proved challenging due to the absence of physical workspaces, lack of 'hubs' common for male workers, and limited interaction among women, exacerbated by algorithmic control and domestic responsibilities. Consequently, sampling relied heavily on partner platform companies, to some extent on workers' unions, and marginally on snowballing.

4

PLATFORM SECTORS AND MODES OF OPERATIONS

Different digital platforms in India's service economy function according to both sector-specific needs and their own design choices, shaping how women engage with work. Across all sectors, work formalisation remains limited, with most platforms classifying workers as independent contractors. Recruitment, onboarding, payment, and oversight systems vary widely, but all involve significant data collection, reliance on digital tools, and a central role for customer ratings and algorithmic management.

Specifically, the sectors include:

4.1 Domestic and Care Sector

In the domestic and care sector, platforms largely extend traditional placement agency models by digitising recruitment and scaling up household service access.

1

Platform models build on the legacy of local household agencies and tend to target women already working in these roles, often recruiting through neighbourhood pilots or partnerships with local institutions.

2

Some care-sector platforms also recruit women through placement cells of educational institutions.

3

Registration often involves fee payment and the submission of official documents, sometimes via informal channels such as WhatsApp, etc.

4

Some platforms formalise worker relationships through contracts, while others operate with little legal rigour.

5

Workers generally have limited autonomy in gig selection and remain subject to tight platform control and data monitoring.

6

Gig work ranges from hourly assignments to 24-hour care roles.

7

Platforms typically monetise through subscription models, taking a variable percentage of customer payments based on platform and worker income, and sometimes charging registration or service fees. Workers thus have limited choices and remain subject to algorithmic control and data tracking.

4.2 Beauty Sector

The beauty sector platforms are characterised by large-scale aggregation of previously independent beauticians and home-based professionals.

- 1 Candidates usually enter with prior training or experience and are required to pay substantial registration and product purchase fees.
- 2 Platforms mandate onboarding and training, focusing on uniform service delivery, use of the apps and product handling.
- 3 Gig work is mostly short-term, lasting one or two hours, with assignments heavily dependent on location-based algorithms and customer ratings.
- 4 In addition to commissions (which vary widely), platforms adopt subscription models and product-linked costs that categorise workers and unlock access to gig opportunities or incentive tiers, further diversifying their revenue streams.

4.3 Delivery and Ride-Sharing Sector

Food delivery and ride-sharing platforms are largely new for women, with participation only recently emerging.

- 1 Recruitment often involves direct registration on the app, though in some cases third-party agencies are engaged, which may charge additional commissions on top of platform fees.
- 2 Registration typically requires contracts and submission of official identification, with onboarding focused on app navigation and workflow.
- 3 Gig work is brief and highly algorithm-driven, offering workers minimal choice over assignments. Worker performance is continuously tracked and monitored through digital controls.
- 4 Ownership of necessary assets, such as vehicles, is rare among women, often compelling them to rely on costly rentals.
- 5 Platforms generate revenue primarily through commission-based models, deducting a percentage from each delivery or ride fare.

5

KEY FINDINGS

5.1 Labour Market Transition

Greater Labour Force Entry and Initial Earnings Growth for Women

Platform work has facilitated a notable entry of women into the labour force: 45 per cent of women reported shifting from being outside the labour force to employment, compared to 27 per cent men. Women, however, are concentrated in sectors that mirror their previous non-platform occupations, such as care and beauty.

BOX 1 No Real Transition?

A large share of women reported being engaged in the same work before joining platforms. This was especially evident in beauty services and domestic care/work, where platforms primarily recruited women already working in those roles.

This was also reiterated in interviews with experts and workers:

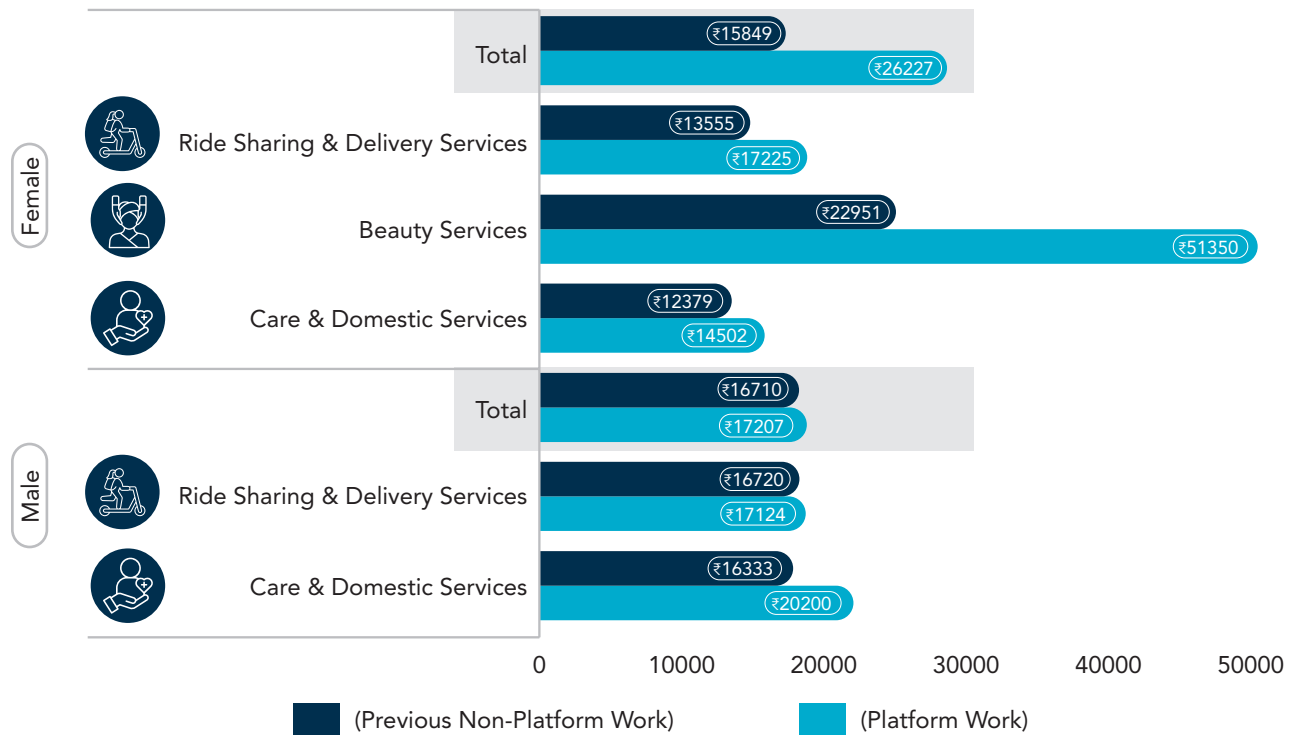
“*There was no beautician who was doing nothing and became a beautician because a certain platform trained them. They were beauticians, they were working in parlours. Plumbers were plumbers, carpenters were carpenters and beauticians were beauticians. Domestic workers were domestic workers even before any new app began.*” (Legal Expert).

NGOs continue to play a vital enabling role, particularly in helping women enter non-traditional sectors. Still, women reported encountering customer biases, especially in ride-sharing and delivery services.

