

THE CHANGING WORLD OF WOMEN'S WORK

Navigating the Possibilities and Precarities within Platform Work



Background

This study provides a comprehensive analysis of women's participation in India's platform economy, situating it within the broader context of persistently low female workforce participation, particularly in urban India. The gig economy in India employed an estimated 7.7 million workers in 2020-21 and is projected to expand to 23.5 million by 2029-30. Platform-based gig work is expanding across both traditional domains of women's employment, such as care, domestic work, and beauty services, and into non-traditional sectors like ride-sharing and delivery services. Nearly 90 per cent of India's workforce remains engaged in informal employment, with women disproportionately represented in insecure and low-paid forms of work.

Against this backdrop, the platform economy has been widely regarded as a potential avenue for expanding women's access to paid employment. Its promise of flexible work arrangements is often considered particularly attractive for women, who continue to bear a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and caregiving responsibilities. This study, therefore, seeks to answer whether platform work can act as a key enabler of women's economic empowerment.

Study Objectives

1. To explore how platform work shapes women's labour market trajectories, earnings, flexibility, and working conditions.
2. To examine how access to digital infrastructure and skills influences platform participation, and whether it enables broader awareness, stronger networks, and navigational capacity, or restricts entry and agency.
3. To understand how platform work affects women's agency over household decisions, mobility, financial control, and experiences of violence, and whether it expands their space for better livelihood choices.
4. To analyse how different platform models shape workers' experiences of benefit disbursement, task allocation, pay structures, grievance redressal, and incentives, and how these influence women's empowerment across sectors.

Methodology

- This study adopts a mixed-methods research design, combining a desk review, quantitative surveys, and in-depth qualitative interviews to generate a nuanced understanding of women platform workers' experiences across sectors. The desk review examined academic and grey literature, platform policies, and relevant legislation. The quantitative component comprised a survey of 598 platform workers (440 women, 157 men, and one transgender person). The survey captured information on respondents' employment trajectories, earnings, working conditions, access to digital infrastructure, social security coverage, and intra-household decision-making. Given the study's sample size and sectoral coverage, the findings are intended to provide indicative insights rather than statistically representative estimates of the broader platform workforce. To complement the survey findings, qualitative interviews were conducted to explore labour market transitions, digital and physical infrastructure, safety, agency, and support systems. The study also incorporated perspectives from key ecosystem stakeholders, including union representatives, platform aggregators, policymakers, legal experts, and academics, to capture institutional and regulatory perspectives. This triangulated approach allows for common patterns as well as sector-specific distinctions, grounded in the everyday realities of women engaged in platform work.

Key Findings

- For many women, platform work represents a digital shift within existing forms of informal employment rather than a sectoral transition.
- Platform workers often experience initial gains in earnings; these benefits tend to diminish over time due to the continuous onboarding of new workers, declining availability of gigs, and platform-imposed costs such as registration fees, high commissions, and mandatory purchases.
- Most social security benefits (PF contributions, paid leave, and gratuity) are lower in platform work than in previous employment. Workers reported limited awareness of available entitlements, administrative delays in accessing benefits, and health insurance schemes that are often contingent on meeting platform-defined targets or work thresholds.
- Although flexibility is a commonly cited feature of platform work, workers reported that earnings incentives, performance targets, and platform requirements often influence when and how long they work. Daily work hours ranged from 6.5 to 9.8 hours, with commuting and unpaid care responsibilities further increasing overall time demands.
- As digital intermediaries, platforms often obscure employer-employee relationships, while ratings-linked access to work opportunities and earnings can create power imbalances. Many workers reported that these dynamics contribute to depression, anxiety, and poor mental well-being.
- Workers identified several gaps in grievance redressal systems, including limited transparency, delays in resolution, and concerns regarding the handling of harassment-related complaints, particularly among women workers.

- Training programmes largely focus on app familiarisation and service standardisation rather than meaningful skill development, resulting in limited opportunities for career progression and upward mobility across sectors.
- There is a significant gender gap in awareness of workers' unions, combined with time constraints stemming from domestic and caregiving responsibilities, which limit women's participation in collective organising.
- Platform work has enabled some women to gain greater access to personal income and formal banking channels; however, improvements in financial agency are often constrained by income instability, household dynamics, and continued reliance on family support.

Recommendations

- Increase transparency in platform work arrangements by requiring the public disclosure of commission structures, algorithmic work allocation processes, and earnings breakdowns. State Governments may consider sector-specific minimum earnings standards and place limits on platform fees.
- Strengthen worker autonomy and working conditions by reducing the link between gig availability and acceptance rates, preserving genuine flexibility in scheduling, investing in gender-responsive infrastructure, and improving grievance redressal mechanisms through trained personnel and effective implementation of PoSH provisions.
- Expand skilling and career progression pathways by creating upskilling opportunities linked to worker tenure and promoting training in non-traditional sectors. The Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship could play a role in standardising curricula and establishing quality-assurance frameworks.

- Platforms must create women-centric networking hubs to promote freedom to show solidarity and collectivise. The State should consider formally recognising Gig Workers' Unions and establish tripartite bodies comprising government, platforms, and unions to collectively govern earnings, welfare benefits, and working conditions.
- Improve data availability and evidence generation by mandating greater transparency from platforms regarding worker data, including a dedicated platform worker category in national labour force surveys, and supporting further research on algorithmic management, ratings systems, and worker well-being.

IWWAGE – An Initiative of LEAD at Krea University

Block M 6, Second Floor, Kharera,
Hauz Khas New Delhi, Delhi - 110016
+91-11-49403983



www.iwwage.org