

Women's Labour in India's Gig Economy: Autonomy, Flexibility and Vulnerability

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Abstract

The rapid development of the gig economy over the past few decades has transformed the global work environment by offering flexible employment opportunities. This paper aims to identify the role of the gig economy in the development of women's labour participation in India, with special emphasis on flexibility, autonomy and vulnerability. The gig economy is a contradictory phenomenon in women's lives, offering both a platform for financial independence and a source of vulnerability. However, the paper also emphasizes the need for strong policies, social protection and inclusive digital access to make the gig economy more equitable and empowering for women.

Keywords: Gig economy, Women's labour, Flexibility, Autonomy, Vulnerability, Platform-based Economy

Introduction

The "gig economy" refers to a labour-sharing market system in which individuals engage in short-term, task-based and flexible forms of employment rather than standard, full-time contractual work. As defined by the Cambridge English Dictionary, the gig economy is a way of working based on people having temporary jobs or doing separate pieces of work, each paid separately, rather than working for an employer. This form of work has expanded at an unprecedented pace in recent years, facilitated by the proliferation of digital platforms such as ride-hailing services, food-delivery apps, freelance marketplaces, and on-demand home services. Globally, the gig economy is now recognised as a significant structural shift in the world of work, particularly in urban spaces, driven by rapid technological advancements, changing consumption patterns, and the increasing need for flexibility in the labour market. India has emerged as a formidable force in transforming traditional jobs through the gig economy. According to NITI Aayog's 2022 report, India had around 77 lakh workers engaged in the gig economy, and this number is expected to grow to 2.35 crore by 2029-30. In the next decade, the gig economy is expected to become a greater element of the informal sector, with the Boston Consulting Group predicting a possible increase to 90 million gig workers in India over the next 8 to 10 years. Sectors such as transport, food delivery, beauty services, logistics and e-commerce are major generators of this workforce. Gig work provides opportunities for youth, women and semi-skilled populations. It provides diverse economic opportunities, especially for those without formal education, professional training, or access to

conventional employment. The gig economy attracts not only young professionals but also individuals in rural areas and smaller cities who now have a means to earn through digital platforms. According to the Oxford Internet Institute's "Online Labour Index", India leads the global gig economy with a 24 per cent share of the online labour market, implying an increasing number of people working as gig workers (Kasliwal 7).

The gig economy has also impacted women positively by providing opportunities for economic participation, skills development, and social empowerment. Women who enter the gig economy gain financial independence and skills and change their roles within their families and society as a whole (Prajapati and Prajapati 73). According to the International Labour Organization's 2021 report, women have gained new income opportunities through digital labour platforms, especially those who are restricted by mobility or other social issues. Valerio De Stefano also argues that platform work can improve women's economic empowerment by breaking barriers to their entry into the labour market. Juliet Schor also argues that gig work can improve women's economic empowerment by providing supplemental income and financial independence, and giving women skills and independence. The gig economy has provided women with opportunities to participate in economic activities, be active players in the labour market, and improve their household income and work-life balance. Research indicates that a large percentage of women gig workers have achieved financial nancial independence and a steady income; for instance, women gig workers in Delhi NCR have earned over 20,000 rupees and become the sole breadwinners for their families.

Objective of the study

1. To assess the level of autonomy felt by women workers in the gig economy, especially in terms of decision-making, control over work schedules, income generation, and achieving a work-life balance.
2. To analyse the significance of flexibility in the context of women workers in the gig economy, which includes flexibility in work schedules, remote working, and gig economy jobs, contributes to the economic empowerment of women.
3. To evaluate the risks and challenges faced by women in the gig economy, such as income insecurity, absence of social security, job insecurity, gender discrimination, safety, and legal issues.

Scope of the study

The study aims to explore the association between the gig economy and women's labour force participation in India, with specific reference to understanding how the phenomenon of platform-based

digital employment has not only provided women with new avenues of economic empowerment but has also, in many ways, continued to sustain the old gender inequality dynamics.