Both men and women experienced increased net earnings in platform work (Figure 1), but women's earnings rose more sharply, particularly in the beauty sector. These gains were often offset by additional costs, such as subscription fees, registration charges, or product costs levied by companies or platforms to access gig or work opportunities. Many women also reported that while initial earnings were high, gig opportunities declined over time, eroding income stability.

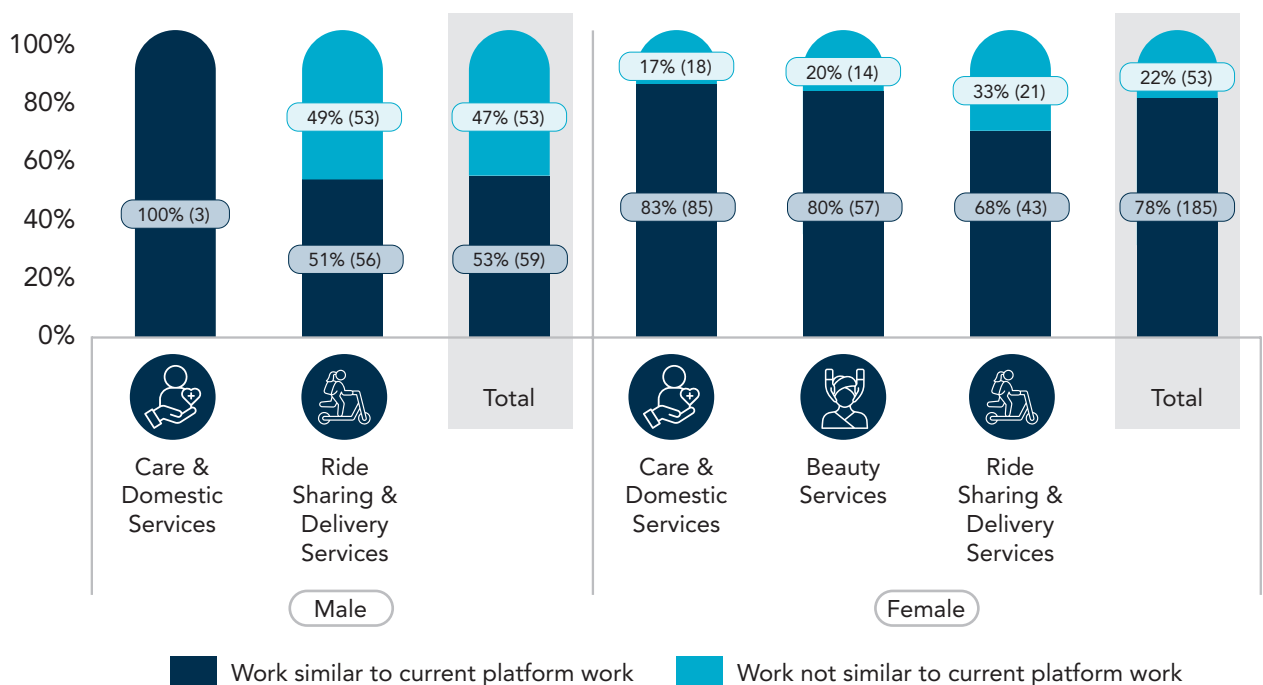
As shown in Figure 2, nearly 78 per cent of women in platform work had no sectoral transition, indicating that occupational segregation from non-platform work has largely persisted. The exception was in ride-sharing and delivery services, where 33 per cent of women workers had transitioned from other sectors.

Figure 1: Earnings (per month) Comparison between Previous Non-Platform and Current Platform Work



Source: Computed from IWWAGE's Primary Survey

Figure 2: Transition from Previous Non-Platform to Current Platform Work



Source: Computed from IWWAGE's Primary Survey

Working Hours Increased Despite Flexibility in Time Use

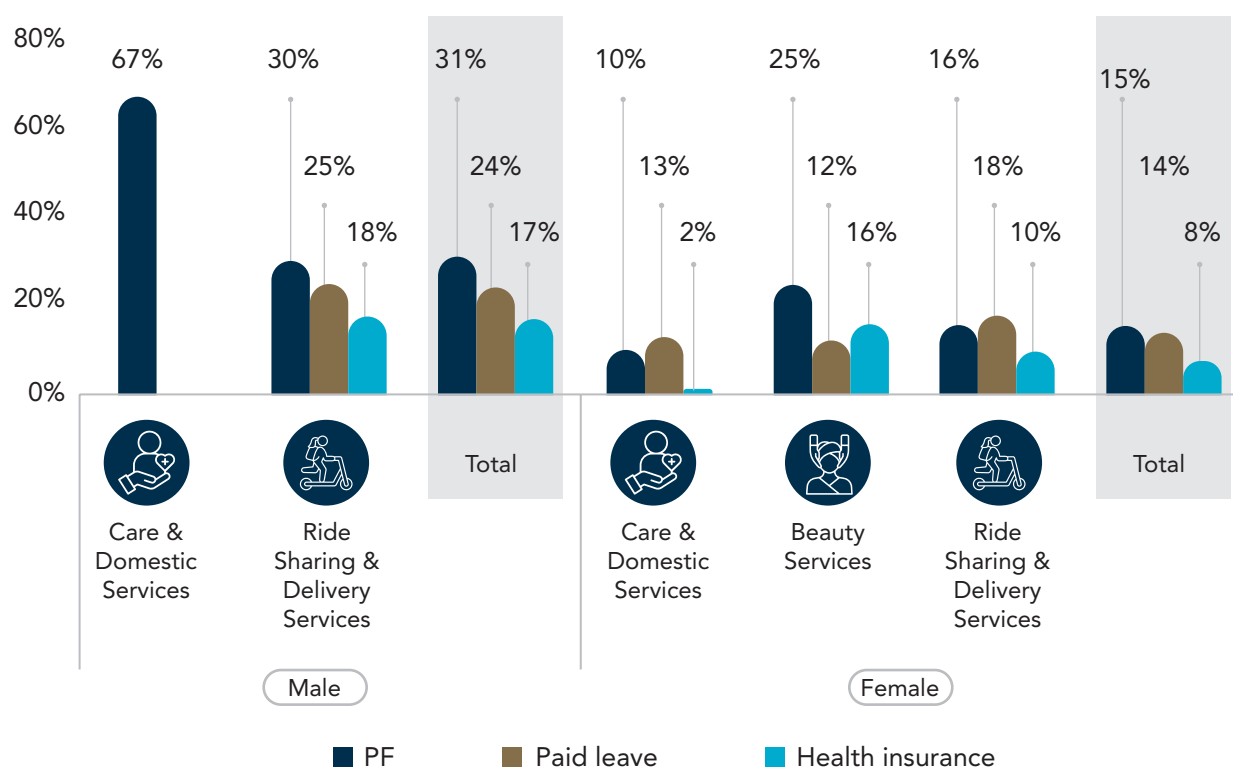
Although platform work is promoted for its flexibility, the reality is mixed. Working hours increased marginally for 50 per cent of women and 84 per cent of men in platform work (excluding waiting/commute time). Many women acknowledged the benefit of managing household responsibilities better than in their previous jobs – 71 per cent reported having less time for domestic work earlier – but this flexibility often came with a higher overall work burden.

