



WOMEN WORKING IN THE GIG ECONOMY

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Abstract

Ranging across the beauty industry, domestic work, food delivery, cab services and medical care, along with the upcoming digital labour due to growth in remote working, the gig economy holds immense potential to fill the gaps for employment generation in India, principally for women with the ability to balance work and family responsibility and gain financial independence in due process. This paper examines the current trends in India's gig economy workspace for women. It also examines if its expansion in the future will significantly improve indicators like female labour force participation rates. This will contribute to economic growth. The paper also aims to familiarise the reader with the terminology used while referring to the gig economy. As the workspace horizon shifts from traditional white-collar jobs to more contract-based work, growth in such on-demand/platform jobs is rising, raising probing questions like changes in policymaking and work benefits to accommodate this new rising workforce. Viewing it from a gendered lens to include questions like fair treatment and equality coupled with pay parity will give further insight into the conditions of women who are going to be a significant part of this rising workforce and thereby help in understanding if being a part of the gig economy accrues any tremendous benefits to women whilst creating a gender-sensitive work environment.

Keywords: Gig Economy, Women, Female Labour Force Participation Rate, Workforce, Gender-Sensitive, Pay Parity.

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Introduction:

"The gig economy provides women with a unique opportunity to build a career around their priorities, rather than fitting their priorities around their career."
- Nithya Krishnan, founder of HerMoneyTalks.

Initially coined in the 1920s by musicians, the word gig has spread in trenches across all industries, indicating short-term engagements among employers, workers, and customers. It falls outside traditional, standard, or conventional forms of employment relations. The gig economy workforce comprises workers hired to complete a particular task or work for a certain length of time, in which work tends to be project/assignment-based or temporary. The relationship between a worker

and a client is evolving. Workers are now being classified as independent contractors, partners, or entrepreneurs.

Today, the gig economy is usually via a platform, i.e., through a digital medium, due to the platformisation of the gig workspace. The work is akin to already existing freelance and casual work. The platform enables on-demand work to be generated per the customer's requirements and the service provider's skill sets on an existing application.

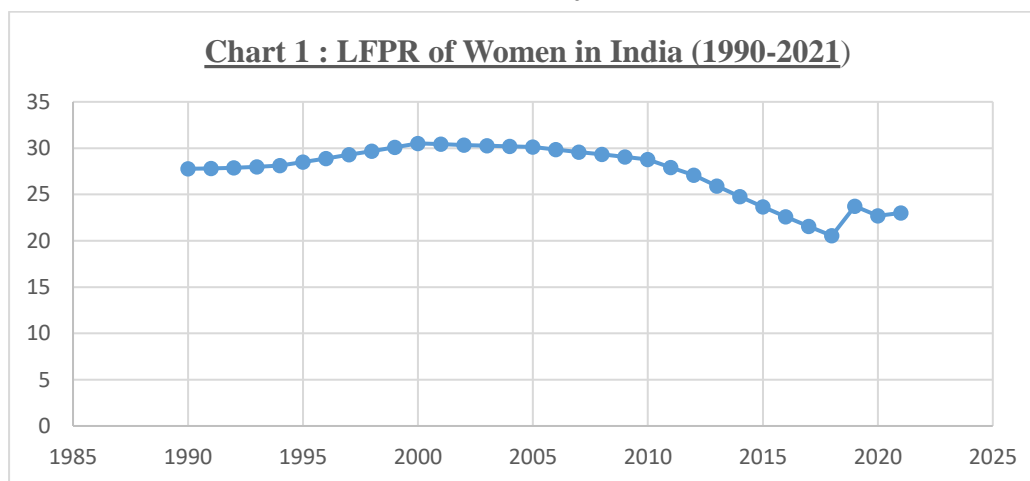
Globally, India has the most significant number of gig workers, with the potential to serve up to 90 million jobs and is currently employing only 15 million people as of 2022. Skill differences, wages, job duration,



control, or autonomy that an individual has towards their job determines the quality of the job. Even as the gig economy is the most attractive option for women in the face of rising unemployment in India, the falling Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) of women, as illustrated in Chart 1, is puzzling as it is concurrent with high economic growth rate, declining fertility rate and a rise in women's educational attainment, indicating that women's disproportionately high unpaid care work and limited options and precarious work conditions once they enter the market contribute to this low LFPR.

The attrition rate is further accentuated in the urban areas due to the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work and other domestic responsibilities due to nuclear family structures.

The problem of women gig workers in India is two-fold: the inability to facilitate women's movement into the workforce and the perpetuation of structural and operational barriers promoting the gendered division of gig work. The obstacles are due to a lack of digital access and participation of women in low-level skilled jobs.



