EVENT PROCEEDINGS

Women in the Platform Economy: Evidence, Accountability and Algorithmic Governance

Host organisation	Institute for What Works to Advance Gender Equality (IWWAGE)
Format	Virtual panel discussion and Q&A (recording uploaded on IWWAGE's YouTube channel)
Date	4 June 2026
Proceedings prepared by	Nabankur Huda, Research Associate, LEAD at Krea University

Prepared from the session notes and cross-checked against the full speaker-attributed transcript.

Participants

Name	Role	Function in session
Sruthi Kutty	Head of Policy and Strategy, IWWAGE	Moderator/host
Dr. Bidisha Mondal	Head of Research and Strategy, IWWAGE	Panellist - macro context, labour-market outcomes
Prakriti Sharma	Senior Research Manager, IWWAGE	Panellist - worker challenges, grievance redressal, collective action, policy

Purpose and context

The session presented IWWAGE's body of research on women's participation in India's platform economy. IWWAGE has engaged with the gig economy since 2020 and frames this within its wider focus on women's economic empowerment and female labour force participation (FLFP). The discussion aimed to surface where platform work creates genuine opportunity for women, where the gaps lie, and what policy, platform-level and advocacy responses are needed.

The studies referenced were:

- **2020 study** — examined a cohort of beauty workers; focused on labour-market outcomes and the flexibility of platform participation.
- **2025 study (MacArthur Foundation)** — broadened the sectoral scope to include traditionally women-dominated sectors (beauty, domestic and care work) and non-traditional / male-dominated sectors (ride-sharing, delivery). Wider geographic coverage. Looked beyond labour-market outcomes to women's agency in the domestic space, collectivisation, and grievance redressal.

- **2025 study (ILO-funded)** — deep dive into grievance redressal mechanisms and operational realities; report not yet published at the time of the session.

1. Macroeconomic framing

- Per the **NITI Aayog** estimate, the gig workforce is projected to reach roughly **23.5 million by 2029–30**.
- Recent gains in FLFP have been driven largely by **rural women**, with much weaker growth among urban women. As the platform economy is urban-centric and built on flexibility (who to work for, how much, and when), it was expected to draw urban women into the workforce.
- Multiple **state-level legislations** are emerging to govern the platform economy, making it important to understand women's specific challenges so they can be reflected in legislative frameworks.

Platform modes of operation differ sharply by sector

- **Domestic and care:** Limited geographic reach (typically 2–3 cities), limited customer and worker base. Revenue mainly from commissions and subscription fees charged to both customers and workers. Largely informal — one domestic-work platform was found to be operating **without a legal licence**. Gig duration ranged from hourly tasks to 24-hour service (sometimes live-in with the client).
- **Beauty:** In addition to commissions/subscriptions, a significant revenue stream comes from **selling products (beauty kits, spa tools, etc.) to service partners at prices well above market rate**. Large geographic reach, sometimes international; large customer base: one platform reported engaging ~47,000 workers. These platforms tend to **onboard workers who are already sector-skilled**. Gigs are short (1–2 hours). **Ratings are central**, linked to earnings, social security and continued access.
- **Ride-sharing:** Revenue mainly from subscriptions and commissions from both sides. **Women's participation is very limited** due to restrictive supply-side norms, negative employer bias, and a **high entry barrier** (need to own or rent a vehicle).
- **Delivery:** Revenue from commissions/subscriptions plus **intermediaries** (e.g., advertising fees charged to restaurants). Operates at a large, sometimes international scale.

Does the platform economy bring women into work? (MacArthur study)

- Survey of ~600 workers, of whom ~440 were women.
- **~45% of women** reported they were **not working before** joining the platform — versus only **~27% of men**. Platform work has therefore meaningfully facilitated women's entry into the workforce.

Sectoral transition

- In care, domestic and beauty (traditionally women-dominated), most women were already in a **similar** sector before joining.
- In ride-sharing and delivery, ~**33% of women** had come from a **dissimilar** sector. This transition was largely enabled by NGOs such as the **Azad Foundation**, which provides driving skills, not by the platforms themselves.

2. Earnings, social security, flexibility and skilling

Earnings (pre-platform vs. current)

- Ride-sharing and delivery: **moderate** increase.
- Beauty: **significant** increase, but workers complained of **rising commission rates** and **mandatory product purchases** from the platform at above-market prices.
- Care and domestic: **marginal** increase.
- Over time, earnings are **declining** for two reasons: (1) rising commission rates, and (2) continual onboarding of more workers, which reduces the number of gigs available per worker.