The study focuses on the role of the gig economy in empowering women, with particular emphasis on how it enables them to achieve financial independence, utilise their skills effectively and enhance their decision-making capacity within both the household and society. The flexibility and accessibility of gig work provide women with opportunities to participate in income-generating activities on their own terms, thereby fostering greater autonomy and confidence. However, alongside these benefits, the study also critically examines the vulnerabilities and precarity associated with gig work, including income instability, lack of social security, and limited legal protections, which can hamper long-term empowerment.

Research methodology

The methodology for this research is primarily qualitative, involving a detailed review of existing literature on women in the gig economy. Data has been gathered from academic journals, government reports, and policy documents, including NITI Aayog and Oxford Internet Institute studies, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the topic and its implications for women in India.

Review of literature

In the field of literature, Kasliwal (2020), Ghosh, Ramachandran and Zaidi (2021), Prajapati et al. (2025), Rahul and Dr Shaifali's (2025) are some of the prominent works explaining the issues of gig economy and women. Again, **NITI Aayog (2021)** refers to its rapid growth **and The Code on Social Security, 2020** incorporated its social security aspect.

Flexibility, Women's Autonomy and Skill Utilisation

One of the major reasons the gig economy is attractive to women is its flexibility, which enables them to manage their unpaid and paid work effectively. The gig economy provides women with the autonomy to choose their time and work space; thus, they are not bound to a fixed physical space (Kasliwal 2). The gig economy also provides women the opportunity to engage in paid work at their preferred time and space; thus, women's autonomy is enhanced through gig employment (Hunt et al. 11). Given the time constraints of work and family, gig employment is also important for women as working mothers, as it enables them to work during their children's school hours or even in the evening or when their children are taking a nap. The home-based nature of gig employment also enables working mothers to remain physically present at their workplaces without having to seek alternative child care. The nature of gig employment also enables working mothers to accept or decline work based on their needs; thus, their labour force participation is ensured, but not their labour force exit. Moreover, the gig economy allows workers to enter and exit the labour force as needed. For example, some women may opt to exit

the gig economy during pregnancy or when they have more intensive care-giving responsibilities and re-enter when they can arrange alternative care or when their care-giving responsibilities ease. The ease of exit and re-entry, which is typical in platform work, enables women to access paid work at times that suit them best. This flexibility has also encouraged many women to venture into entrepreneurship, leveraging their skills and expertise in various domains. The gig economy often presents lower entry barriers for women than formal employment or traditional entrepreneurship. Most gig platforms require minimal capital investment and emphasis skill-based participation rather than formal qualifications. Many platforms provide easy access to markets and customers without requiring substantial capital investment. This accessibility has empowered women, especially those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, to start their entrepreneurial journeys with minimal financial risk(Sarmah 1473).

Besides flexibility, another major advantage of the gig economy for women is the level of control over their professional lives, which is usually absent in other forms of employment. While in other employment, the entire work routine, responsibilities, and behaviour at the workplace are predefined by the employer, the gig economy offers women a platform to choose their clients, set their rates, accept or decline work, and even define the terms of engagement. Thus, the level of control, however small, marks a major shift in women's exercise of control over their professional lives, especially for those who were hitherto outside the mainstream employment domain due to other responsibilities, mobility restrictions, or other factors. The level of financial independence attained by women from the gig economy has also been seen to improve their bargaining power at home, thereby increasing their confidence and independence in society.

Across the globe, the gig economy has witnessed a surge over the last decade. The growth of the gig economy is mainly due to the widespread use of smartphones and the internet, which have helped individuals provide services and customers access workers. The digital platforms Etsy and Meesho have low capital requirements, helping women from low-income backgrounds become entrepreneurs. Women working as content writers, graphic designers, and software developers leverage their skills through the gig economy to achieve financial freedom and professional growth. Moreover, the gig economy has helped women monetise skills in domestic work that have historically been considered insignificant, such as cooking, baking, tailoring, embroidery, and handicrafts. Digital platforms have helped women transform their domestic skills into income-generating activities, enabling them to earn money without a physical workplace or capital investment. This is especially helpful for women who may have mobility or social constraints to accessing the public sphere for income-generating activities. By leveraging skills

developed in the domestic sphere for income-generating activities, the gig economy has helped women become entrepreneurs while also enhancing their autonomy and social visibility.

