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Locating women workers in the platform economy in India – *old wine in a new bottle?*

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ABSTRACT

Using the feminist lens of women economic empowerment and the concepts of resources, agency, and achievements, and the inter-related concepts of power, this article shares the experience of women beauty workers and women cab drivers working on different types of platform models in India. While beauty work is essentially a feminised sector of work in India, ride-hailing is a male-dominated form of work. The analysis is drawn from in-depth interviews with women workers, platform management, and union leaders, among others, to understand struggles and ways of 'being and doing' of women workers on platforms. The article presents the different types of platform models – freelance, fixed salary, and hybrid – and the differential impacts of these models on the working conditions of the women in these two sectors. The article then continues to unravel the concept of 'flexibility and autonomy', and the precarious nature of work for these different contractual arrangements as well as the implications of algorithmic controls and management on women workers. It eventually highlights that this 'new' gig economy contributes to the continuation of the informal nature of work, along with the precarity of the same, which hinders their ability to achieve empowerment.

Cet article adopte le prisme féministe de l'autonomisation économique des femmes et des concepts de ressources, de libre-arbitre et d'accomplissements et des concepts interreliés de pouvoir, pour présenter l'expérience des travailleuses du secteur des soins esthétiques et des femmes chauffeurs de taxi qui travaillent sur différents types de modèles de plateforme en Inde. Si le travail esthétique est essentiellement un secteur féminisé en Inde, les services de taxi sont une forme de travail dominé par les hommes. Cette analyse est tirée d'entretiens approfondis avec des travailleuses, des responsables de plateformes et des leaders de syndicats, entre autres, afin de comprendre les luttes et les façons « d'être et de faire » des femmes travaillant sur ces plateformes. Cet article présente les différents types de modèles de plateforme – freelance, salaire fixe et hybride – et les effets différentiels de ces modèles sur les conditions de travail des femmes dans ces deux secteurs. L'article déchiffre ensuite le concept de « flexibilité et autonomie », et la nature précaire du travail pour ces arrangements contractuels différents, ainsi que les implications des contrôles et de la gestion algorithmiques sur les travailleuses. Enfin, il souligne que cette « nouvelle » économie des petits boulots contribue à perpétuer la nature informelle du travail, ainsi que la précarité de ce dernier, ce qui empêche les travailleuses de parvenir à l'autonomisation.

KEYWORDS

Women's economic empowerment; women platform workers; gig economy; platform work; informal labour

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Utilizando la lente feminista del empoderamiento económico de las mujeres y los conceptos de recursos, agencia y logros, además de los conceptos interrelacionados de poder, este artículo da cuenta de la experiencia de las trabajadoras del sector de la belleza, así como de las taxistas que laboran en diferentes plataformas en la India. En este país, el de la belleza es un sector laboral esencialmente feminizado, mientras que el transporte personal es un ámbito de trabajo dominado por hombres. El análisis se sustenta en entrevistas en profundidad realizadas con trabajadoras, directivos de plataformas y líderes sindicales, entre otros. Dichas entrevistas buscaron comprender las luchas y las formas de 'ser y hacer' de trabajadoras que laboran a partir de plataformas. El artículo presenta los diferentes tipos de modelos de plataformas – trabajadoras independientes, salario fijo e híbrido – y los impactos diferenciales que conllevan en las condiciones de trabajo de las mujeres de estos dos sectores. A continuación, el artículo continúa desentrañando el concepto de 'flexibilidad e independencia' y la naturaleza precaria del trabajo para estos diferentes acuerdos contractuales, así como las implicaciones que los controles y la gestión algorítmicos suponen para las trabajadoras. Finalmente, destaca que esta 'nueva' economía informal contribuye a dar continuidad a la tradicional naturaleza informal del trabajo y a su precariedad, lo que obstaculiza la capacidad de las mujeres para empoderarse.

Introduction

Women have always been engaged in some form of productive and/or reproductive labour but much of their work is invisible and they are largely employed in low-skilled, low-paid informal work with little or no social security (Chakraborty 2021). Stagnation of formal employment and lack of paid employment has led to greater casualisation of labour wherein women are found clustered in low-paying jobs such as domestic work and own account, home-based work (Chen and Raveendran 2018). Women's access to paid work opportunities is also determined by prevalent gender and social norms (Sudarshan 2014) and their unpaid and care responsibilities (Zaidi *et al.* 2017), which reduces their ability to negotiate better work conditions. Moreover, a wide gender wage gap (Kantor *et al.* 2006; Lama and Majumdar 2018) and gender digital divide (Kathuria 2021) keeps women further away from decent jobs.

The adoption and expansion of digitalisation of the economy in India has led to the rapid growth of the platform economy in the last decade. This new economy operates algorithmically through digital mediums (apps or websites) linking clients and platforms with workers (Muldoon and Raekstad 2022). Recent literature sheds light on the precarity of these jobs characterised by erratic and low incomes, lack of social protection, long working hours, and lack of upskilling opportunities (Hunt *et al.* 2019; ILO 2021; Rani and Singh 2019). Although it claims to have created opportunities to re-evaluate and restructure the increasingly male-centric ecosystem of work and create a 'gender-equal space' (Rubery 2019), the low female labour force participation rates in India and the lack of data indicative of an increase in women's participation in gig platforms in

India (Soni 2021) have raised questions about the ability of these platforms to narrow gender gaps in participation rates (Raval 2019).