Social security

- The main gain was in **health insurance** coverage (notably in beauty, ride-sharing and delivery relative to prior employment).
- However, many workers **do not know how to avail of the benefits**, are unclear on terms, what is covered, and how to claim reimbursement, so coverage is not effective in practice.
- Social security coverage is often **linked to ratings**; a drop in rating can mean loss of coverage.

Flexibility and time use

- After joining platforms, working hours **marginally increased** (did not decline). This **excludes waiting time**, which would push hours higher still.
- A significant share of women across sectors said it had become **extremely difficult** to manage domestic responsibilities.
- Platform policies that undermine the promised flexibility: **mandatory login hours, penalties for rejecting gigs, and incentive-linked thresholds**, all of which push toward full-time engagement. Declining per-gig earnings also force workers to stay logged in full-time to earn enough.

Enablers and barriers

- **Enablers:** access to digital infrastructure (mobile phone, internet, digital skills); and family permission (supply-side norms).
- **Primary barrier:** domestic responsibilities.

Skilling and upward mobility

- Sector-specific skills were generally acquired **before** joining, from NGOs or other training organisations, **not from the platforms**.
- Platform-provided training focuses on app familiarisation, service standardisation and customer-facing behaviour, **not sector skills**.
- Most workers, **including in beauty**, see **no clear path for career growth or upward mobility**.

Moderator's reflection (Sruthi Kutty): Closing these gaps, skilling, certification, leadership and upward mobility — would help convert gig work from a distress-driven fallback into genuinely aspirational work, consistent with a "women-led development" agenda.

3. Worker challenges and grievance redressal

Platform-work challenges affect all workers, but are **exacerbated for women** by social norms around mobility, domestic and care burdens, limited access to credit and financial services, and digital literacy gaps. Challenges fall under three domains: **earnings, algorithms, and safety/dignity/working conditions.**

Earnings

- Beyond the widely discussed earnings volatility and decline, the **incentive structures** themselves are under-examined: opportunity costs, pressure to meet incentive thresholds, **additional upfront costs** (products for beauty workers; fuel for delivery/cab workers), and **opaque deductions** workers cannot account for. Limited avenues for upward mobility persist.

Algorithms

- **Time pressure**, a nationwide strike by delivery workers on **31 December, 2025,** led the government to mandate the removal of the "5-minute delivery" promise, though similar fast-service models persist in domestic services.
- **Limited flexibility** (despite being the main reason women join).
- **Ratings** (customer-set) tied to **ID deactivation**; a dropped rating can mean permanently losing access to the platform.
- **Constant platform policy changes** about which workers are **not notified**, and they discover them only while on the job.
- **Emergency cancellations** (especially home-based services) are heavily penalised, again risking deactivation.

Safety, dignity and working conditions

- Rising **customer misconduct**, particularly for home-based and on-street work; **gender bias** against women drivers.
- **Mobility and accident risks**, and under-discussed **long-term health risks** (e.g., spondylitis, tennis elbow) from carrying massage beds and beauty kits.
- **Weakened bargaining power**: the platform inserts itself between the customer and the worker, with constant **surveillance** of interactions.
- **Rating asymmetry**: a single bad customer rating can sharply reduce a worker's rating (affecting social security and ID status), whereas it can take **10–15 workers** rating a customer poorly before that customer is flagged.
- **Caste- and religion-based discrimination** re-emerging in new form: customer-visible names allow shortlisting; a platform representative confirmed customers sometimes request a worker of a specific religion or caste, requests usually not entertained but which still occur.

Platform-provided support systems

- **Chatbots and help centres** (evolved from helplines), heavily AI-enabled; **ticket-based** complaint systems and **escalation mechanisms** for urgent issues like ID deactivation, but front-line staff often lack the authority to explain or resolve.
- **Safety tools** (SOS / panic buttons), mainly in ride-sharing and some domestic services; reliability uncertain.

- **Health insurance / social security**, largely limited to **accidental insurance**.
- **Account review and deactivation** processes.
- These systems are designed to manage **operational issues and platform efficiency**, not pay structures, algorithmic decisions, or gendered vulnerabilities.

Assessment — are these systems accessible, responsive, transparent, and contestable?

