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Gendered labour's positions of vulnerabilities in digital labour platforms and strategies of resistance: a case study of women workers' struggle in Urban Company, New Delhi

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ABSTRACT

The expansion of digital labour platforms (DLPs) in South Asia has incorporated the pre-existing intersectional social inequalities, initiating new sites of exploitation and collective resistance which disrupt and negotiate the gendered labour's positions of vulnerabilities. This paper explores the case of a courageous strike by women workers of Urban Company (online beauty and home services platform) in New Delhi to hike their commission percentage amid the pandemic. We identify that the gendered labour's positions of vulnerabilities in DLPs are informed by the false promise of flexibility, algorithmic insecurity, lack of safety and security, and high dependence of workers on the platform. Against this backdrop, the women's resistance via informal unionism employed the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and informal kin networks to co-ordinate and develop solidarities and launch protest actions, with the support of the traditional trade union. Their limited success is evidence of the associational power of informal unionism, along with the visibility of women harnessing public attention as 'sufferers of injustice'.

L'expansion des plateformes numériques de travail (PNT) en Asie du Sud a incorporé les inégalités sociales intersectionnelles pré-existantes, et lancé de nouveaux sites d'exploitation et de résistance collective. Ce document a examiné le cas d'une grève valeureuse entreprise par les femmes travaillant pour Urban Company (plateforme en ligne de soins esthétiques et de services à domicile) à New Delhi pour obtenir une augmentation de leur commission pendant la pandémie. Nous avons identifié que les positions de vulnérabilité genrées de la main-d'œuvre sur les PNT sont influencées par la fausse promesse de flexibilité, l'insécurité algorithmique, le manque de sécurité et la précarité, et la forte dépendance des travailleurs sur la plateforme. C'est dans ce contexte que la résistance des femmes à travers un mouvement syndical informel a eu recours aux TIC et aux réseaux informels de proches pour exprimer leurs revendications, mobiliser la « socialité de l'empathie », parvenir à une cohésion interne et coordonner/lancer des actions de protestation avec le soutien d'un syndicat traditionnel se faisant leur allié. Leur succès, même limité, démontre le pouvoir découlant de l'esprit associatif du syndicalisme informel et de la visibilité des femmes qui suscitent l'attention du public comme « victimes d'injustices ». La résistance des travailleuses d'Urban Company signifie que, lorsque le capital réinvente et réimagine les

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processus relatifs à la main d'œuvre, la main d'œuvre est tout aussi capable d'inventer de nouvelles formes de stratégies de résistance.

La expansión de las plataformas laborales digitales (DLP) en el sur de Asia ha ocurrido manteniendo las desigualdades sociales interseccionales preexistentes, por lo que ha dado lugar a nuevos lugares de explotación y resistencia colectiva. Este artículo analiza el caso de una valiente huelga realizada por las trabajadoras de Urban Company (plataforma en línea de servicios de belleza y del hogar) en Nueva Delhi, cuyas demandas, en medio de la pandemia, se centraron en aumentar el porcentaje que reciben por concepto de comisión. Identificamos que las posiciones de vulnerabilidad por motivos de género de las trabajadoras en las DLP se basan en la falsa promesa de flexibilidad, la inseguridad algorítmica, la falta de seguridad en general y su alta dependencia en la plataforma. Con este telón de fondo, la resistencia de las mujeres a través del sindicalismo informal utilizó las TIC y las redes informales de parentesco para expresar sus quejas, movilizar la "sociabilidad de la empatía", conseguir cohesión interna, coordinarse y lanzarse a las acciones de protesta tras establecer una alianza con un sindicato tradicional. Su limitado éxito es una prueba del poder asociativo del sindicalismo informal y de la visibilidad de mujeres que aprovechan la atención pública como "sufridoras de la injusticia". La resistencia de las trabajadoras de Urban Company da cuenta de que, cuando el capital reinventa y reimagina el proceso laboral, el factor trabajo es igualmente capaz de inventar nuevas estrategias de resistencia.

Introduction

The emergence of digital labour platforms (DLPs) in South Asia in the past decade offered diverse work opportunities with the promise of flexibility and freedom to choose when they wanted to work and better payments, which many women workers' found quite appealing. In particular, the location-based DLPs like Urban Company and Hello Madam gigfied the body labour and care work, and professionalised beauty and wellness services. They offered work time and workspace flexibility which attracted both unemployed women and those already part of the precarious informal economy. However, these platforms are a 'socio-technical artefact' mediating the 'traditionally gendered service-work' (Raval and Pal 2019) and exhibit the logic of 'structural domination' (Flanagan 2019) and labour exploitation.

In this paper, we explore a courageous protest undertaken by women workers of Urban Company (online beauty and home services platform) in New Delhi to hike their commission percentage amid the pandemic. We investigated the gendered labour's positions of vulnerabilities in DLPs; and explored how women negotiated or resisted their positional vulnerabilities within the DLP and the specific strategies that they deployed. This paper contributes to the documentation of women using the strike as a tool of resistance (Sheill 2019), an arena that has not received much attention in the academic scholarship concerning DLPs.