Further, some researchers argue that merely an increase in women's workforce participation rate may not in fact be beneficial for women's well-being due to precarious working conditions and increases in women's both paid and unpaid work burdens (Duflo 2012; Hunt and Machingura 2016; Rowlands 1995). Yet, the popular narrative advocating gender equality for growth that excludes the processual approach of establishing substantial equality for social justice and change has dominated. As noted by Kabeer (1999, 459), this neoliberal approach promotes certain ideal traits for women to aspire, including 'industriousness, altruism, dedication to family welfare, thrift and risk aversion among others'. Batliwala (2007) reflects on the historical degeneration of the term 'women's empowerment' from its erstwhile feminist use that advocated systemic and societal transformation in power relations, especially in favour of marginalised women, to its present technocratic and narrow adoption by states and multinational corporations to further their own ulterior motives in the name of growth. This has resulted in the reduction of the concept of 'women's empowerment' to poverty eradication formulae such as formation of 'self-help groups' and promotion of entrepreneurship through micro-credit programmes (*ibid.*).

Mishra and Raju (2020) analyse Uber's neoliberal appeal and find that entrepreneurial spirit pitched as 'flexibility and autonomy' helped platforms to put forward their own profit-driven interests, cut costs, and transfer market risks on to the workers while simultaneously appearing to be worker-friendly. The neoliberal discourse is further fuelled by the augmented demand for such services catering to the urban middle and upper classes, resulting in platformised labour even in sectors that are traditionally considered women's domains such as beauty and domestic work, in addition to transport and delivery services (Raval 2019). Evidently, the position of workers, especially women, remains unchanged in the platform economy and gendered barriers practised within traditional labour markets are transferred to these digitalised platforms such as lack of safety mechanisms on platforms (Jha 2021), inequitable access to technology (Chaudhary 2020), and increased gender wage gap (Raman and Saif 2021).

Additionally, the platform economy is seen as a lucrative opportunity for women – considering the flexible working hours as a supporting mechanism for women to address household work along with paid work and therefore creating potential for economic participation (Kasliwal 2020).

In view of these debates, this article revisits the concept of 'women's economic empowerment' as espoused in feminist literature to draw out a comparative analysis of women's work experiences in platforms in India in two sectors: the beauty work sector, a *feminised* sector of work; and the ride-hailing sector which is male-dominated. This article is therefore an attempt to juxtapose and deconstruct the neoliberal discourse of entrepreneurship, romanticised through flexibility and autonomy, against the feminist ideas of power, resources, choice, agency, capabilities, and transformation through the lived experiences of women workers in the platform economy. The analysis for this article is drawn from qualitative data that privilege the voice, struggles, and ways of 'being and

doing' valued by women participants in the two sectors. Thus, the intention of the article is not to analyse women's experiences against a certain prescribed set of indicators on economic empowerment, rather, it adopts a grounded approach which is contextual, process-oriented, and based on women's situated knowledge(s).

Methodology

The findings in this article are based on qualitative in-depth interviews conducted from November 2019 to July 2020 in three cities of India – Delhi-NCR, Bengaluru, and Mumbai – with women workers in two sectors – beauty work and ride-hailing.

A total of 53 interviews (including two focus group discussions) were conducted: 31 were in-depth interviews with women respondents and the remaining 22 were with other stakeholders. These included platform representatives, trade union members, research experts, and policymakers to understand varying perspectives and standpoints of the functioning of platforms. Getting consent for this research was a challenge due to the worker invisibilisation and anxiety among the workers fearing disciplinary actions by the platforms. Therefore, keeping the confidentiality of workers was the utmost priority and names of participants were pseudonymised. The snowball technique was used for sample recruitment.

About eight platforms were identified (see Table 1), four each for beauty and ride-hailing sectors, to conduct interviews and focus group discussions. The digital platform model is not a monolith, and one finds variations within the same (ILO 2021), and we found three prominent 'models of operation' that the platforms use to engage which we describe below:

- The *'gig' or the freelance model* is similar to the 'Uber' model where the person is considered as an independent partner/part time/freelancer/entrepreneur/self-employed rather than an employee with minimum worker liability on platforms. They are paid per task or service provided to the clients who are connected through an app algorithmically operated by the platform.
- The *fixed salaried model* is when workers are considered as employees of the company and paid a certain amount on a monthly basis. The worker is answerable to the platform and vice versa.
- The *hybrid salaried model* includes platforms that combine both the fixed salaried and freelancer models. There is variation among platforms with respect to how they offer these contracts to the workers. Certain platforms provide both fixed salary and freelancer as an option for the workers, while others provide incentive-based fixed salary contracts.

Table 1. Distribution of platforms in the interviews across models

	Freelance model	Fixed salaried model	Hybrid salaried model
Ride-hailing	Uber	Sakha Consulting Wings (market wing of the Women of Wheels programme of the Azad Foundation)	Koala Kabs and TaxShe
Beauty work	Urban Company		BeautyGlad, Lookplex, YLG

The article will concentrate mainly on the experiences of women beauty workers and ride-hailing drivers in the freelance and hybrid models using a feminist framework of women's economic empowerment.