- **Partially accessible:** heavy chatbot reliance; workers must navigate multiple portals; language barriers (improving with more regional languages); reduced access to the **human support** workers most value.
- **Inconsistently responsive:** no certainty that a ticket will be resolved or even answered; delayed follow-ups; auto-closing tickets; even SOS can carry long waiting times (escalated for women, but urgency still not matched).
- **Limited transparency/contestability:** unclear decision-making; no reasons given for deactivation despite document submission; very few ways to challenge ratings; limited appeals.
- **Summary:** difficult to reach a human; delayed, repetitive and fragmented; little transparency on outcomes; sudden sanctions with limited explanation.

4. Collective action and organising

Forms of organising

- **Unions** (growing in number and size), **associations**, and **informal networks** (WhatsApp groups; delivery "hubs" where workers physically meet).

Where women stand

- Issue-raising has come largely from **ride-sharing and delivery**. In **domestic care and beauty**, issues arise in isolation and rarely gain policy traction.
- **Structural and gender barriers:** time poverty, high opportunity cost of participation, spatial dispersion of workers, platforms penalising worker-to-worker interaction, and app-based **tracking/surveillance** that deters organising.
- **Interest-over-time signal (search-interest comparison):** "Uber strike" shows many peaks across ~2016–2026; "Zomato strike" shows a small peak at the end of 2026 (the 31 December nationwide action); "Urban Company" shows a flat line — mirroring how visible collective action is concentrated in some sectors and near-absent in women-dominated ones.

Field examples

- **Delhi:** A domestic-abuse survivor under heavy household surveillance, discouraged from joining a union, eventually risked it and reached an association after a severe grievance (loss of her sister linked to a work-related accident).
- **Hyderabad:** Traditional (male-dominated) unions felt like spaces of control rather than support; newer, more inclusive unions are giving women space to collectivise.
- **Mumbai:** The strongest union presence for beauty and domestic services; women attend with their children while managing care responsibilities. Functions partly as a space for survival, venting and sharing, but has also produced bargaining outcomes (e.g., multiple women collectively rating a harassing customer until he was flagged and blocked).

Persistent channels despite constraints

- WhatsApp groups and informal hubs; **digital voice** (social media, YouTube grievance channels); **issue-based mobilisation** (clusters of ID deactivations, a co-worker's accident, the 5-minute-delivery issue); and persistence despite punishment. Women's participation remains limited but is growing.

5. Legal and policy landscape

National

- Of the **four labour codes**, the **Code on Social Security** is the **first instance** in which gig workers are included in legislation, covering social security and welfare, with registration via the **e-Shram portal** and welfare measures funded by a fee/cess on platforms. **Implementation is yet to be seen.**
- Gig workers are **not yet included in any other labour code**.

State-level

- **Five states** have passed a Gig Workers' Social Security and Welfare Act (as of 2026): **Rajasthan (2023, the first), Karnataka, Bihar, Jharkhand, and Telangana.**
- Common design: **tripartite machinery and a welfare board** for grievance redressal and internal disputes. Boards include gig workers, aggregators, government officials and civil society members, though **unions/associations are not named in the law**.
- **Welfare cess** varies by state: ~**1–5%** (Karnataka), ~**1–2%** (Jharkhand, Bihar).
- These laws focus on **social security**, not the full labour-rights framework: **no wage regulation or fair pricing, no minimum-wage provision, and no freedom of association.**
- **Karnataka** is the only state to begin introducing **occupational safety and health standards**, including POSH compliance and **mandated women workers on boards** (number not yet decided). Maternity benefits fall within the social-security ambit but remain unclear.
- **No employee–employer reclassification:** platform workers are treated as contractual, sitting between self-employed and contract-based; they are called "partners," "pilots," etc., but **not "workers."**
- **Implementation delays** persist.

Stakeholder interest–power matrix (policy lens)

Quadrant	Stakeholder
High power, high interest	Aggregators
High power, low interest	Government (no national framework yet)
Low interest, low power	Consumers
High interest, low power	Platform workers and unions

Note on consumers: they appear "low power" in the policy landscape, but are **paradoxically powerful in workers' daily lives** — their ratings and feedback (granted by aggregators, and valued above worker ratings) directly affect workers' earnings, social security and access to jobs. The worker-side rating power that once existed has largely been removed over time.