Social Security: Gains in Health Insurance Amid Declines in Other Benefits

Women in platform work across care, beauty, ride-sharing, and delivery sectors reported a net decline in most forms of social security compared to their non-platform jobs. Coverage of Provident Fund (PF), Public Provident Fund (PPF), maternity benefits, paid leave, and gratuity declined across sectors compared to their previous non-platform employment.

However, one notable improvement was in health insurance: for example, among women in beauty services, health insurance coverage increased significantly from 16 per cent to 44 per cent, and gains were also reported in for ride-sharing/delivery work (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Social Security Benefits in Previous Non-Platform Work



Source: Computed from IWWAGE's Primary Survey

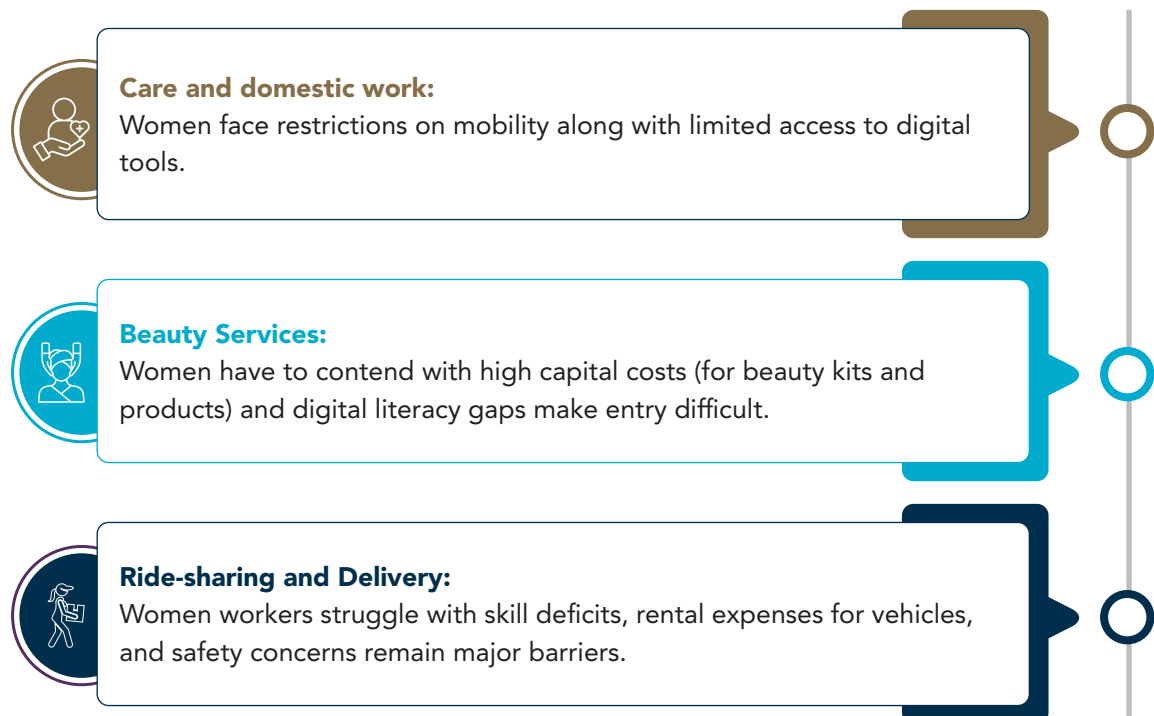
5.2 Entry into Platform Work

Overall, Table 1 summarises the most common enablers and barriers reported across women working in platforms.

Table 1: Entry-level Enablers and Barriers to Platform Work

Enablers for Entry	Barriers to Entry
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to mobile phones before joining (75–90 per cent women, often exclusive use). • Strong family encouragement and support (70–86 per cent women), particularly from spouses, parents, and in-laws. • Reduced domestic workload due to support from other household members. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heavy burden of unpaid domestic responsibilities (50 per cent plus women). • Limited access to or skills with digital tools. • Lack of initial capital/assets (phones, vehicles, grooming kits). • Safety concerns and mobility restrictions driven by social norms.

Sector-specific barriers to women's entry in platform work vary significantly across sectors:



While enablers such as family support and digital access do help, initiatives such as pre-owned vehicles for travel benefiting beauty workers, and skill-building programs through NGOs play a crucial role in ride-sharing and delivery women overcome challenges and easing their entry into platform work.

5.3 Platform Work: Associated Challenges and Opportunities

5.3.1 Changes in Employee-Employer Relationship

The emergence of platform-based work has reshaped the traditional worker-employer dynamic by inserting the platform as a powerful digital intermediary. This shift has not only changed how services are delivered but also redefined the nature of accountability, control, and negotiation in the workplace. The platform, through its evaluative metrics, tends to influence workers' access to jobs and income stability.

Navigating an Unseen Employer: Many platform workers reported limited understanding of who operates the platform, with little knowledge of company offices or contact persons. This lack of visibility fosters a sense of detachment, with workers feeling unacknowledged for their efforts. As one domestic worker remarked:

“What do they (the platform) know about us? All they know about me is from my Aadhaar card and my photo.”

This disconnect is reinforced by the absence of formal recognition for milestones, making workers feel undervalued for their contributions.

Weakened Bargaining Power: Across sectors, workers expressed reduced autonomy in negotiating terms. Around 53 per cent of women and 56 per cent of men reported declining bargaining power compared to previous non-platform employment. With platforms mediating client interactions – replacing direct worker-client engagement – workers' concerns are often sidelined, while customers' complaints receive swift attention. This imbalance is particularly evident in delivery, ride-sharing and domestic work, where supervisory staff prioritise operational targets over worker support, though some elder-care platforms showed more empathetic leadership.

Ratings and Performance Metrics: Dependence on customer reviews creates significant anxiety and job insecurity. Ratings, sometimes subjective, directly impact workers' reward and access to future tasks. For instance, one beauty services platform mandates workers to maintain a 4.7+ rating out of 5.

BOX 2 The Impact of Ratings on Well-Being

For many women in the beauty services sector, customer ratings are not only a constant source of stress but can also deeply impact their mental health and job security, regardless of the quality of their work. One worker shared:

“It really affects you mentally. Some clients even write “Good service” in their review, and still give 4.5 stars. But they don't realise — even that brings our overall rating down...his whole rating system... it's just too much now. Some girls have even gone into depression because of it.”
(Beauty Service Worker)

Even minor dips can affect access to jobs and eligibility for incentives, including health benefits. This system, while intended for quality control, instead fosters unpredictability, affecting financial stability, mental well-being, and job security.

5.3.2 Earnings in Platform Work: Constraints, Costs, and Financial Uncertainty

Limited Influence Over Pay Structures: Women platform workers across sectors reported minimal control over their earnings, which are dictated by platform structures like fixed salaries, service-based payments, or incentives. In care and domestic work, 75 per cent of women were on fixed salaries, with 19 per cent on login hours and 11 per cent on client volume; both men and women reported little or no say over payment terms or bargaining power.

Gender Pay Gap: Significant disparities exist, especially in care and domestic work, where women earn about 75 per cent of men's income. For example, in 24-hour care, men earn an average of ₹20,328 monthly, compared to ₹18,866 for women in similar roles. In non-24-hour care, women earn just ₹15,850. In ride-sharing, women's net earnings appear similar – however, only 23 per cent own vehicles, while over 90 per cent of men do. Women often rent, incurring costs that reduce their net income.