Conceptual framework

In defining empowerment, feminist literature places emphasis on it being a sociopolitical and economic process that is complex, non-linear, contested, and entailing negotiations and compromises with uncertain outcomes; a process that is critically oriented towards transformational shifts in power between and across individuals and social groups (Batliwala 2007; Kabeer 1999; Perezneito and Taylor 2014; Rowlands 1995). Another integral part to this process of empowerment is the concept of power which, according to Rowlands (1995), is not in the sense of its conventional understanding as zero-sum, whereby a gain for one is a loss for the other. Instead, it is a form of power that challenges authoritarian power by developing critical consciousness and confidence at a personal level to undo internalised oppressions along with the ability to negotiate and influence decision-making processes in close relationships, and at the collective level working together with other individuals with a spirit of co-operation for a greater impact on sociopolitical and economic structures.

Perezneito and Taylor (2014) explicate the concept of power into four dimensions, referred to by them as 'change outcomes'. These four dimensions that are now widely used in feminist literature to study women's empowerment are: power within, power to, power over, and power with (*ibid.*, 236).[1] Further, according to Kabeer (1999), central to the concept of power is the 'ability to choose', and this ability can be further qualified in two ways: what were the conditions of choice in terms of availability and costs of alternatives; and whether this ability was exercised for strategic life choices or second-order choices. Thus, in Kabeer's view, 'empowerment refers to the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them' (*ibid.*, 437). The inter-related dimensions put forth by Kabeer to study empowerment with a focus on economic advancements are resources (material and non-material pre-conditions), agency (process), and achievements (outcomes).[2]

Thus, the above literature emphasises the need to focus on processes, moving beyond mere access to resources to the actual realisation of strategic choices, and shifts in dominant power structures through the use of individual and collective agency. In this article, we examine women's experiences on beauty and ride-hailing platforms, across freelance and hybrid models, by referring to Kabeer's (1999) empowerment framework of inter-related dimensions – resources, agency, and achievements – keeping in view the four change outcomes elucidated by Perezneito and Taylor's (2014) four dimensions of power.

The platform economy and women's economic empowerment

The platform economy with its promise of offering a 'modern and vogue', 'professional' work environment with 'flexibility and autonomy' and 'higher incomes' has attracted

aspiring women workers wanting to escape the precarious work conditions of a traditional work set-up which involves endless vacillation between paid work, unpaid work, and care responsibilities, and affects women's well-being and inter-generational care deficits for her family. There was a range of aspirations expressed by the women participants in the qualitative research, desiring a change in their present circumstances or in Kabeer's words, wanting to challenge their specific 'position of denial'. These included aspirations to change gender restrictive norms on mobility, sexuality, or even stereotypes on the kind of jobs women could or could not do. For instance, women from masculine sectors such as ride-hailing chose the sector to challenge the prevalent notion that 'women cannot drive' and further break the sociocultural restrictions on mobility and agency:

> My mother completely refused to let me do this job. Not for any job, just for this driving job … because she said this field is not right. I told her that this is what I want to do. I could serve as an idol for other girls. (Woman cab driver, Delhi-NCR, February 2020)

For the younger women in our sample, working in the platform economy was also viewed as an opportunity to learn and improve future employment prospects; and for women with children, access to better opportunities and resources for their children was another strong aspiration expressed in the interview. 'If I save some money, I can use it for my children's education' (beauty worker, interview, Bengaluru, April 2020).

In this section, we examine the changes women aspired to in their lives in terms of the three dimensions – resources, agency, and achievements – and assess whether their experiences on joining the platform economy enabled them to make strategic life choices towards equitable socioeconomic power relations in their specific context. We take this discussion forward by discussing experiences of women's work in the freelance and hybrid models of work offered by platforms, at the personal, close relationships (market and family), and collective levels.

Resources and agency

The three indivisible dimensions of labour elucidated by Kabeer (1999) are: resources, agency, and achievements. Resources and agency together correspond to Sen's capability approach which moves away from the utilitarian focus on providing and accessing goods and commodities to an approach that focuses on quality of life achieved by enhancing capabilities and functionings and, ultimately, freedoms (Kabeer 1999; Sen 1995).

The behind-the-scene negotiations

The expansion of the platform economy in India has created a perception of increased availability of better-quality jobs with the potential of earning high incomes with ease of entry and exit. However, the women respondents in the interviews and focus group discussions narrate the behind-the-scene gendered struggles involved in accessing jobs being made available in the gig economy. These included the existence and effective use of an entire range of prior resources and agencies drawn from their human, financial, and social

capital. Generally, the journey of a woman worker in either of the sectors, beauty or ride-hailing, began with 'power within' reflected in their zeal and a sense of self-confidence to bring a change in their present circumstances. The negotiations thus began from their home and community, especially for those choosing to be in non-traditional sectors like ride-hailing, for whom gender norms seemed especially tricky. It was important to gain support from parents in the case of unmarried women and from husbands and in-laws in the case of married women workers, and often it took a while and a series of gives and takes to convince their families. A key informant belonging to the ride-hailing sector assessed that 'It's not easy to convince people at home … they don't understand so fast … even at my home they refused/objected, citing child care as my primary responsibility.' Women workers met with resistance in the family as ride-hailing was perceived as a masculine job, but also had undertones of 'low status' or were considered 'disreputable'. Another angle pointed out by Dheeraj, a woman cab driver, was with respect to women's mobility and casting accusations on her character, 'they doubt their wives more when they go out for jobs'. However, safety issues were also a matter of concern for the families of cab drivers, 'my husband said nice things … and my mum refused especially about the night driving … it was a safety issue' (interview, Bengaluru, January 2020).