The existing studies on DLPs have some limitations as there is an extensive focus on taxi drivers and delivery workers, thereby failing to capture the diverse experiences of

workers in other DLPs, notably the 'traditionally gendered area of work' (Kampouri 2022; Ticona and Mateescu 2018). There is an over-representation of European and North American experiences of DLP workers (Hunt and Samman 2019). Moreover, though there have been some attempts to document workers' resistance in both the remote online and location-based DLPs or map the 'form' and 'substance' of such contention *vis-à-vis* customer, platform, and state (Irani and Silberman 2013; Johnston and Land-Kazlauskas 2018; Wood *et al.* 2021b), they hardly capture the gendered labour's resistances. In addition, the discussion on workers' resistance in location-based DLPs is highly limited to riders, mainly the food delivery workers, a sector over-represented by male workers (Chesta *et al.* 2019; Marrone and Finotto 2019; Tassinari and Maccarrone 2020; Trappmann *et al.* 2020).

Nonetheless, there is some scholarship on the gendered resistance experiences articulated from the global South perspective covering the formal sector and the informal economy, which includes the 'formal establishments that do not comply with the regulations' (e.g. sanitation and fishing) and those that are 'outside the purview of regulation' (e.g. domestic work, sex work) (Fernandes 2021; Gooptu 2000; Kabeer *et al.* 2013a, 5, 2013b). Recent experiences of women organising, mainly informal from grassroots with horizontal leadership, have deployed digital tools to challenge structural power relations and democratise society (Nazneen and Okech 2021). In this context, this paper explores the nature and strategies of women's resistance on Urban Company, a DLP which offers workers an opportunity to work with informal work arrangements and avoids state regulations. The paper is organised into two main sections. First, we navigate the work practices and women workers' experiences in Urban Company to identify the gendered labour's positions of vulnerabilities in the DLP and unfold the immediate motivations for women workers' protests. We then discuss how the use of ICTs, informal kin networks, and alliances with traditional trade unions enabled and enhanced worker mobilisations and informal unionism in Urban Company. Finally, we critically evaluate their strategic choices in workers' resistance to underline the key limitations and success of protests to reflect potential entry points for future labour organising on the DLPs.

Methodology

The study is based on qualitative research methods, where in-depth interviews of ten women participants in the strike were conducted and we adopted the snowball sampling method. We formulated an initial timeline of protest using the available media reports, navigating the hashtag #BoycottUrbanCompany on Twitter, and interviewing a journalist who covered the Urban Company protest in October 2021 and two women trade unionists of the All India Gig Workers' Union (AIGWU) who were part of the movement. The timeline helped in structuring the conversations we had with the women workers who had been a part of the protests. We asked them about their motivations for joining the platform, their work experiences, professional situation during the pandemic, conditions leading to protest, their resistance strategies, and how they negotiated with the company

management. The researchers had prior contact with the women AIGWU trade unionists, which helped us in recruiting the initial participants. We also had a brief discussion with a male Urban Company worker, who was the brother of one of the women participants. He had a crucial role to play in the women's protest in the company. The interviews with participants were mainly in Hindi, except for the English conversations with the journalist and the AIGWU trade unionists. We successfully connected with all the leading women organisers of the protest. Three women participants were aged between 20 and 30 years, while the remaining were between 30 and 45 years. They all had more than two years of experience in Urban Company and belonged to second-generation migrant families in New Delhi. Our participants included four women from the OBC community, two Scheduled Caste, three Upper Caste Hindus, and one Muslim woman. The conversations ranged from 40 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes and the names of respondents in the study have been anonymised.

Urban workers' protest in Gurugram, New Delhi

> They turned the lights off, closed all the doors of the office. We were not even allowed to use the washroom. I was two months pregnant then. There were three other women who were also expecting, even then we were denied the bathroom. My family asked me to come back, that with the baby inside I should not take such stress. I told them I am sitting in *dharna* [peaceful sit-in protest], for this baby only. Tomorrow when she is born, what will I feed her? I am a mother, I am a worker, I fight for my valid rights, I fight for my child's *future*. (Interview, New Delhi, 3 May 2022)

Geet caresses her baby bump as she narrates her experience of a cold December night in 2021. She was among the main organisers of the Urban Company protest, which though short-lived, was the first of its kind among the beauty and wellness platform workers in India. Earlier, the country had witnessed multiple protest demonstrations and successful strikes by taxi drivers and delivery partners (two sectors where male workers dominate the workforce) on DLPs. This was the first time that a platform company which is largely dependent on women's labour had faced an organised, spontaneous sit-in protest outside their main office.