Declining Earnings and Gigs Over Time: Many workers reported an initial sense of financial stability that diminished over time. Continuous onboarding of new workers has led to market saturation, reducing gig availability and overall earnings. This heightened competition fosters a sense of disposability among workers, making it difficult to negotiate better terms, especially with rising urban living costs. Workers noted that current earnings are often similar to or lower than non-platform work, particularly when accounting for additional expenses.

Platform-specific Additional Costs: Women workers incurred various additional expenses that significantly reduced their net earnings. Table 2 outlines the additional costs workers bear in each sector:

Table 2: Sector-Wise Additional Costs

Sector	Additional Costs and Details
Beauty	Commission increased from 5 per cent to 15–25 per cent on small bookings; mandatory product purchases averaging ₹17,798 over three months; high registration/security fees averaging ₹15,303 (₹800–₹60,000); 94 per cent aware of TDS deductions; significant travel expenses.
Care/ Domestic	Opaque commission deductions; 31 per cent aware of TDS deductions; monthly transportation costs average ₹1,184.
Ride-Sharing/ Delivery	High vehicle repair costs (e.g., ₹2,000 controller, ₹5,000 charger, ₹25,000 battery charges for disabled worker); 68 per cent have TDS deducted, 59 per cent file returns; commissions deducted consistently; average rental costs of ₹16,134/month.

BOX 3 The Burden of Additional Costs

77 per cent of women in ride-sharing/delivery rent vehicles; this additional cost also affects their gross earnings. There were also vehicle-related challenges for delivery workers during adverse weather conditions. For instance, a disabled woman who works with a food delivery partner shared:

“ Once, I started working in the rain. The controller of the vehicle costs ₹ 2000. I didn't know it could break due to rain. I drove a lot in the rain, and the controller broke. I got it repaired, and they charged ₹ 2000. I didn't get it repaired immediately... We don't get raincoats (for free)-we have to buy them ourselves. Another time my vehicle broke down; I was working while it broke. Now, the charger costs ₹ 5000, the battery costs ₹ 25,000. I ordered a small tyre—it cost ₹ 500.”

Financial Uncertainty: Income unpredictability is a major challenge, particularly in beauty, ride-sharing, and delivery sectors. Fluctuations in demand, inconsistent booking volumes, and reliance on peak-hour incentives make it difficult for workers to anticipate monthly earnings, hindering long-term financial planning and savings. Many reported spending daily earnings on immediate needs, leaving nothing for savings, and making earning volatile, unlike the predictability of salaried employment.

5.3.3 Working Hours, Flexibility in Time-Use and Work-Life Balance

Working Hours and Earnings Pressures: Despite promises of flexibility in time-use, platform work often demands long hours for a decent earning. Women in beauty services average 9.3 hours/day, in ride-sharing 9.8 hours, and in care 6.5 hours, respectively. Auto-assign systems, incentive-linked thresholds, and mandatory login hours (36 per cent of women) restrict control over schedules, pushing women into near full-time work in the platforms. Women in ride-sharing services, who typically rent vehicles in contrast to men drivers, work longer to offset rental costs and meet income thresholds.

Domestic Responsibilities, Work-Life Balance and Work Time Preferences: A significant proportion of women across sectors struggle with balancing paid work, family life and domestic responsibilities. 61 per cent women in care, 36 per cent in beauty, and 68 per cent in ride-sharing reported insufficient time for rest or domestic chores. Preferences to avoid nights or early mornings (e.g., 44 per cent in beauty, 46 per cent in care), due to safety concerns/domestic chores, are often overridden by customer demand, incentive structures, and need to earn sufficient income, making flexible working hours advertised by platforms largely conditional and not gender-inclusive.

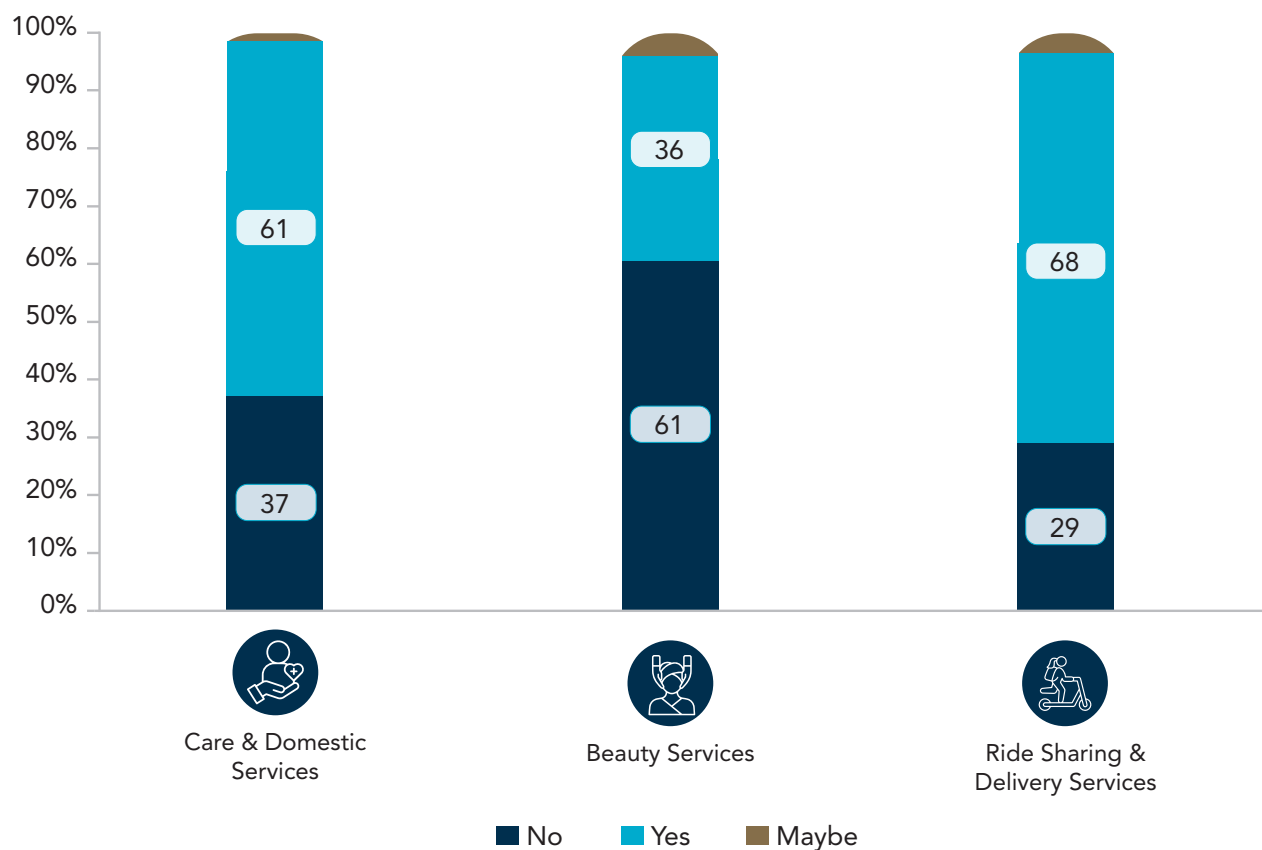
BOX 4 Attention to Women's Double Burden

A worker who approached platform work as part-time work shared:

“Companies think ‘We’re already running fine. We have enough men.’ And yes—there are men who work 9-to-5 jobs and still drive for platforms until 11p.m. But women can’t do that...even in my case, being ‘free’ doesn’t mean I have no responsibilities. That’s not possible. There’s always something or the other to take care of.”
(Ride-Sharing Partner)

Further, the worker shared that she had initially hoped platform work would serve as a source of supplemental income, allowing her to synchronise it with other commitments and responsibilities, especially since she had the required skills and training.