Although the beauty sector is a femininised sector, with workers and clients being mostly women, beauty work combined with mobility and visiting other people's homes was perceived with some disapproval. Bhoomi, a beauty worker who has a post-graduate degree, shared that she was met with feelings of shock in her family, 'My mother was really shocked, she asked me whether I didn't find anything else to do … ' Pratibha, another beauty worker, having faced pressure from her in-laws to leave her work in the IT industry in Delhi due to night shifts, found interest in beauty work but she faced pressures yet again:

> in IT there is night shift. It's not safe for women, your in-laws don't allow you … After I had a child, I learned beauty, but my husband wasn't supportive. He thought 'is this even any job to do? People who aren't educated do this type of work! I retorted it's nothing like that, I like the work.

Women workers found their own ways to deal with gender norms, class, and caste biases of their family and community, sometimes giving in selectively, and sometimes fighting it out to take up their liking and be financially independent. A particularly assertive and articulate beauty worker shared her negotiations with her husband:

> I've told him, you've married me, you've not bought me … the money you put into the wedding, I put in double of it … so if you have a right over me, I have the very same right … if I do two jobs, then you have to do too … I will not be subservient to you. (Interview, Delhi-NCR, April 2020)

The attraction and appeal of the platform economy motivated many women workers to enter into negotiations with their immediate families, showing agency and capacity to influence key decision-making processes. In this instance, we do observe shifts in power relations – variations of 'power within' and 'power to' – where women come to acquire a space in the decision-making processes hitherto held by patriarchal forces in the family.

Entry into the platform economy

Having made the decision to enter the platform economy as a beauty worker or a cab driver, women workers now had the option of becoming a freelancer or an independent contractor with the platforms or join the platform's hybrid model that provided a fixed salary with task-based incentives. In the freelancer model, women workers were not committed to a single platform, however, their skills were matched with clients by the platform, and the platforms charged a commission from the workers' service fee to the tune of 20–30 per cent. In the hybrid model, usually smaller, more women-centric models (TaxShe, Koala Kabs, BeautyGlad), there was an opportunity to start with a fixed salary for a fixed number of hours devoted to a single platform, and with experience, workers were given the option of taking additional 'tasks' which were paid on a piece-rate and provided them an opportunity to earn more. Further, under the freelance model, workers were provided with negligible social security and no guaranteed work stability as against the hybrid models. In the freelance model, all workers are considered as 'individual contractors' or 'self-employed' and thus have limited social security such as accidental insurance. There are no maternity benefits even in the popular beauty and salon services platform, Urban Company, that has one of the largest women workforces working for the platform. In the freelancer model, there is no scope for negotiation for any social security benefits. In the hybrid models, under both sectors, there were provisions of social security benefits such as health or medical insurance, maternity benefits, or pensions; there was some scope of negotiation owing to the structure and intent of these women-focused platforms. However, the popularity of the freelancer model among the respondents of this study indicated a strong aspiration for freedom, flexibility, and the need for earning better income.

In terms of the information and knowledge available to women workers before taking up the job, women workers shared varying experiences of receiving contracts from the platforms, suggesting that it is slowly becoming a norm as part of the promised professionalised experience for the workers. However, in most cases, across the models, these were found to be 'contracts of adhesion' (ILO 2021), which means virtually no space for negotiating terms of services that are set by the platform (except in Sakha Consulting Wings). Chaudhary (2020), in his study, found that 48 per cent of the beauty workers with Urban Company did not receive any work contracts. However, many beauty workers in the interviews acknowledged receiving joining letters requiring them to sign contracts with Urban Company, but often the contracts were lengthy and in an unfamiliar language and, for this reason, many respondents in the interview mentioned that they did not read the contract entirely. Women respondents related similar experiences on ride-hailing platforms. Asma, a cab driver, also recalls receiving a contract, 'but we didn't even know what the contents of the contract were. They did not read it to us, it was in English. Had it been in Hindi we would have read it' (interview, Delhi-NCR, June 2020).

On the other hand, Bhoomi, a beauty worker belonging to the hybrid salary model, seemed well aware of the contents and terms of the contract:

> in a month we get four holidays plus whatever festivals you have – there's health insurance, there's PF (Provident Fund), all of this is mentioned in my contract … I just felt good that everything is put down on paper so there's a reassurance that whatever is said will be done. (Interview, Delhi-NCR, April 2020)

However, the contracts were also used as a bond agreement in some hybrid beauty and ride-hailing platforms, wherein salary of two weeks for a period of six months could be withheld. This was especially so in the case of beauty workers and it was to counter the high attrition and retain beauty workers for a minimum period of time. According to the platforms, this was done to ensure minimum returns on training and equipment provided to the new recruits. Except in the case of the hybrid salary model, the workers in the contracts were described as 'freelancers', 'partners' or 'individual contractors' with no medical or health insurance or any other social security benefits. Thus, the experience of receiving contracts varied inter and intra sectors.