Urban Company, earlier known as Urban Clap, is primarily a home service delivery platform founded in 2014 that provides on-demand labour for services including beauty and wellness, fitness, cleaning, appliance and home repairs, etc. The company offers services in more than 30 Indian cities and has expanded its presence over the years to the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Australia, and the USA. They have more than 32,000 workers enrolled on their payroll, trained to perform standard and customised home services. The promise of better-earning prospects, flexibility in work time and workspace, and respect and dignity in society through the professionalisation of home services, attracts many young and middle-aged workers previously engaged in the informal economy or unemployed towards Urban Company, a DLP. However, their labour is misclassified as 'service partners' (shades of the management vocabulary of micro-entrepreneurship). This helps the company to hide behind the state's regulatory

blind spots and are not bound by the obligations on labour codes and regulations, and for providing social security and other worker benefits. This arrangement compels the labour to bear the complete risks and accountability associated with their work in exchange for the 'software-generated market leads' provided by DLPs (van Doorn 2017), where the labour is highly monitored and ranked through algorithmic functions based on customer reviews and rating scores:

> At times I feel it is better to be back in our [beauty] parlour only, all their tall promises seem to be an utter lie now. (Interview, New Delhi, 16 October 2021)

The *akash kusum* (an ambitious dream) of better pay with flexible work hours started to crumble after the company brought in hidden cards of penalties and introduced abrupt policy changes. Many workers began complaining about the reduced pay per task, lack of safety protocol, and extended work hours. This was contrary to their main reason for joining Urban Company, the 'flexibility'. On 8 October 2021, the first protest broke out at Urban Company's office in Gurugram. More than 150 workers participated in the picketing and forced the company to come to the discussion table within a week. The workers won most of their demands on the paper, instilling hopes regarding the alleged 'partnership' with the DLP. Though that hope did not last long, as Urban Company announced a Minimum Guarantee Plan that insisted on an upfront payment (ranging from INR 2,000 to 3,000) graded with new worker classifications. This created a further burden on women, especially those who were yet to recover from the pandemic-induced economic loss and the unequal domestic care burden. On 20 December around 100 women workers initiated a day and night *dharna* outside their Gurugram office, which became a milestone in the DLP workers' protest in India.

Gendered labour's positions of vulnerabilities in DLPs

Flexibility in work schedules

In the South Asian context, particularly in northern India, where patrilocal marital practices are highly prevalent, women's social mobility and access to material resources are highly restricted and mainly embedded within family-kinship relationships (Kabeer 2011). However, these structures are hardly static, as women's interaction, negotiation, and exchanges with the state, civil society, and market economy potentially redefine the social relationships (*ibid.*). Except for the working women in affluent families who can afford to hire domestic help, relative ease from 'domestic duties' is a distant dream for most working women in India.

For all the women workers of Urban Company who participated in this study, they mainly come from working-class and lower-middle-class families where a relief from the domestic duties was either impossible or contingent on the charity of their relatives and in-laws. Therefore, the promise of flexibility in work time was a key attraction to balance their aspiration to enter the market economy and manage domestic duties simultaneously.

The traditional salons had standardised work routines or fixed working hours, with little scope for professional mobility. Even if they brought additional revenue (via attracting more customers or attending more work), it usually did not invite more payment, as their additional labour remained invisible (Raval and Pal 2019). In contrast, Urban Company assured payments for each unit of work they undertook. They could join and exit the company with ease. Apart from purchasing an Urban Company kit costing INR 25,000–35,000, which the company promised to support even through a loan option (Chaudhary 2020), worker enrolment did not require huge capital investment or risks like that of setting up a new beauty parlour. Urban Company provided 'access to credit, skilling, inventory and market/customers' (Munshi and Gupta 2019).

However, these perceptions changed over time. The platforms tried to prioritise customer needs by pressurising the workers to undertake a higher number of tasks. The continuous pressure from DLPs to meet the desired targets on workers drastically deteriorated workers' work–life balance (Munshi and Gupta 2019), making the promise of flexibility a distant reality. Further, the grading and ranking of workers based on the number of tasks completed fostered an atmosphere of 'competition' with other workers at work, rather than nurturing solidarities (Mendonça and Kougiannou 2022):

> After the first year, you will feel that there is a dip in the number of good orders coming your way. One might get three pedicures and clean up in a day, you get maximum INR 300–500 from this, after deducting the commission and other expenses. There was a time I used to earn INR 2,000 a day, now if it's suddenly INR 500, how do you manage? You tend to take more and more orders, resulting in more working hours and less time at home. I joined Urban Company so that I can spend more time with my children. If I must work more than the usual hours, then what advantage did joining Urban Company give me? (Interview, New Delhi, 30 March 2022)

Algorithmic insecurity

Wood and Lehdonvirta (2021a) identified 'algorithmic insecurity' as a critical feature embracing DLP workers' subjective experiences and vulnerability. They describe the 'algorithmic insecurity' as 'a novel form of insecurity that relates to the vulnerability and fear that workers experience as a result of working in an unstable and opaque environment in which platforms use customer-generated ratings to score workers and algorithms to amplify the consequences of those scores' (*ibid*., 32–3). Many DLP workers experience constant anxiety about their future, and are concerned about their ability to access work, earn income, and meet the ever-changing work requirements of the platform (*ibid*., 24).