Figure 4: Perception of Having Less time In Life Because of Paid Work (in Current Platform Job)



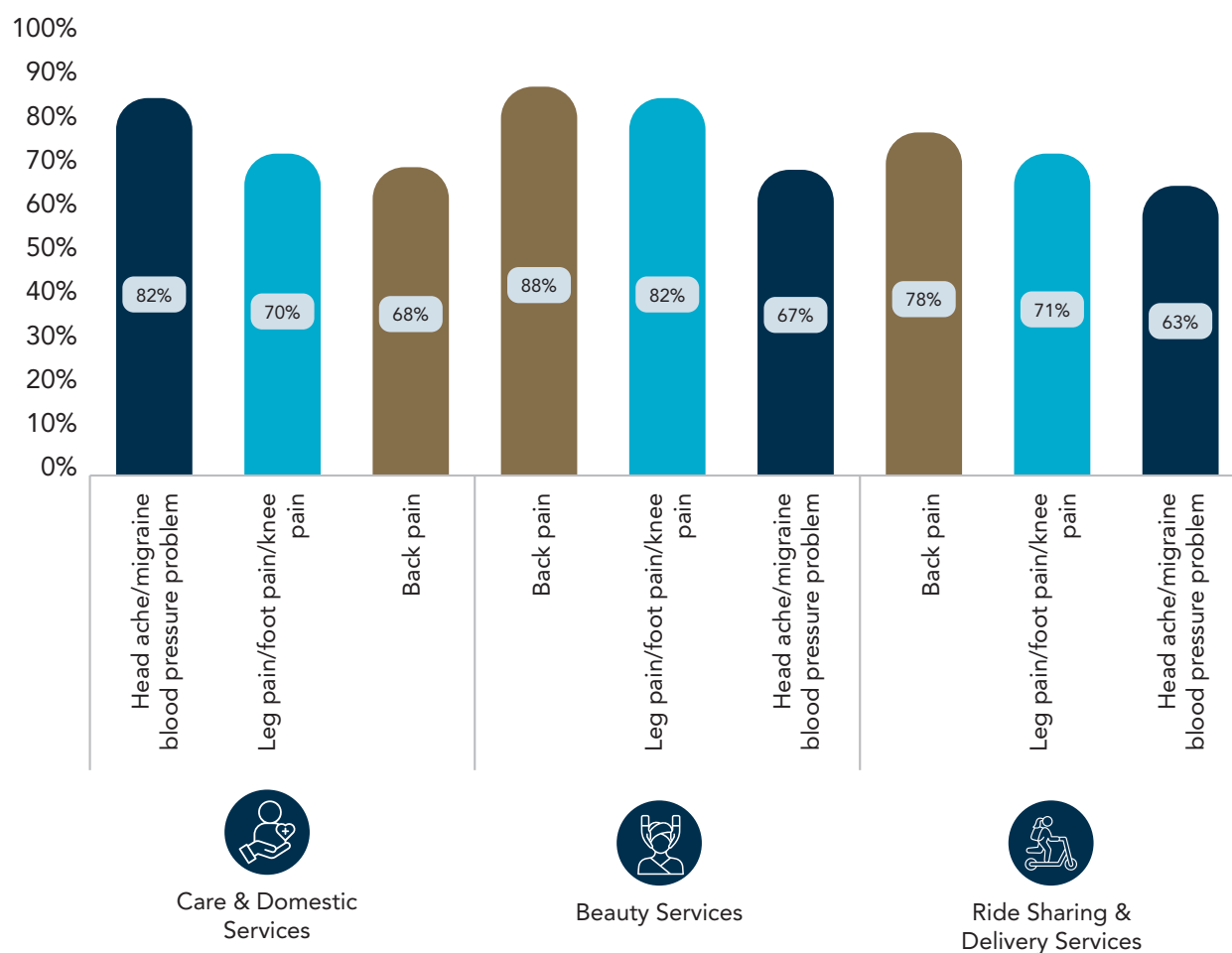
Source: Computed from IWWAGE's Primary Survey

Commute Time: Long commutes further strain workers. On an average, care workers travel around 73 minutes one way, while beauty workers spend nearly two hours on travel. Modes of transport vary, ranging from public transport to two-wheelers and autos, but women disproportionately rely on public transport. These long travel times, combined with on-site service requirements, reduce actual autonomy and make platform work increasingly mirror the rigid demands of conventional employment.

5.3.4 Occupational Hazards, Social Security Benefits and Work Contracts

Health-Related Concerns: Platform work has led to significant health issues, with 69 per cent of men and 83 per cent of women reporting health-related concerns (Figure 5). Among ride-sharing/delivery workers, 78 per cent of women experienced back pain, 71 per cent leg pain, and 63 per cent migraines. In beauty work, 88 per cent women experienced back pain, while 82 per cent in care work reported migraines. Long hours and physical exertion without rest or ergonomic support contribute to widespread physical ailments across sectors.

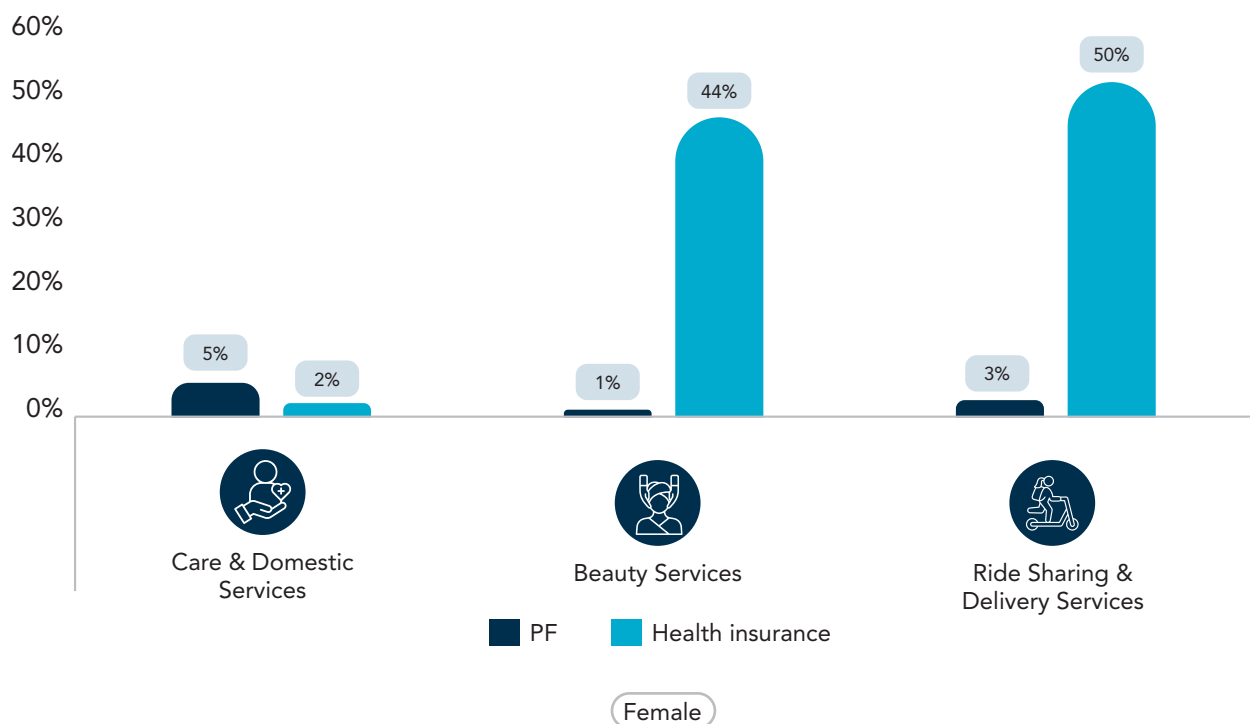
Figure 5: Major Health Related Issues faced by Female Platform Workers