Given the weak position of workers *vis-à-vis* the platform, the scope of 'power over' with regards to the choice that women workers made between the two modes of engagement was much reduced and depended on various factors such as their care arrangements at home, skills training, level of education, availability of financial resources to make the initial investments, and access to digital resources such as smartphones.

Further, even if the women wanted to participate on these platforms it was not easy as workers needed to have attributes such as 'good personal grooming' and ability to speak English as they are valued by beauty platforms:

> They were only selecting people who knew how to read and write well because during the training, we have to take notes. The HR [human resources] also communicates in English only most of the time. During the interview time they will ask, who only knows Tamil and English … most of time in Bangalore, they know all local languages like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada. I knew English so it was not a problem for me. (Karuna, beauty worker, Bengaluru, July 2020)

In addition, workers had to make significant capital investments to work on these platforms, which varied depending upon the platform and the model they adopted. For instance, ride-hailing hybrid platforms – Koala Kabs, TaxShe, and Sakha Consulting Wings (fixed salary) – did not require any financial investment or collateral on placement (although workers may take loans to buy vehicles at a later stage). On the other hand, all other platforms, across the different models, required significant investments in assets and tools from women who wanted to join the platform. These would be in the form of security deposits with the platform in return for the provision of tools, equipment, and cost of skill training (for beauty workers); while cab drivers took credit for buying vehicles, smartphones, and other equipment with payment in the form of monthly payments or equated monthly instalment (EMIs). The initial capital investments often led workers to a debt trap after a period of time when accessing work became difficult, which made their exit from the platforms problematic and difficult. While often women chose to be freelancers or independent contractors due to the flexibility promised, in effect, this neoliberal promotion of individualisation came with no social security or protection, and additionally with a high possibility of getting trapped in a cycle of debt.

Work environment as an indicator of economic advancement

Income

After initial investments and skilling, women workers looked to recover the costs and earn their living through short-term contracts or gigs generated by the platform's digital applications. In both the freelance and hybrid models, women workers now had to make the most of the pre-set piece rates and rates of commission unilaterally decided by the platforms for various services provided to the clients. Further, piece rates or the commissions charged by the platforms varied depending on the vagaries of the platforms' policies and frequent market fluctuations. Throwing light on the volatility of her income, Piyali, a beauty worker with Urban Company, commented:

> There are days when you don't get work at all, you are sitting idle. Of course, it affects your earnings, sometimes you earn 3,000–4,000 and other times you do not even earn a rupee. That makes a difference! (Interview, Delhi-NCR, April 2020)

In the case of hybrid models, while the fixed salary was assuring, it was usually quite low and eventually women, especially those who were primary earners in their homes, would take up extra work to supplement their incomes, as was observed among women workers with TaxShe, Koala Kabs, and BeautyGlad.

Over a period of time, with increased labour supply and higher competition between platforms within the same sector, the compensation earned by the workers for the same work fell substantially. Income volatility both in the short and long term, accompanied by pressure to pay debts, and no risk cover against income and job insecurity in the freelance model, resulted in uncertainty and precarity similar to the traditional informal sector. Furthermore, the platform economy thrived on the idea of worker fungibility, a practice that encourages the dispensability of individual workers (Flanagan 2019). In addition, to keep up with the pressures of prompt doorstep delivery to clients, platforms had to recruit workers constantly, which at the same time led to oversupply of labour (van Doorn 2017). The constant recruitment of new workers instilled a feeling of dispensability among workers and added to their job insecurity or precarity. Further, the feeling of dispensability cultivated by the platforms also devalued the workers' years of experience, skills, and knowledge base.

A peculiarity of the beauty sector as against the ride-hailing sector is that it is more personal in nature. Enterprising women workers could build their own clientele and beat the threat of fungibility. Recognising this feature of care work, some platforms in beauty work allowed repeat booking of the same beautician by the clients, a feature that is not available in the case of ride-hailing services. Beauty workers could use their social capital and agency to create a niche through their skills in care work, resulting in some job security. Nonetheless, the platforms have managed to create a preference for piece rates, such that even those clients hiring women workers directly used the same rates as given on the platforms.

Earnings for the workers in the beauty sector differed between the two models at the time the interviews were conducted. The highest earning for a freelance beauty worker

ranged between INR 30,000 and 40,000 (US$350 and 500), while a hybrid beauty worker could earn up to INR 20,000 (US$250) including earnings from incentives. Expressing her anguish over the earnings, a freelance beauty worker shared:

> In the first two years, I made good money. Then Urban Company started to advertise and more girls joined and as a result bookings drop and now even to earn INR 3,000, I have to take more bookings … they also cut high commission and I have to pay for conveyance extra. Despite working long hours I end up earning less and staying in a rental house. How will I buy a house of my own in Delhi with this income? (Interview, Delhi, January 2020)

Similarly, we find a freelance woman cab driver's salary in a 'good month' lay in the range of INR 15,000–20,000 (US$180–250), slightly more than a hybrid fixed salary of INR 10,000–12,000 (US$120–150) with little more through incentives. As such, the hybrid model came with some stable income and social security benefits but workers' ability to obtain higher earnings was limited. However, workers who did not want to tie themselves down to a low income chose to be freelance workers facing higher income volatility as well as a debt trap. This is indicative of low 'power to' and 'power over' for women owing to the chance of earning better even if it comes with a risk.