6. Q&A

1. **Flexibility vs. loss of social security.** Women often had **better social security** (maternity benefit, paid leave) in pre-platform employment but **traded it for flexibility**, given disproportionate care burdens. In practice, the platform's flexibility **deviates from what was promised** (mandatory login hours, threshold-linked incentives). Pre-platform earnings were **stable** (enabling better financial planning); platform earnings, though sometimes higher, are **unstable**, making planning difficult. Experiences also vary by how long a worker has been on the platform (early joiners received better incentives).
2. **Climate/heat impact.** Not only heat but **rain and all weather** affect workers, with rising short- and long-term **health impacts**, especially for delivery workers whose workplace is the road.
3. **Have platform women collectivised faster than non-platform informal women? No.** Non-platform informal workers find it easier to collectivise; platform workers face severe repercussions (e.g., ID blocking) and **surveillance**. In women-dominated sectors, work happens in closed/private spaces, making outreach harder. Digital tools can help, but also expose workers (face-scanning, platform representatives infiltrating WhatsApp groups).
4. **(Moderator addition)** Workers often **only meet during trainings or in parks**; trainers are trained to limit interaction, and longer-tenured workers (who once had better perks) are kept from interacting with newer cohorts.
5. **Why are consumers in the low-power quadrant despite rating power?** Because the matrix concerns **influence over the policy landscape**, where consumers have little say, their rating power is **granted by aggregators**, not inherent. Initially, workers could rate customers back (more balanced); that has since changed.
6. **Caste/identity segregation.** Marginalised-caste women are **concentrated in domestic and care work**, mirroring the traditional labour economy. High capital barriers in ride-sharing further disadvantage marginalised workers. One domestic-work platform had **built a paid option into its interface, allowing customers to specify caste/religion preference** for workers, with many clients willing to pay extra. Caste- and religion-based segregation is thus **replicated in the digital economy**, especially in care and domestic platforms.

7. Positive practices noted

- Some platforms are making policies **more gender-inclusive** (removing monthly work targets and surge-pricing models).
- Some are **actively providing sector skills** (e.g., a care platform offering training that aids retention and a sense of upward mobility).
- Grievance redressal done well: **helplines staffed by trained social workers**; a ride-sharing app (expanding across states) that is transparent about deductions and **regularly consults worker representative groups**.
- **Chennai** has begun establishing **rest spaces** for platform workers.

8. Key recommendations (consolidated across studies)

1. **Earnings and transparency** — sector-specific **minimum earnings**, a **cap on commissions**, and an end to arbitrary/opaque deductions.
2. **Working conditions and safety** — recognise that the workplace extends to the roads; provide **gender-sensitive rest infrastructure** (Chennai as a model); **implement the POSH Act across all platforms** through state-level legal measures.
3. **Grievance redressal** — pair chatbots with **human-supported, multilingual** mechanisms.
4. **Benefits** — make them **comprehensive and accessible regardless of performance ratings**, with **vernacular communication** and active support for claiming.
5. **Upskilling** — genuine, **tenure-linked** pathways, with targeted training in **non-traditional sectors**, integrating NGO efforts (e.g., Azad Foundation) into platforms.
6. **Collective voice** — **legally recognise unions and informal collectives**, support women's participation, and mandate public disclosure of earnings algorithms and social-security data.
7. **Data** — introduce **platform workers as a distinct category** in national labour-force surveys (currently, only estimates exist; partially reflected in the recent PLFS).

9. Closing remarks

- Platforms should deliver **sector-specific skill training at scale** (current NGO efforts are insufficient), particularly for the **fast-growing non-traditional sectors** (ride-sharing, delivery), so that women are not confined to traditionally female sectors. This should ideally be **mandated**.
- Platforms are **here to stay**; the central question is ensuring participation is **fair, inclusive, and constitutes decent work**.
- IWWAGE's role is to **relay worker challenges and demands to platforms and policymakers** and propose pathways that benefit both workers and customers. There is a clear, underused space for **consumer-facing advocacy** (e.g., questioning the necessity of instant service and promoting scheduling options). Where some platforms already do this well, it proves a better model is achievable; if gig work is where jobs are being created, those structures must be strengthened in workers' favour.

Reports referenced are available on the [IWWAGE website]; the grievance-redressal (ILO) report was pending publication at the time of the session. The [recording] is posted on IWWAGE's YouTube channel.