Many of the women workers earlier working in the beauty parlours expected that a technology-based platform running with less human interference would treat them fairly and unbiasedly. However, they started experiencing insecurity and vulnerability in the way algorithms allocated them work, taking away the promise of flexibility the moment they settled within the DLP. The DLPs, supported through private equity funds and venture capital in the initial stages, prioritise the company's growth over profits and engage in 'predatory pricing' to gather customers and workers (the 'partners') or to capture the

market (International Labour Office 2021; Medappa *et al*. 2020). However, as the platforms with enough customers had accumulated a massive pool of data, which made the functionality of their algorithms highly efficient, they made the workers dependent on the platform, and strategically optimised the operational cost by squeezing workers' labour and time (*ibid*.). Therefore, the promise of flexibility gradually became contingent on workers surrendering to the DLP's erratic policy changes on wages, penalties, and incentives.

The terms and conditions for workers joining Urban Company state:

> Urban Company reserves the right, in its sole discretion, to change, modify, or otherwise amend the Terms, and any other documents incorporated by reference herein for complying with the legal and regulatory framework and for other legitimate business purposes, at any time, and Urban Company will post the amended Terms at the domain of www.Urban Company.com/terms. It is your responsibility to review the Terms of Use for any changes and you are encouraged to check the Terms of Use frequently. (Urban Company 2020)

In the absence of a legally binding work contract, the ever-changing terms and conditions between the company and the workers (or 'partners') heightened the insecurity of workers. Earlier surveys on Urban Company indicated that only 21 per cent of the respondents had attended college, while 72 per cent of workers had finished high school (Chaudhary 2020, 31). For most women workers, accessing and evaluating the frequent policy changes which include changes in commission rates, work rates, penalties, rating policy, auto-debit, recharge amount, and product purchases is difficult as they are not well-versed in English as well as the legal language used in the documents. This can substantially undermine workers' autonomy and earning potential.

The women workers had very little choice but to accept the terms and conditions that could potentially be used against them.

According to Geet:

> You will always find there are many vacancies in Urban Company, they are recruiting all the time, but are the numbers of customers increasing exponentially? I don't think so. Many people leave Urban Company after a year. First year you will get good jobs, higher-value jobs, after that they will start reducing your frequency. You will get six pedicures and one facial may be, in a day. After 10–12 hours of working, you even don't have 500 rupees in your hand, the same person who was earning at least 1,200 rupees each day a few months back. Is this possible to happen without company's intervention? I don't buy. (Interview, New Delhi, 3 May 2022)

Pooja agreed with these observations and added that work allocations did not appear to be randomly chosen by the algorithm. According to her, if workers had taken a loan from the company for purchasing beauty kits, then they got higher-value jobs until their loan was settled. With the loan settlement, the quality of orders deteriorated. She suspects a conscious manipulation through algorithms by the company. Another participant, Janaki, shared how after her participation in the protest and legal action, her ID was blocked by the company. She was told by the customer care officer that this was due to her bad performance. When she confronted them with a screenshot from the app with 4.6 stars as her rating, the operator on the other side replied, 'that's not everything, we have other measurements too' (interview, New Delhi, 1 May 2022).

The algorithmic opacity and controls deter not only customer–worker interactions but also worker–worker interactions. Workers' grievances are addressed through pre-structured information-sharing customer care centres. The managerial class of DLPs are often inaccessible to precarious workers, whom the company claim to identify as 'partners', but they are available for the high-ranking employees (e.g. engineering, data analytics, and design section). The automated Interactive Voice Response or remote call centres are often the only available forums for workers to raise their grievances, irrespective of which platform it is, Uber or Urban Company. It is only through collective actions that they can meet the company officials. However, the extensive disciplinary purview of the DLPs (many of them being transnational corporations) hinders the emergence of forming workers' collective voices (Huws 2019) or penalises them badly.

Sujata says:

> They manipulate everything. My clients have been very satisfied. I have seen them giving me stars never below 4, most of them will give a 5 star only, yet after the protest and *dharna* they were showing my performance as poor performance. How can that happen if they are not altering our data. (Interview, New Delhi, 1 May 2022)

The IDs of many of the women who were leading the protests were blocked. One of the workers shared that one day INR 800 got deducted from her existing credit account. She called the operational manager and complained about the money deduction when she was not even working with the company. The manager responded by saying that it was some software error and the money would be refunded soon. Even after a month, this was not done. Jyoti referred to the company as a *chindi chor* (petty thief), using technology to pickpocket poor people.

The linking of re-training requirements with ratings and reviews also put an additional burden on workers' time and drained their resources and earnings. The workers complained that Urban Company was penalising workers for cancelling orders or for arriving five minutes late at the place of appointment. Moreover, as customer feedback is privileged over workers' experience, a false complaint can damage the workers' overall credentials. In the traditional workspace, like a beauty salon (in physical space), client satisfaction secures workers' reputations, and it holds some stability in the regime of 'organised informality'. A worker's reputation cannot be destroyed arbitrarily. The durability of worker reputation is negotiated in the local society, rather than competing to quantify within opaque software systems, where corporate companies have more power to influence the worker's outcome. Moreover, good ratings require high investment in terms of time and performance across multiple assignments. This makes workers very dependent on the current platform as shifting to a new one would mean starting afresh in case of ratings and reviews.