Balance between paid work and care through the promise of flexibility and autonomy

A major attraction for women workers towards the platform economy was the flexibility and freedom in choosing a place and time of work with the possibility of maintaining a better work–life balance. The experiences of women workers captured through our interviews however suggest otherwise. Due to the income volatility and uncertainty of future income, women workers were under high pressure to complete as many gigs as possible, especially if the income from the platform was the primary income for the worker. The International Labour Organization Conventions 1 and 30 have generally set the standard at 48 hours of work per week, with a maximum of 8 hours per day. Women cab drivers belonging to the freelancer model of large platforms reported having worked the longest hours in comparison to other women sectors. Muskan, a cab driver, stated that she works for 16 hours and that sometimes it was longer if she had to drive to far-off places (interview, Delhi, March 2020). Even in hybrid ride-hailing platforms, such as Koala Kabs or TaxShe, women workers could select their work timings, however, pressure to earn higher incomes pushed them to choose long hours of work including late hours. The beauty sector, which is dominated by women workers, unlike the ride-hailing sector, never required workers to do late-night shifts. Due to the proliferation of beauty platforms, beauty workers had a choice in terms of finding employment on these various platforms. The possibility of switching over to other platforms placed beauty workers in a slightly better bargaining position with the platforms in terms of not working late evenings.

The safety and security concerns were more readily taken on board by smaller hybrid platforms in the beauty sector to attract women workers. Some of these considerations, such as not working late nights and provision of commute services to and from the client's home, were taken on board by BeautyGlad as listed by Pratibha:

> We don't have any services after 6 pm for safety. We also have pick up and drop [to and from client's home]. I am on commission [a freelancer] … people who are on payroll [hybrid model] have an ola cab pickup and drop. Safety is ensured. If freelancers request, then we get it. (Interview, Delhi, April 2020)

Similarly, in the ride-hailing sector, women drivers working with Koala Kabs did not have to work beyond 5 pm in the evening, and ridership was restricted to women, children, and men accompanied by women. At YLG beauty platform, the workers in the backend support would check with the beauty worker about distance, location, and time before confirming the appointment. They also provided incentives for booking after 5 pm and gave some basic self-defence training. At Sakha Consulting Wings, women drivers received training in self-defence, gender and sexuality, and first aid.

As observed by Shade:

> by touting the empowering benefits of labour flexibility and entrepreneurialism for women, and in their erasure of class and race dynamics, sharing economy discourses personify neo-liberal feminism, which subscribes to the logic of the marketplace and presumes individualization and responsibilisation. (Shade 2018, 37)

Thus, the women workers working as 'freelancers' and 'independent contractors' in the platform economy 'empowered' by the 'freedom and flexibility' provided by the platforms were expected to be responsible for their own upkeep and for the well-being of their families. The platforms excused themselves of these responsibilities. Given the long working hours, high mobility, and frequent changes in the work sites, child care inadvertently became the responsibility of the women workers' families, particularly of the immediate women members. So, while Muskan, a cab driver, explained how her daughter took care of her younger brother and household chores, Ruchi, another cab driver, found solace that her sister was available to do most of the care and household activities when she was away. Zariya, also a cab driver, explained:

> After coming back from work, I clean the house and prepare lunch for my family. After that I handwash clothes. Mine is a big family so I wash all their clothes including my husband's, his brother's and his wife's. (Interview, Bengaluru, January 2020)

In other words, women workers who had older children or other family members who could take care of their household responsibilities, were able to take up paid work in the platform economy, but still at the cost of increasing their overall work burden as women were required to take care of their household responsibilities. Hence, the attraction to flexibility in paid work was driven by patriarchal norms of being primarily responsible for care work at the household level. The flexibility provided by the platform economy increased access to paid work opportunities for women but did not change the structural inequalities with respect to gendered familialism (Palriwala and Neetha 2009) in care work, and sectoral division of paid work in terms of gender, caste, class, and so forth. This shows low indications of 'power within' and 'power to' in terms of the ability to negotiate redistribution of care work within the family. Thus, whether flexible work schedules led to a better quality of life or whether it disempowered

women by increasing their burdens remains a question. In other words, women did not have the choice but to accept the double work burden as women are primarily required to attend to care tasks, which remains an unresolved issue (Vyas 2021), while taking the opportunity to do paid work due to the flexibility offered by platforms.

Access to worker rights amid lack of flexibility and autonomy

With respect to leave, one day off in a week was the accepted norm across the sectors, but due to the high demand for services on weekends, the platforms, especially in the beauty sector, made it mandatory to accept work on Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, across all models. The illusion created by the platforms about flexibility and freedom ignored the underlying hierarchical relationship and structural inequalities between the client, platform, and workers, which was negated when the lived experiences of women workers in the platform economy were observed closely.