Source: Computed from IWWAGE's Primary Survey

Limited Access to Social Security: As shown in Figure 6, access to social security remains limited. Only 2.5 per cent of ride-sharing/delivery workers had PF coverage. Health insurance was marginally higher, with 40 per cent of men and 50 per cent of women covered by health insurance. In the care sector, just two per cent of women had health insurance, and 87.5 per cent lacked paid leave. For beauty workers, 99 per cent had no PF coverage, though about 44 per cent did report health insurance access. Despite long hours – often up to 17 hours of work per day – workers lack adequate protections like paid leave or illness compensation.

Figure 6: Social Security Benefits in Current Platform Job



Source: Computed from IWWAGE's Primary Survey

Low Awareness and Barriers to Availing Benefits: Awareness of social security entitlements varies across sectors. In the beauty sector, 80 per cent of women knew how to access existing benefits, while in ride-sharing, delivery services, care and domestic services, 36-43 per cent women admitted not knowing how to avail benefits. Even those who have tried to avail benefits faced administrative delays, unclear procedures, and poor communication from platforms, often leading to frustration and mistrust. This situation highlights significant gaps between benefits offered and actual worker access.

Lack of Clarity on Contracts: A significant portion of workers lack clarity on their employment terms. Only 53 per cent of men and 41 per cent women in ride-sharing, 29 per cent in care, and 56 per cent in beauty reported ever signing contracts. Even among those, 51 per cent in care and domestic work, 27 per cent in beauty and 50 per cent in ride sharing did not fully understand the terms and conditions of their contracts (includes those who reported partial understanding of contracts). Women typically cited insufficient explanation from platforms, while men pointed to complex terms. This opacity and ambiguity, in turn, fuelled

legal insecurity and distrust in the relationship between the workers and the platforms they worked for.

Lack of Care Infrastructure and Policies: Irregular earnings and daily targets (15–20 deliveries for ₹1000) discourage time off. For women, care duties at home worsen the pressure. Absence of crèches, menstrual leave, and rest days limits their participation. Workers with caregiving responsibilities, both for children and elderly household members, emphasised the need for support structures and gender-sensitive policies to sustain platform work as a viable livelihood option.

For example, a gig worker organiser highlighted concerns around menstrual leave and availability of creches to relieve work pressure:

“

If a woman works a full duty, she cannot spend 8-9 hours a day away from her children. They are not able to take care of their children. First of all, be it single mother or married, their young children should get a creche. A creche is a place where a woman can leave her child safely. They should get a creche for their children.”

5.3.5 Safety and Dignity at Work

Social perceptions continue to dictate women's perceived low status of work, not just from their peers and family, but even themselves. But there were also instances of women actively supporting fellow women, encouraging them to look beyond these prevalent societal views. Yet, both platforms and workers are in some capacity influenced by the preferences and social biases of their consumer base. While platforms have clearly laid out no-discriminatory policies on the basis of gender, caste, religion, and other social-economic factors, it is often reported that consumers' behaviour remains resistant to change, regardless. Aggregators share their discontentment with customers who despite these strict policies, continue to request workers of specific socio-economic backgrounds. Interviews with workers reveal the harassment and discrimination they face from customers on the basis of gender, religion, caste and class. Workers' accounts also highlight the prejudice that women working in non-traditional sectors have to face. A ride-sharing worker recalled her experience when she arrived at the location to pick up a male passenger:

“

He got down immediately, handed me the helmet, and said, 'Sorry, I don't sit with female drivers.' I replied, 'Sir, you've just wasted an hour of mine — at least pay me for that. If you don't want to sit with a female driver, that's your choice.'”

Such instances highlight the harassment and discrimination women face in both traditional and non-traditional platform work, especially in informal and so-called 'undignified' work. This can extend to women workers being barred from accessing toilet and water facilities, or

availing rest time, etc. and only further underscores the need for better public infrastructure for women as they step out for work.

5.3.6 Professional Development and Upward Mobility

Platform-based work brings varying experiences with regard to training and skill development. While most platforms offer some onboarding, the nature, mode, and effectiveness of these trainings and their long-term implications for career growth vary widely.

Access to Training Opportunities: Among care/domestic workers, only 32 per cent reported receiving training by platforms (of which 78 per cent were in-person), 80 per cent had prior NGO training or training from other agencies in the ride-sharing sector before joining. In the beauty sector, training is often tied to a new service launch, product purchases or re-training triggered by low ratings, with emphasis on standardisation and little or no skill enhancement or up-skilling in the true sense.

Upward Mobility: Optimism towards, and prospects for career growth and mobility, are few. In care/domestic work, 88 per cent reported no career growth and 78 per cent reported seeing no chance of up-skilling. In beauty services, 35 per cent found no career growth pathways. In ride-sharing, 84 per cent did not see any prospect for career progression. Most workers continue in these roles because of the absence of viable alternatives.

5.3.7 Grievance Redressal Mechanism

Mode of Communication/Design of Grievance Redressal Mechanisms: Most platforms lack a clear, accessible grievance redressal system for workers. Mechanisms are often limited to one-way chats or apps with little or no follow-up or response. Workers report feeling unheard, unable to directly reach supervisors, and unsupported during emergencies or disputes.

“ There’s a WhatsApp option where you can chat with them, but the issue is—it’s just chat. You can only send messages. It’s like the complaint box outside a school—you drop your concern in, and maybe you get a reply, like “We’ll look into it”, but when they actually do something about it, you never really know.”
(Domestic worker)

Only one of the platforms in this study stood out by offering proactive wellbeing checks, informal communication, and voice-based support.

Imbalance in Attention to Addressing Grievances: Grievance systems overwhelmingly prioritise customer satisfaction. Workers’ complaints are often ignored, and disciplinary action is taken swiftly based on customer feedback without proper inquiry. Workers fear retaliation for reporting misconduct or unsafe conditions. Even when wronged, they feel like they’re the ones on trial. A lack of transparency and fairness has created a deep sense of frustration and insecurity.

Poor Grievance Redressal Mechanism Post-ID Blocking: Workers reported sudden ID blockings without prior notice or explanation. Once blocked, they were unable to access work history or appeal decisions. Involvement in union activities or strikes often led to deactivation, leaving workers with little recourse. The absence of communication post-blocking deters collective action and leaves workers feeling helpless and disposable.