Lack of safety and security

Many of the women talked about how they were constantly asked by their friends and relatives whether they fear going into 'strangers' homes. Safety issues are a huge concern for them as they must enter the homes and even the bedrooms of unknown people.

Women workers spoke about feeling 'helpless' in 'unwanted situations' and identified 'precaution' as the major way of protecting themselves. As a (precautionary) tactic, they double-checked their client details and shared the work location with their families:

> Actually, there was nothing that we could do rather than just calling the helpline number, which is mostly outsourced to some call centre, people working there are just telecommunicators, they hardly have any power. (Interview, New Delhi, 30 March 2022)

They were aware that they would not receive any emergency support or response from customer care because of the latter's remote nature of operations and limitations of standard operating procedures. The fear of penalties and downgrading of ratings amplified their vulnerability:

> There was one girl who responded to a booking and entered the flat. The women didn't seem problematic, but a few minutes after the people in the housing society came with the police, alleging the client was a 'call girl' [sex worker] and arrested. The poor girl who went to work also got arrested along with her. She pleaded, and called the company helpline, but Urban Company just denounced her, blamed her for not wearing the uniform right. It's only after her parents came to the police station that she was released. What faith that girl will have now for the company? Nothing. (Interview, New Delhi, 19 March 2022)

> We were taught to leave a client's home if we feel uncomfortable, but it was also taught to us that even if the client slaps you do not charge back or quarrel, just leave immediately. Are we here to be harassed and manhandled? Why can't the company ensure a safe environment, legal and police assistance in case of a crime done to us? We too have self-respect and dignity. (Interview, New Delhi, 1 May 2022)

In the absence of a systematic redressal system, particularly in the case of the threat of sexual harassment, women always remain anxious. The DLPs usually evade the responsibility for the workers' safety at their workplace. Therefore, the burden of being 'safe' is totally on the women's shoulders. Other studies have indicated how reporting workplace violations or assaults, even within the family, has potentially altered the perception and access to women's work (Gupta 2020):

> Women workers tread a thin line between financial independence, patriarchal protection and assumptions about their morality. Knowing the consequences of reporting of physical hazards, particularly, sexual safety, deters women from taking any action … Moreover, women have limited legal protections which they can access on their own in cases of threat to personal safety. (Gupta 2020, 8)

The misclassification of labour as 'partners' in Urban Company denied women workers the social security provisions (e.g. holiday wages, medical leave), otherwise available in protected sectors (through the Industrial Relations Code). It has also limited the workplace protections legally available via India's Supreme Court-initiated Vishaka guidelines (1997) and the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal Act of 2013). In the absence of a well-defined employer–employee relationship, the women workers in DLP do not even get covered by the Internal Complaints Committee of the company. In this context, the insecurity of women workers in Urban Company

manifested in the demands for a functional and human-operated (not automated Interactive Voice Response) anti-harassment helpline.

The COVID-19 pandemic-induced vulnerability

As the pandemic impacted the livelihoods of the working-class and lower-middle-class households, many women opted for DLPs. It was considered the primary source of income in the household. In pre-pandemic times, the average net monthly income of Urban Company workers ranged from a minimum of INR 20,000 to a maximum of INR 80,000 (Chaudhary 2020, 37). The high earning potential in DLP incentivised many to close their beauty parlour, permanently. The lower requisite for digital access and functionality in location-based DLPs (as opposed to online-based crowd work) and the weak entry-level barriers for individuals (Hunt and Samman 2019) were conducive to capturing the aspirations of the less-educated women workforce with basic operational knowledge of mobile phones.

After the pandemic, the women workers experienced an increase in their work timings and penalties. Late evening appointments and a penalty of INR 500 for the cancellation of three consecutive trips were some of the changes that came in.

The idea of flexibility became a distant dream for many in Urban Company:

> You will get tips at 6.30 pm in the evening asking you to travel 15 km from the residence. If I go at 6.30 pm in the evening, when shall I come back? You know the situation of Delhi, is it safe for a woman to travel alone at night? If I go out late in the evening, who will cook, who will feed my children? They just say flexibility like that, in real life they only understand money and nothing else. (Interview, New Delhi, 1 May 2022)

Compulsions related to rating requirements, good reviews, and fear of penalties forced many women to continue working in difficult situations. This included providing services to COVID-19-infected and symptomatic customers during their quarantine period (Mehrotra 2022).

Amid the pandemic, the workers found it hard to tolerate up to 30 per cent of commission rates charged by the company, along with the arbitrary imposition of penalties. From the year 2020 onwards, many women workers started complaining about the increasing penalties ranging from INR 200 to 800 (Mehrotra 2022). As the earnings of the women declined, their excitement over working for DLPs reduced. The option of returning to the traditional beauty parlour was no longer there due to the pandemic restrictions, thereby increasing their dependency on the DLPs (Table 1).