Source: International Labour Organisation

Further, as per the 2022 Oxfam India report, in India, only 31% of females have access to mobile phones as against 61% of males, which contributes heavily to the digital divide with women being kept out of the workforce, especially since its platformisation.

Review of Literature:

Kalleberg and Michael Dunn, 2016 in their paper analysed good and bad jobs in the Gig Economy. The study questions the opportunities that a gig economy offers along with hard questions like workplace protection and how the gig economy will look in the future. The paper explains the differences in job quality via a four-quadrant table, as illustrated in Chart 2.

The chart below showcases that relatively highly skilled jobs belong to the top right quadrant, i.e.,

software development and adjoining jobs. Workers in the quadrant with low control and higher wages are managed on specific metrics, e.g., in Uber. There is low level of transparency regarding how work is allocated and low control by workers. However, due to their operations in metropolitan areas, they can earn more than the minimum wage. Workers engaging in crowd work typically perform simple tasks and are paid very little. None of the workers come under the bracket of high control and low wages, as more control by individuals typically amounts to a higher salary. Looking ahead, the paper suggests providing workers with a social security net to protect them from the insecurity associated with gig work.

**Chart 2: Classification of work based on Wages and Worker Control**

High Wages/ Low Worker Control 1. Transportation Platforms 2. Delivery/ Home task Platforms	High Wages/ High Worker Control 1. Online Freelance Platforms, i.e., software development
Low Wages/ High Worker Control 2. Crowd Work Platforms	Low Wages/ High Worker Control None

Kasliwal, 2020 in her qualitative study on gender and the gig economy, indicates that gig work has not led to a direct increase in the Female Labour Force Participation Rate (FLPR). It observes similar gendered division and employment levels as other forms of work. While the platform economy has particularly attracted female service providers, structural barriers and low skills still need to be improved. Further, the study notes that digital literacy remains a problem among women as they are less likely to own mobile phones and other devices due to socio-cultural restrictions, preventing access to the platform-based gig economy. Through an analysis of the privacy policy (PP) and Terms of Use (ToU) of five platform firms and interviews with women workers in the low skill professions, i.e., beauticians, carpenters, plumbers, domestic help and office workers, the paper notes that there are limitations to women's participation in the gig economy due to restrictions on women's movement in the gig economy. Further, there is a need to establish a "Platform for Platforms", an emergency helpline button for SOS and bring gig work under the ambit of a legislative act to prevent workplace harassment. Moreover, social security and employment benefits can be enhanced via an employment contract and inclusivity of gig work in the social security bill to curate better gender-based policy decisions at the micro and the macro level, especially for the low-skilled category. The study concludes that while the gig economy is a perfect option to facilitate the movement of more women into the workforce, the legislature must pave the way for the same, and

aggregators must work harder to improve the conditions of women in the workforce.

Choudhary, 2021 in her study on India's emerging gig economy, states that literature on the gendered experience of gig work is scant. While drawing attention to the falling women's LFPR, the study notes that the technology-driven gig economy is booming in India with the expansion of numerous "on-demand" digital and online retail platforms. Due to this, a reidentification of labour relations occurs, leading to the professionalisation and commodification of work. Uber, Ola, Amazon, Flipkart, Urban Company, Swiggy and Zomato are the gig workforce's most significant employers in India. Women often work in traditional sectors like domestic work, care work, beauty and wellness and are underrepresented in the gig economy's delivery and ride-hailing sub-sectors. However, despite being the primary beneficiaries of the gig economy, women lack adequate bargaining power, collectivisation, and unionisation with other workers due to occupational segregation and a pervasive automated rating system by platform firms. The study suggested creating a skill training system, strengthening skills-based policy programmes, and underscoring the need to extend social safety nets for gig workers.

Gupta, 2020 in her study on understanding the Gig economy of Delhi from a gendered perspective, looks at understanding the peculiarities of gender, class caste and body – labour and looks at differentiated risks and vulnerabilities faced by women, especially in the global south. The study analyses 'ServiceHelp', India's



leading on-demand service platform. It restricts itself to beauty work and makeup activities, the two primary services women perform, known as the ‘feminine’ sectors. The socio-economic position of the workers severely determines their access to opportunities. Recognising this, the study states how the structure of labour organisation and deployment relationships at work and control over work processes are inextricably intertwined with productions of gender and class relations. Further, the study also highlights the concept of bodily labour, which refers to paid work that focuses directly on the body of others involving services performed on and *by* the body, making the power relations visible. Since bodies are varied, the quality of services cannot be standardised, leading to friction between productivity and quality. The study also delves into the changing employment relationship due to gig work, the constant income volatility with job insecurity and the precarious rating system used to keep tight control among workers. There are noticeable safety hazards due to limited information on the nature of duties and the absence of centralised office space for addressing grievances. Thus, this calls for a reclassification of the employee status through regulatory oversight as well as greater self-regulation, the rethinking of workplace technologies and formalisation of an appealing technology for workers to contest against poor ratings, which often leads to their suspension, and looking at economic growth through a gendered lens to reduce gender and patriarchal controls with regards to women and work and enabling women to build group solidarities to better the working conditions.