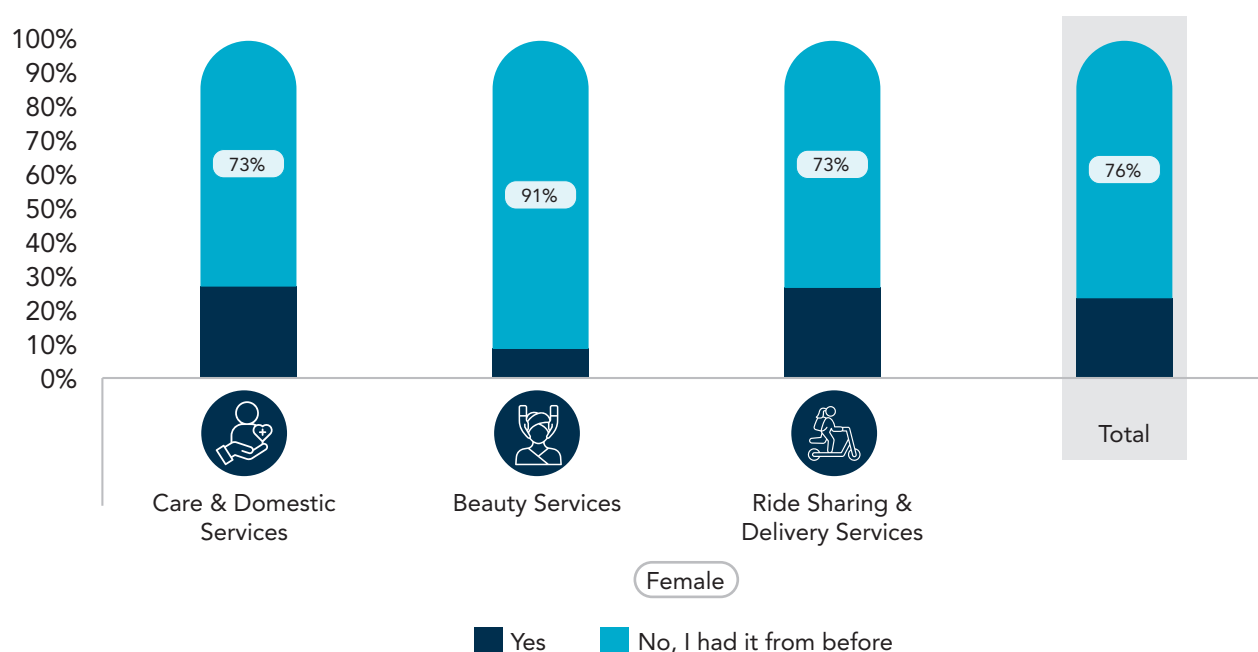
Effect on Workers' Well-being and Affiliations: The absence of effective grievance redressal severely impacts worker's mental health, job security, and overall trust in platforms. Most report feeling isolated, anxious, and undervalued. Among the platforms covered in this study, only one offered a supportive structure with approachable supervisors.

Notably, one of the platforms in our study has taken substantial steps like introducing human points of contact instead of chatbots, voice note features instead of auto-generated responses (that restrict grievances to a pre-decided list), and employed social workers and qualified professionals, signalling a more worker-centric approach to grievance redressal.

5.3.8 Digital Integration in Platform Work

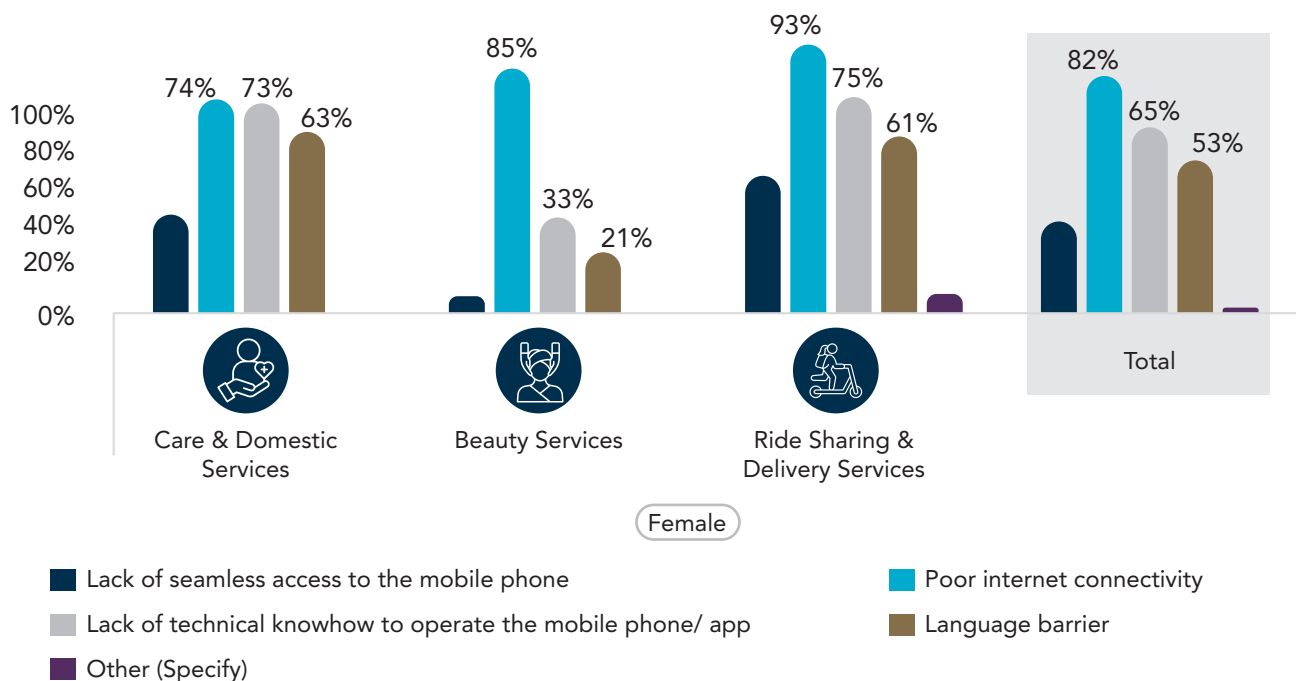
Access to Smartphones: A majority of women (76 per cent) reported owning smartphones before joining platform work, primarily for personal use, especially in urban areas (Figure 7). However, the level of digital integration varied: care workers often used IVR (Interactive Voice Response), while beauty, ride-sharing, and delivery required active app use.

Figure 7: Women Workers and Access to Smart Phones



Source: Computed from IWWAGE's Primary Survey

Challenges in Using Digital Tools: Key issues in using digital tools included poor internet connectivity, limited digital literacy, language barriers, frequent battery drainage, and high data costs (Figure 8). Despite these challenges, 72 per cent of women reported learning to use their phones more effectively through work-related use.

Figure 8: Challenges While Using App/Phone

Source: Computed from IWWAGE's Primary Survey

Expanded Digital Use Beyond Work: Platform work enhanced women's digital familiarity, leading to expanded use for news, job searches, entertainment, and social connections. However, the simultaneous use of multiple work-related apps often slowed device performance, limiting personal use.