Further, in terms of the right to be treated equally and democratically, the narratives of the women workers suggested that the hierarchical relationship between client–platform–worker is established by the platform economy's use of algorithms to influence workers' performance through monitoring and surveillance. The algorithmic control mattered particularly in the case of freelancers across the ride-hailing and beauty work sectors, while affecting the hybrid worker to a somewhat lesser degree in terms of the incentives received to upscale tasks over and above the committed tasks. The algorithmic system was used in all the beauty platforms that were part of this research, however, some ride-hailing platforms like Koala Kabs and TaxShe, which had fixed routes and passengers, did not use algorithms. Instead, they used GPS on the apps to ensure that passengers were safely picked and dropped off, as they tended to be usually women and/or children. Most notably, these platforms did not use algorithms to strictly control the behaviour of workers through ratings by clients.

In the freelance models, on the other hand, the dual approach of incentives and penalties is in-built in such a manner that every single task could either invite a reward or a punishment managed by algorithms, thereby indicating that there was absolutely no 'power over' the outcomes. The algorithms were designed by the platforms to encourage competition among workers through rating systems, boosting performance and obedience to the platform and clients. Piyali, a beauty worker with Urban Company, shares her experience of ratings and other penalties:

> The minimum rating to be maintained is 4.8, earlier it was 4.5. If it goes down to 4.6 then they block you and you do not get work. Then you have to go to the office and request and if they ask you why it was your fault, then we explain to them, try to reason with them but then they say all girls work, you're not special. (Interview, Delhi, April 2020)

The non-compliance to minimum standards of service set by the platform often led to penalties which included wage cuts and temporary suspension from the platform; while at the same time workers were given incentives for complying to standards in the form of higher ratings or points, monetary benefits for achieving targets, and tipping by clients. However, care work is interactive in nature and is co-produced by the carer

and caree relation and, hence, these algorithmic minimum standards of performance that depended mainly on client satisfaction were ambiguous and arbitrary. Moreover, client biases emanating from social conditioning of gender, caste, or class were also aggregated in the rating system against an individual worker. The rating system imbibes social reality resulting in undue emotional labour on the workers to please their clients or even resulting in discriminating circumstances against workers.

Some hybrid models, like Koala Kabs and Sakha Consulting Wings, have had to collaborate with bigger platforms like Uber to find more work for their women drivers. One such cab driver, Sonali, explains the rigour by which the algorithms are applied in Uber, 'we cannot cancel the duty at the airport … if we cancel more than three duties, then our IDs stop working' (interview, Delhi, March 2020). Similarly, Muskan, another cab driver, talks of the invasive surveillance, 'this car has GPS … I can't turn off the GPS, when I start the car, GPS turns on … Uber gets to know everyone's destinations' (interview, Delhi, June 2020).

Given that the algorithms play a central role in disciplining the workers, women workers in the interviews reported that there was no scope to bargain, challenge, or influence the system, and hence no scope to negotiate with the platform or the clients (indicative of low power over and negligible power with). In addition to lack of communication with the platforms and the lack of transparency of the algorithmic system, platforms further impinged on workers' privacy, through collection of personal data without the knowledge of the workers. Furthermore, the data collected from the workers was unilaterally controlled and used by the platforms for training machine learning algorithms to expand their operations and sell to third-party agencies and other companies (ILO 2021; Rani and Singh 2019). The use of algorithmic management system by the platforms undermined the promise of freedom, flexibility, and autonomy for workers, and instead what we see is mirroring of traditional work inequalities and increased precarity through the use of new technologies.

Alternatively, in some hybrid models, women had some scope of negotiation and felt there was a safe space where they could share their anxieties:

> I was working in Lookplex. I live in Ghaziabad and from there I used to go to Gurgaon and they showed concern, whether I've reached or not, how long will it take … I have come home at 2 am … and even then, they were in touch with me … asking me about my whereabouts … I would feel good, no? (Beauty worker, interview, Delhi-NCR, April 2020)

These platforms were small but more importantly had a more woman-centric outlook which resulted in developing a personal relationship with the management.

Sexual harassment at work place

Women respondents in our interviews described various incidences of sexual harassment faced by them at work. Ruchi, a woman cab driver, shared how some male passengers harassed her, including inappropriate gestures and propositions:

> If this happens during the day [customers talking indecently about sexual life] then we can talk back but if it is at night, then we have to just listen quietly … another time also someone asked

> me if I am married and was asking me for my mobile number then I told him, 'You can go now or I'll call the police' then he got out of the car. This was after reaching the dropping point. (Interview, Delhi, February 2020)

Most women gig workers decide not to work past late evening owing to the fear of sexual harassment during work. This impacts their ability to earn more as they often have to let go of incentives. This was keenly felt by woman cab drivers, and a few beauty workers, as explained by a freelance cab driver on refusing late evening bookings despite higher incentives, 'If we travel at night 12 midnight to 6 … we can't even get through the [platform's] call centre number [in case of emergency] … they don't care [about our safety]!' (woman driver, interview, Delhi, January 2020).

Women took the responsibility for their safety in their own hands rather than negotiating with platforms to create safe workplaces. Women workers relied on their self-defence tactics such as carrying pepper spray, red chilli powder, hockey sticks, etc. They seldom approached the companies, especially the popular platforms, to resolve any crisis they faced and were left vulnerable to violence during work hours and spaces. Moreover, the implementation or knowledge of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) (POSH) Act, 2013, is almost negligible across the board; no functional Internal Committees as mandated by the POSH Act were found and existed at most on paper and were restricted to mostly their own employees. The insights from our interviews showed that women workers in smaller and women-run platforms which offered the hybrid work model, such as TaxShe and Koala Kabs, were more aware of sexual harassment and the law in comparison to workers in the popular ride-hailing and beauty platforms.