Informal unionism and workers' resistance

Use of ICTs

India's National Capital Region (NCR) has high digital penetration. Though there is a gendered digital divide and digital literacy, the women in this region are in a much better situation than most other non-metropolitan cities.[1] Their familiarity with smartphones

Table 1. The timeline of the protest

Date	Mode	Key demands	Punitive actions	Result
8 October 2020	• Strike for a day • Picketing in front of the office	• Maximum of 20% commission for the company • Safety measures for women. • Consultation before policy amendment • Removing unreasonable penalties and abrupt blocking • Relaxation during health emergency, maternity, and marriage • Stopping the imposition of Urban Company products by auto-debiting money from their account	None	• Preliminary meeting with the co-founder • IDs being unblocked
14 October 2020	First formal negotiation with the officials	Same as above	None	Among 13 demands put forth, most were accepted on paper
13 December 2020	Negotiation meeting with the officials	Against new categorisation of workers, lack of consultation, lack of flexibility, Minimum Guarantee Plan	None	Unsuccessful
20–22 December 2020	Two-day strike and sit-in protest	Same as above	• Civil injunction against four people • Their IDs were blocked	Unsuccessful

had enabled an entry point to work on DLPs, including Urban Company. In particular, the training sessions and workshops conducted by Urban Company made them more comfortable to use digital tools and technologies. They acquired digital literacy from within and outside the platform, which played a crucial role in connecting with other workers, to channel their grievances and co-ordinate protests:

> During COVID-19, they [Urban Company] organised Zoom meetings, where people from other cities took part. They will give us classes on many things. One day we hijacked that meeting, got all these girls together and formed a WhatsApp group named UC PROBLEM SHARE. We understood our difficulties are all the same, that does mean our solution also has to be collective. This group played an important role in our October protest. The day we picketed in Delhi, our colleagues did the same in Jaipur, Rajasthan. We made them [Urban Company] understand that we are much bigger than what we appear to be. (Interview, New Delhi, 30 March 2022)

WhatsApp was the key medium used by protestors for initiating intra-worker communications. Apart from forming new groups, they used the existing communication infrastructure of Urban Company to deliver their instructions and updates. They used the WhatsApp groups formed by the DLP during their training days to reach a large proportion of workers. Each batch that undertook training had separate WhatsApp groups, and it became a convenient channel for content sharing, voicing resistance, and communicating the future course of action:

> I myself was part of multiple WhatsApp groups, based on localities and training batches. So, with just a forwarded message one could reach at least 400 workers at a stretch. Myself, Pooja, Geet, and others were using these groups to request people to take part in the protest, or log off for a day from the app in symbolic solidarity. (Interview, New Delhi, 2 June 2022)

On 2 October 2021, a woman worker tried to commit suicide as her ID got arbitrarily blocked. A video of her went viral through these WhatsApp groups, triggering many women to (spontaneously) organise and participate in the subsequent protest. Although the workers were in financial distress, they started collecting funds from each other to temporarily support the worker who attempted suicide, demonstrating the 'sociality of empathy':

> People gave whatever possible from 200 to 2,000 rupees for her. They blocked her ID for a long time without a justification. All her earnings came to a standstill. How long people will keep *himmat* (courage), sometimes they will break down right? We didn't know her personally, but all of us thought we needed to save her first with whatever we could contribute. *Jaan Kimti hai* [life is precious]. (Interview, New Delhi, 2 June 2022)

Sharing the digital space helped in forming a camaraderie and instilled a deep sense of belongingness amongst the workers even though they had never met in person. The presence of Urban Company officials in these groups did not deter the women as they derived courage from each other. They also realised that as a collective they were more powerful. Since, WhatsApp was a familiar platform, apart from the creation of a few groups without officials, they did not consider the option of shifting to a new platform.

Informal kin network as a source of trust and courage

Though digital communication was crucial in organising the protests, it did not displace other traditional modes of communication – informal networking. Many of these women knew each other before joining Urban Company from their professional experience and work reputation in the local society. A survey-based study on Urban Company workers in both Mumbai and Delhi also indicated referrals from informal social networks as the key source of information regarding job vacancies in Urban Company (Chaudhary 2020, 33).

Sujata says:

> I have been in this profession for the last 20 years. Many people I used to work with are now in Urban Company. I have invited many workers to the platform. In our profession, you know each other like that. We used to take part in the make-up workshop, spa workshops. *Aise hi dost bante gaye* [we have made friends while working]. (Interview, New Delhi, 9 May 2022)

The caste and kin relationship-based recruitment in the market economy had been one of the bases of occupational segregation in India. As opposed to the traditional occupations (in the informal market), in the case of DLP, the caste capital was not visibly a key factor for labour recruitment. However, the kin network remained relevant as a network for job identification, information sharing, and discussions. A woman worker who later became a key organiser of the protest had her brother (Rajeev) working in Urban Company's air-conditioning (AC) mechanic and plumber section. When there was initial confusion and paranoia around the merit of the Minimum Guarantee Act, he was able to clarify the doubts based on his experience. He explained that though initially the Minimum Guarantee Plan (where workers top up INR 3,000 for getting 40 high-valued sure-shot jobs) looks like a lucrative offer, very soon the company will hike the top-up amount, as

happened in their work division. In their case, the top-up amount started with INR 3,500, but now for the same plan, workers are made to pay more than INR 10,000 per month. So, he warned them, 'if you let in now, later it will become a *fansi ka fanda* [a rope to hang oneself]'. Rajeev was trusted by the group because of kinship relations as well as being a fellow worker. Most of the women working in Urban Company are embedded in family kinship relationships and everyone in their families was working to sustain the family. This made it easier for them to trust someone (Rajeev) who was kin to one of their fellow workers. Pooja says:

> The company threatened my brother, and asked why he is intervening in this matter. I denied all the claims. He was not intervening, he was just telling the truth to people. If a brother does not stand by his sister, who will? And we girls are not puppets, all the girls were already enough disturbed on how the company was running and then one day you come and say, we have to pay more money to get a job. We work, we go to people's homes in the scorching sun, you sit in your AC cabin and earn *haram ka paisa* [earn money for doing nothing], now you need more money so that we die? (Interview, New Delhi, 2 June 2022)

Framing the protest and the role of trade unions

Despite most women not having any formal political association or at least previous experience in protest demonstrations, organising the workers and managing the protest was done without any external help:

> We had no one to learn from. Our everyday struggle taught us to fight back. We have family back home, if we don't earn money our children remain hungry. Every mother can fight a battle for their children, isn't it? (Interview, New Delhi, 9 May 2022)

The women workers of Urban Company started protesting because of the negative life experiences they were facing in the current work situation and much of their response was self-taught. Many women derived motivation from other successful collective actions in the region, notably the year-long Farmers Movement that occupied the borders of India's national capital. This enabled their confidence to opt for the traditional modes of protest, including sit-ins and *gherao*, against Urban Company, apart from other protest modalities, including sabotaging the platform–customer–worker trilogy. Many of these women came from the migrant families of Western Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, and Haryana, where they belonged to farming communities. Therefore, when the women planned to sit outside the Urban Company office on the chilling December night, where the temperature dips down to three degrees at times, they were inspired by the grandmothers of Singhu or Tikri borders, who sustained their movement amid all adversities: 'If they can sit for this long, why not us?' (interview, New Delhi, 2 June 2022).

When we unearth the strategic choice available to women workers in their resistance against Urban Company, the power resources approach (Schmalz *et al.* 2018; Silver 2003; Wright 2000) provides us with a useful conceptual framework. Here, the women workers did not enjoy workplace or marketplace bargaining power, the structural power emanating from labour's position in the economic system, as they neither were in a position to disrupt the DLP's business nor were their skillsets rare enough to make (labour)

replacements difficult. However, they derived courage from the associational power of informal unionism. The women were vocal and visible in expressing their antagonism in WhatsApp groups and were not bothered by the presence of the company officials during discussions and co-ordination of resistance in such forums. As a collective, they asserted and crafted their space within the company to discuss workers' demands. Moreover, the visibility of protesting women in public spaces (e.g. sit-ins and *gherao*), as sufferers of injustice, had the potential to harness societal power (via public pressure).

Informal unionism, in this case, was a spontaneous response of women workers experiencing similar exploitation in the workplace. In the absence of prior workplace representative structures or trade unions, the 'sociality of empathy' responding to day-to-day workplace vulnerabilities and insecurities triggered bottom-up mobilisation that solidified their collective identity as women workers. The informal nature of women workers' union interestingly did not lead to any conflict with the traditional union but instead they enjoyed their support. Both parties worked towards challenging or contesting the precarious position of DLP workers. The women workers harnessed coalitional power by gaining solidarities from IFAT and AIGWU. Seikh Salauddin from the IFAT was in constant touch with the organiser over the phone and responded quickly with a solidarity statement, as the protest got initiated. Rikta and Upasana, two women trade unionists from AIGWU, were regular visitors to the protest site. They helped the protestors in drafting the charter of demand, strategising protest plans, contributed to the planning for further action, and ensured legal help to workers who wanted to take the issue to court. This alliance helped Urban Company workers' informal unionism, the first timers, in overcoming the limitations of inexperience in strategising protest and expanding the protest discourse (e.g. securing external solidarities, preparing press notes, media visibility), and thereby harnessing the resources of traditional trade unions.

Though the number of people who took part in the protest was only around 50 workers, many who could not participate agreed with the protesting women's issues and demands. Some of the new recruits felt that the protesting workers were in the right but were scared to join them for fear of being penalised.

Urban Company also penalised the participants by blocking IDs, hampering extensive mobilisations. For the older recruits in the company, they had realised the absurdity of being

> the sacrificial labour that pulls itself up by its own bootstraps in the hope that the hard work and risk taking will pay off, either by turning the gig into a sustainable occupation or by buying enough time to transition into something better. (van Doorn 2012, 52)

The new recruits adhered to individuated micro-resistance tactics to respond to the unpleasant work conditions they confronted. For instance, some of them shared their personal number with the client and asked them to contact them directly the next time for work if they were pleased with her service. This helped the women forgo the commission that Urban Company charges. Traditionally, beauticians depended on this kind of individualised network, but now they were recreating something similar

among the customers of Urban Company. We can observe similar strategies amongst the OLA-UBER drivers, where they cancel the trip after meeting the customer through mutual negotiation and provide the service at the same price. Though the extent and scope of such resistance is limited and holds other security concerns for women, in the absence of stable unions and large organised workers' movements, such micro-resistances are also a legitimate part of the struggle to ensure a decent earning.