Sardana et al., 2022 investigate freelancers, project-based workers, independent contractors, and part-time hires, all of which form a part of the gig economy. The study also segregates gig work into physical and online labour gigs. Emphasising the role of women workers in

the gig economy in India, there are complexities faced in handling and managing domestic work alongside gig work despite its flexibility. Further, negligible access to mobile phones and other enabling devices along with a lack of knowledge of digital tools, declining female participation rate, working at irregular hours, and widening gender wage gap in the gig economy are a few of the major hindrances to female participation. Other critical issues involve a lack of health insurance and fringe benefits coupled with income insecurity, making it difficult to establish a consistent relationship in the long-term period. Perceiving the future scope, accelerating innovation, and getting good expertise at optimum cost make gig work attractive for employees and employers. The study, however, emphasises that apart from increasing female workforce participation in the gig economy, the aim should be to encourage overall female involvement, especially in the formal sector, to bring about a balanced growth rate.

Objectives of the Study:

1. To examine if women gig workers are involved only in certain kinds of work.
2. To examine the restrictions women face while doing gig work.
3. To examine if current laws in India sufficiently cover the challenges women face in the gig economy.
4. To examine if the growth of women in the gig economy is beneficial for the overall balanced growth of the country.

Research Methodology:

This paper is a conceptual understanding of the present situation of the gig economy in India. Even as many studies are being conducted in this upcoming realm, there needs to be a more in-depth analysis of the situation of workers in different regions. This paper is based on secondary sources and an analysis of the existing literature to clarify the terminology associated



with gig work with a gendered lens.

Result and Analysis:

Women workers in the gig economy often tread a thin line between financial independence, patriarchal protection, and assumptions about their morality. The isolated nature of work leads to less loyalty towards the institution or the company they are employed in. This prevents women from building group solidarities and participating in collective action and cause.

The *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (POSH Act)*, 2013 of India does not cover platform work, as gig workers are considered independent contractors with no specific workplace. However, there has been an ongoing discussion on several platforms to inform employers by bringing gig women workers under its ambit.

Hence, Centralised redressal mechanisms are needed via virtual helplines and forums. There is also a need to give access to tools like insurance, childcare and maternity benefits, and a pronounced need for gendering platform work.

More recently, The Social Security Code Bill 2020 (COSS) was introduced by subsuming nine central labour legislations. It extends across unorganised and gig workers to provide income and social security to all those under its ambit. It includes maternity coverage, education, accident insurance, health benefits, old age protection, crèche facilities etc. It obligates the central government to constitute a National Social Security Board, especially for gig and platform workers.

Furthermore, workers constituting the gig economy must undergo constant training and upskilling due to their precarious nature of work. Social sustainability and impact of gig workers concerning Sustainable Development Goals involving climate and safety, social security benefits to workers will also be taken stock of in the future.

Challenges:

The challenges involved in the participation of women in the gig economy are multi-fold. Firstly, there is a plummeting labour force participation rate of women in India. This, coupled with a need for more digital access among women and rising new forms of digital-based platform firms, hinder women from accessing the market. Additional challenges include occupational segregation that prevents women from knowing their organisational colleagues. This also limits the opportunities for collective bargaining and unionisation, which help bring women's challenges to the forefront. Further, women have limited career opportunities in platform firms due to needing more skills and other limitations. Their work is also subject to external shocks and vulnerabilities. Since they work in a temporary set-up without formalisation of rules and laws, the platform firms need to compensate for a fall in pay or no paydays. Moreover, the workers are also subject to a precarious rating scheme which can lead to suspension from work without a centralised redressal mechanism to challenge such ratings. This may cause additional vulnerabilities during times of need.

Conclusion and Findings:

India is in a precarious scenario with rising unemployment and a falling female labour participation rate. The attrition rate among women is typically higher due to the burden of unpaid domestic labour at home, and their income is considered secondary income to the household or income in the distressed category. Here, the gig economy provides a favourable circumstance with flexible jobs tailored to individual preferences. However, the skill level states the wage rate of the individuals. Increasing women in the gig economy will not lead to a balanced growth rate. Countries should strive to improve women's employment in formal sector jobs with social security benefits. Thus, given the challenges, women's



participation in the workforce significantly depends on childcare support and support offered by family members to engage in such kind of work.

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