The collective dimension of empowerment

The above sections discussed the resources, agency, and the exercise of power at the level of the individual and close relationship (Rowlands 1995), however, the collective level is also important to understand 'where individuals work together to achieve a more extensive impact than each could have had alone' (Rowlands 1995, 87). However, as the workers are identified as 'partners' and not 'employees' by platforms, coupled with varying incentivisation mechanisms, this made it difficult for gig workers to organise, thereby leading to a low 'representation security' (ILO 2021). As such, even where there are unions, they 'cannot collectively bargain with an algorithm, they can't appeal to a platform, and they can't negotiate with an equation' (Gearhart 2017, 13).

The findings from the interviews revealed that the fourth dimension of Pereznieto and Taylor's (2014) 'power with' was negligible when it came to collectivising women platform workers. Freelance ride-hailing platform unions were found to be male-dominated with negligible women members. Some women cab drivers shared that they were aware of such unions and a few found them to be helpful, 'I am also part of the union … they said that if you have any trouble and you have any concern, wherever you are, just put it on your live location, then four or five people will come to help you.' However, most women workers, especially in the smaller hybrid platforms, were not at all organised

and negotiations were more on individual concerns. Interestingly, WhatsApp has become an alternative forum to stay in touch, and share information and challenges. In fact, recently beauty workers from Urban Company conducted a strike using WhatsApp against the platform's policy on high commission rates.

Reasons for lower participation of women in collective bargaining includes women's disproportionate share of unpaid work which is time intensive (Venkat Ratnam and Jain 2002), as well as mismatch of their interests to those of the collectivising organisation (Kantor *et al.* 2006). Moreover, the backlash of the platforms towards collectivisation has been extreme (including actions like suspension of IDs, legal action, etc.) which threatens the employment security of workers. This also discourages women from becoming part of unions as negotiation to work is a hard-won battle owing to rigid gender norms around mobility and sexuality, and most women are not willing to risk it (Kabeer 2021).

Conclusions

The vulnerability faced by women workers on digital labour platforms mirrors those women in the informal economy, as they continue to struggle against invisibilisation, precarious working conditions, inequalities in access to work and wages, and lack of control and autonomy over one's work. In terms of achievement (Kabeer 1999) and reiterating the models of power (Perezneito and Taylor 2014) in alignment with Kabeer's idea of women's empowerment, one finds that women's agency to take up work, especially in a non-traditional livelihood such as driving, gives an immense sense of self-confidence and self-esteem, and enhances their 'soft' as well as trade skills which points to a high level of 'power within'. In terms of 'power to', women are able to shift the power in their families to varying degrees in terms of their income-earning capacity and mobility for work. However, women have largely internalised the patriarchal system that promotes gendered familialism with respect to care work. Further, women's agencies are often acutely curtailed at the level of the platform which functions arbitrarily based on an algorithmic management system. We find that in some hybrid platforms which are small, they tend to be more sensitive to women's issues, however, the earning capacity of workers is much reduced as compared to freelance or incentivised models.

Additionally, the ownership of resources and assets such as smartphones and vehicles which are a prerequisite to entering the location-based platforms restricts most women to work on platforms (indicative of 'power over'). Further, the women in the beauty and ride-hailing platforms had some form of ownership of smartphones but needed initial investment in terms of security deposits and/or skills training which often would not be possible without the consent and financial support of the family. However, there is a sense of pride, especially when women own assets such as a vehicle.

Importantly, women in freelance models are quite power-less in the face of algorithm controls and rating and feedback systems. Despite this, in terms of 'power with', women's

participation in collectivisation in the platform economy is negligible across all models. Social dialogue is imperative for women workers to negotiate and engage with platforms about working conditions (incomes, ratings, penalties, deactivation, etc.), use of data, and social security benefits. This will have a domino effect on growing women's influence in various institutional domains to achieve women's economic empowerment on digital labour platforms.

Finally, while platforms might have created some jobs for many aspiring women workers, the quality of jobs resembles those in the informal economy and it has restricted their potential for economic empowerment. Rather, the innovative technologies which are operated by the neo-capitalist forces have resulted in newer forms of working-class exploitation, and the neoliberal 'flexibility and autonomy' discourse of the platforms has reinforced gendered norms, and hence, the conclusion – that it is nothing but 'old wine in a new bottle'.

Notes

1. Power within: the internal individual capabilities based on knowledge, self-esteem, and sense of entitlement to effect changes in lives; (b) power to: economic decision-making powers at the institutional levels of family, community, and the markets; (c) power over: access and control over material and non-material assets; and (d) power with: the ability to organise with others, or collectivise to effect a change.
2. 'Resources include not only material resources in the more conventional economic sense, but also the various human and social resources which serve to enhance the ability to exercise choice … The second dimension of power relates to agency – the ability to define one's goals and act upon them. Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose which individuals bring to their activity, their sense of agency, or "the power within"' (Kabeer 1999, 437–8).

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