Vulnerability and Precarity in Gig Work

Flexibility as an edged sword

Flexibility offered by gig work depends largely on whether it is a primary or supplementary source of income. Gig work as a primary source of income offers less flexibility than when it is a source of additional income. Such arguments reinforce the practice of gendered familial responsibilities within and outside the household instead of challenging it, thus further enhancing the 'double burden' on women. Balancing between unpaid and paid work negatively impacts women's physical and mental well-being and leaves little or no room for rest and leisure. Hence, flexibility is often criticised for dehumanising and commodifying workers (Ghosh et al. 2).

Gendered work and the Gender Pay gap

Women are mostly found to be concentrated in beauty and wellness services, online teaching, content writing, and micro-tasking platforms, which are considered "safe" and aligned with traditional gender roles. On platforms, most women are found working in jobs considered feminine, such as cleaning and caretaking. This also affects the availability of women in higher-paying and technically skilled gig work. Also, there are gender-based wage gaps in the gig economy. A study by Team Laar in India on gig economy workers found an 8-10 per cent difference in monthly salaries between male and female delivery executives (Kasliwal 3). Similarly, Dubey et al.'s analysis of 37,599 crowd workers (19% female) on 'a popular freelancing platform' found that women earned 62-89 cents for every \$1 earned by males), and this was true across many job types (administrative, design, business services, networking management, sales and marketing, writing and translation, software development) (James). Another study of Uber workers in the US also found a gender-based wage gap between men and women who are performing similar tasks (Kasliwal 3).

Algorithmic control

In theory, the gig economy's equal-opportunity character is considered one of its strongest advantages, grounded in the assumption of algorithmic neutrality. However, in practice, machine-learning algorithms are designed and curated by human coders, who may inadvertently embed their own biases into these systems. Moreover, platform algorithms continuously adapt by learning from user behaviour and historical data. They rely on worker reputational metrics such as client feedback, the frequency of completed gigs, responsiveness, and other performance indicators, which can themselves reflect existing

social inequalities. As a result, algorithms are fully capable of reinforcing and amplifying biases, inadvertently leading platform economies to promote gendered patterns of work. However, even on these platforms, most women are found working in jobs considered feminine, such as cleaning, caretaking, or beauty and wellness.

Job insecurities

In a 2018 study conducted by the Observer Research Foundation and the World Economic Forum, 35 per cent of the women surveyed were uninterested in joining the gig economy due to a lack of job security and an uncertain status. The platforms have no specific policies to make it easier for women to enter the workforce. There is an evident lack of any provision for dispute redressal (Kasliwal 4). In the event of a dispute between registered parties, the platform claims no obligation to intervene and is not liable for any damages or demands. Previous studies have identified negative experiences of platform work, including free trial labour and unpaid tasks deemed unsatisfactory (but which were then subsequently used by the requester); frequent periods of unpaid job search and bid time; limited support from platforms in the event of any disputes; and service agreements skewed in favour of requesters over workers.

Digital divide

Unequal access to digital technologies is also a major hurdle to women's participation in the gig economy. According to The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2020, published by the GSM Association, "India's digital gender divide is 20% in mobile phone ownership. However, the gender gap in internet access is even more alarming at 50% (Shaifali and Rahul 37)." Women do not have access to mobile phones and other devices due to cultural constraints. The platform economy is not an opportunity for more than a handful of women in urban cities. The women in rural or disadvantaged economic conditions suffer from this digital divide. Women in the gig economy face issues in access to basic digital infrastructure, which is essential for effective participation in the platform economy. Women in the gig economy also face limited access to banking services and financial technologies, which are essential for effective participation in the platform economy (ForumIAS; Question of Cities). Moreover, according to the study, women in the gig economy also face limited access to training and low digital literacy rates.

Entrepreneurs' challenges

The various challenges that hinder women entrepreneurs' success and the development of their businesses are numerous. However, one of the biggest challenges for these women entrepreneurs in India's gig economy is a lack of capital. Most of these entrepreneurs lack collateral to secure bank loans.