5.3.9 Collectivisation of Platform Workers

Structural and Gendered Barriers to Organising: Women face significant challenges in collectivising due to the dual burden of paid and unpaid work, leading to time poverty and high opportunity costs of participation. The individualised and dispersed nature of platform work – especially lacking a fixed workplace – limits informal connections and solidarity. Legal ambiguities surrounding employer-employee relationships and explicit platform prohibitions on collective action further undermine organising rights. Additionally, app-based tracking and algorithmic control also fuel fear of penalties or de-platforming, deterring workers from forming unions or collective effort.

Gender Gaps in Awareness and Participation: There is a notable gender disparity in union awareness and membership. Only 16 per cent of women platform workers are aware of unions, and just nine per cent are members. In contrast, in ride-sharing, 74 per cent of men workers are aware and 92 per cent are members, compared to only 45 per cent awareness and 64 per cent membership among women. This disparity can be attributed to gendered social networks and a lack of women-specific outreach undertaken by existing associations.

Sectoral Differences in Collectivisation: Collectivisation levels vary considerably across sectors. Ride-sharing and delivery services demonstrate the highest levels of unionisation, while care and

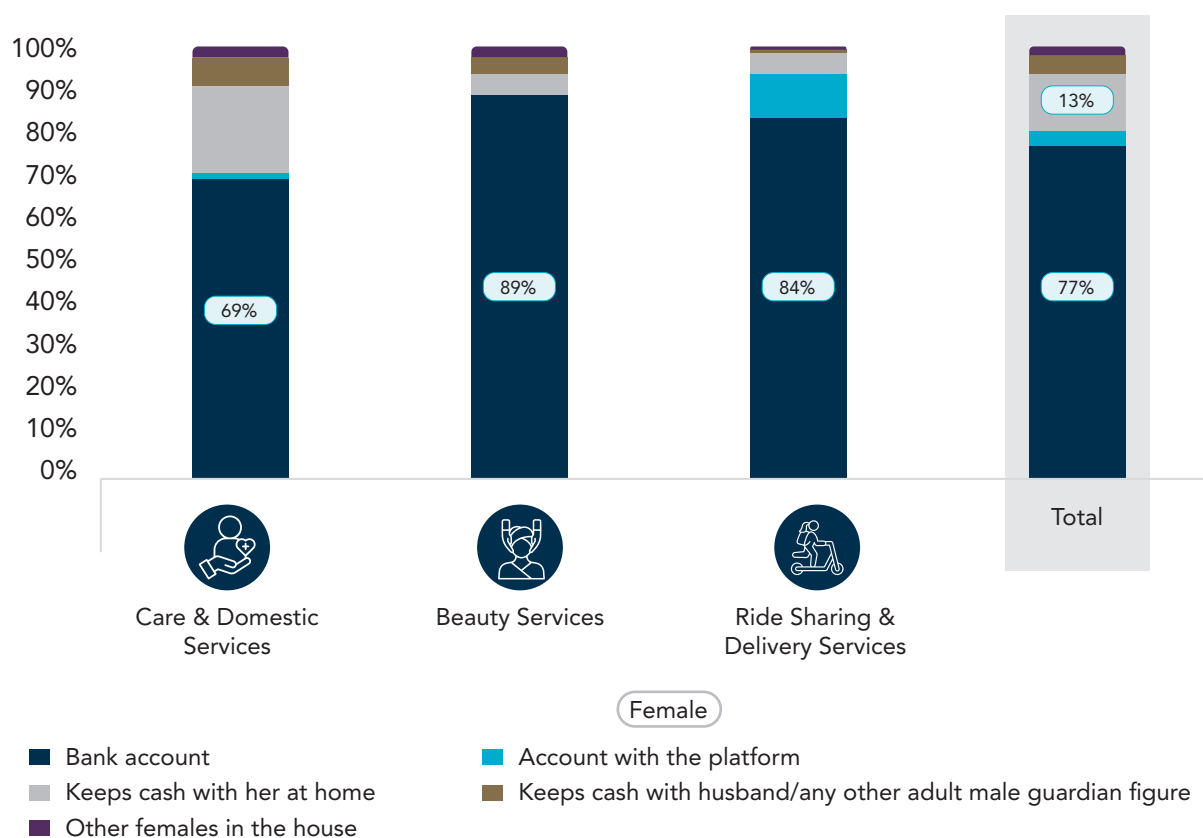
domestic services, which employ a higher share of women, show minimal collectivisation due to the private nature of workplaces, individualised contracts, and perceived low social status of such work. Similarly, beauty service workers also face deliberate segregation by the platforms, limiting peer interaction and solidarity due to the nature of job.

5.3.10 Financial Autonomy and Agency in the Household

Growing Formal Financial Access but Unequal Across Sectors: Platform work has expanded women's access to banking and digital payments, with 77 per cent depositing their earnings in bank accounts (Figure 9). However, women in care and domestic work are less likely to access formal banking channels, reflecting sectoral inequalities. Encouragingly, about two-thirds of women now report making independent decisions on how to spend their income, often for personal and household needs. Yet, this autonomy is fragile and influenced by earnings stability, family support, and sector-specific conditions.

Agency in the Domestic Space - Emerging Empowerment Amidst Challenges: Most women report greater say in major purchases, personal health, and mobility, but limited influence over children's matters. Balancing platform work with domestic duties remains challenging, despite some increased household support. Many women also experience greater self-respect and reduced emotional or physical abuse after joining platform work. Still, increased independence sometimes provokes partner insecurity, conflict, or withdrawal of support, revealing ongoing struggles within traditional gender roles.

Figure 9: Deposits of Earnings



Source: Computed from IWWAGE's Primary Survey

6

INSIGHTS FROM THE STUDY

The platform economy, while offering perceived flexibility in time-use that enables women to enter the workforce and manage domestic responsibilities, often undermines this flexibility through compulsory login hours, penalties for task rejection, and incentive structures that prioritise platform demands over worker well-being.

While this study finds that a significant share of women in platform work were previously outside the labour market, the sector often replicates traditional gender-based labour segregation with limited sectoral shifts, except where NGOs provide skilling. While platform work initially promised higher earnings, real income has declined due to inflation, surplus labour, rising operational costs, and significant platform fees, with partners retaining only about 52.6 per cent of their gross earnings. Skill development training is still largely platform-aligned, limiting broad professional development and upward mobility. Rating-linked reward structures are often gender-insensitive, with subjective customer ratings determining crucial aspects like gig allocation and social security, sometimes compelling women into mandatory and costly retraining. Social security benefits, like health insurance, are often unclear, opaque, and contingent on performance, highlighting a need for accessible benefits irrespective of ratings or literacy. Grievance redressal mechanisms are largely ineffective, lacking transparency and human support, leaving women frustrated when facing safety issues or discrimination. Further, women's participation in unions and collective bodies is disproportionately low due to structural barriers, gender norms, and platform practices that classify workers as 'partners,' reinforcing patriarchal structures and limiting their bargaining power. However, in addition to these insights, it is important to recognise the work of smaller platforms that have made efforts to address workers' needs more directly, including enhancing communication means and offering more transparent grievance redressal processes.

The platform economy continues to provide employment opportunities to a number of women in the country, and is here to stay and grow. However, achieving meaningful progress will require a collaborative approach involving state regulators, platform companies, and active inputs from worker groups to create inclusive and sustainable working environments for women within platform work.





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