Moreover, these institutions exhibit a bias against women. As a result, they find it difficult to get capital for their businesses. Also, venture capital and investment for these entrepreneurs are difficult to find, because venture capitalists invest in businesses owned by men, not by women. As a result, there is a gender gap in funding these ventures, which makes it difficult for these entrepreneurs to grow their businesses and innovate (Sarmah 1473). Moreover, there are harassment and safety concerns for these entrepreneurs as they move their businesses, which makes them feel unsafe and hinders their business development. As a result, they find it difficult to grow their businesses and reach a wider market.

Lack of social and legal security

Most gig-economy companies classify their workers as independent contractors rather than employees. This means that these companies are not obligated to provide benefits such as health insurance, maternity leave, or retirement pensions. This is particularly detrimental to women, especially those who may need flexible working arrangements during pregnancy or may require leave to take care of their children. These working conditions have implications for the health of gig economy workers, with workerist research showing health concerns among gig economy workers such as anxiety, stress, fatigue, repetitive injuries, and COVID 19.

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition, and Redressal) Act of 2013 expanded the workplace to include the informal sector, including domestic workers. It is also called the POSH Act, which protects all women in the public or private domain, including the health, sports, education, and government sectors, as well as any place visited by the employee in the course of her work, including transport. Gig workers are independent contractors, and hence, women gig workers are not protected by the act. Therefore, women are exposed to harassment or safety concerns in transport for work or in gigs that require physical presence. When a service user harasses a service provider, such cases are generally considered contractual disputes between the two parties and are to be resolved independently. The platforms disclaim any responsibility for such cases. The Indian Ministry of Labour and Employment proposed the Code on Social Security Bill in 2019, which recognised gig workers and platform workers for the first time and offered them social security benefits. It was a welcome move, but the implementation of the proposed bill was stalled due to a lack of data on gig workers (Kasliwal 2).

Recommendations

1. The Union Budget 2025-26 emphasises the need to enhance social protection and digital inclusion for workers in the unorganised and gig economies. The budget highlights the need for formal recognition through digital identity platforms such as the e-Shram portal. There is a need to extend

the use of identity-based delivery platforms. In this regard, the identity card schemes should be implemented for unorganised workers.

2. The government should ensure effective implementation of the Labour Codes and expand e-Shram-linked welfare schemes to include maternity benefits, health insurance, pensions, and accident insurance, especially for women platform workers who lack employer-provided benefits. It is also essential for the government to conduct awareness and outreach programs to inform women gig workers about these developments.
3. The availability of digital applications such as TaxShe, Sakha, and BeautyGlam demonstrates the tremendous potential of app-based business models to increase women's engagement in the gig economy. Developing and promoting more women-friendly digital applications can increase women's economic empowerment and bridge the gender gap in employment.
4. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, must be extended to digital and platform-based workspaces. The platforms must ensure the inclusion of safety features, such as emergency buttons, grievance redressal systems, and two-way rating systems, to prevent harassment and abuse of women workers and to address unsafe client behaviour.
5. The government's schemes, such as PMKVY (Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana), must be used to provide specialised training to women workers in e-commerce and digital marketing. Schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Jan Dhan Yojana (PMJDY) and Stand Up India must be used to provide financial services and credit. Expansion of schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Jan Arogya Yojana (PM-JAY) is crucial to ensuring access to healthcare and financial security.
6. Support the care infrastructure by developing national childcare support systems to eliminate unpaid work among women. Platform businesses must provide flexible working hours without punishing workers who cancel work to attend to their obligations.

Conclusion

According to the Economic Survey 2025-26, over 31 crore unorganised workers have registered on the e-Shram portal, with more than 54% of them being women, indicating a significant presence of women in informal and gig jobs. Thus, the gig economy offers a tremendous opportunity to rethink women's participation in the labour force by enabling flexible, technology-based alternatives to traditional work. However, the study has also identified that this has brought about risks and vulnerabilities, including a lack of social security, gender discrimination, and limited bargaining power. Stronger institutional arrangements, inclusive digital infrastructure, and gender-sensitive labour protections to

reduce precarity and encourage women's engagement in income-generating activities. The gig economy, therefore, presents a complex situation in which empowerment and risk coexist. What is thus needed is an appropriate policy framework that addresses these risks and vulnerabilities, making the gig economy a more sustainable form of work for women. Increasing institutional support will be important for enhancing benefits for women.

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