According to a key protest organiser, a one-day protest to log out of the DLP in December 2021 received a response from merely 200 women, while more than 3,000 women workers continued to be active on the platform, defeating the attempt for 'digital disruption' as a bargaining strategy. They also floated the hashtag #BoycottUrbanCompany as part of the Twitter campaign; it too did not receive the expected momentum. The key problem in organising workers in Urban Company was not just the spatially dispersed workforce but the opacity around the real worker strength. The workers also faced the limitation of scaling the protest for a protracted period because of the resource deprivations emanating from inter-sectional gendered inequalities and marginality, and their inability to craft a robust counter-public sphere where public support and support from customers could have been harnessed systematically.

Response from Urban Company

Urban Company's initial tactic while negotiating with the women workers' discontent was either to ignore them or token acceptance of grievances. Therefore, the initial delegations (without confrontations) in August and early October 2021, with 10–15 workers, did not yield significant results. However, the situation changed when workers opted for public demonstrations of protests and expressed militancy in their course of action, including protest marches and temporarily blocking roads. The fear of protests hampering the DLP's reputation brought the women workers to the discussion table on 14 October 2021, where they were treated with snacks, lunch, t-shirts, water bottles, and diaries. Urban Company was forced to agree to 12 of the 13 demands the workers had put through, and they made a public announcement for image recovery. Like many other DLPs and start-ups, they tried to project themselves as sensitive and democratic entrepreneurs after failing all coercive measures against organised women's power. This also demonstrates how the associational power, along with the visibility of women when harnessing public attention as sufferers of injustice, forced the company to accept workers' demands:

> On October 5th, I received a call from the general manager, asking me to not instigate the partners and that if I continue to plan for a protest action, she will not entertain any of our demands from the next time. She also added that I work very less, people have to do at least three bookings a day or they can leave the company. She asked me to serve the company well rather than being a politician. (Interview, New Delhi, 30 March 2022)

The corporate apathy around labour politics has remained unchanged, forcing the workers to question the basis of profit generation of companies. However, many new

age 'partners' (Urban Company) were also hostile to politicising and tried to single out the leaders of the protest workers as unproductive, inefficient, and problem makers. Before the strike on 8 October 2021, the workers found a video circulating in groups where two officials openly threatened the workers with police action. Just like the older times, when factory owners would call the police to break the workers' strike, the DLPs followed a similar strategy. They also used a few workers to spread panic and fear among those ready to fight for their rights:

> Even among us, there were *tattus* [pony or informer] who tried to spread misinformation that police will arrest people and other passive threats to scare us, break our unity. These workers work as agents of the company. (Interview, New Delhi, 2 June 2022)

Nonetheless, the informal unionism of women workers achieved internal cohesion by relying on the informal kin network as a source of trust and courage, and by making their hardships and experiences heard before fellow workers, generating 'sociality of empathy'.

Though Urban Company's response to the protestors had been accommodative in the initial phase, it changed after the 20 December 2021 protest. The workers observed overnight sit-ins and gate blocking on the office premises. The sight of women sitting under the open sky on the chilly winter night in Delhi created a buzz in the media about the insensitivity of Urban Company. However, the DLP quickly filed a litigation on the pretext of the destruction of property and other civil offences. Later, they went on blocking the IDs of many who participated in the protest. Several workers also complained about a reduced frequency of tasks that they received after the protest:

> The manager called me on WhatsApp (so that I cannot record the call) and told me I am blocked for doing the protest. That I have made a dent in the reputation of the company. I told her I am going to pursue this legally, protesting against injustice is our right, how one can be penalised for that? She said she won't open the ID until and unless all the cases get settled. (Interview, New Delhi, 2 June 2022)

On 21 December 2021, in Gurugram district court, Urban Company, in the first of its kind in India, filed a lawsuit asking for a 'permanent prohibitory injunction' against its workers holding any sort of protest action near the office compound (Barik 2021; Velayudhan and Venkataraghavan 2022). However, they named only four of its workers in the petition, as the number of protestors was quite large. On 22 December 2021, the court issued a restraining order against protestors in the 100 metres around the company compound, shortly finishing the *dharna* in front of the office (Velayudhan and Venkataraghavan, 2022). Later, according to the protestors, the company withdrew the case just a day before the actual date of the hearing.

According to Rikta, a trade union activist affiliated with AIGWU:

> This withdrawal is out of fear, they are scared to put the actual situation of labour conditions in front of the court. UC [Urban Company] knows that the demands of the girls are legit, so even if this goes to the court on the pretext of unlawfulness, the workers will still have a platform to raise their concern in front of the judiciary. Which might lead to a discussion on legal bindings, ensuring incentive, insurance, and social security measures. (Interview, New Delhi, 14 April 2022)

Conclusion

The gendered labour's positions of vulnerabilities in DLPs are induced by the false promise of flexibility, algorithmic insecurity, lack of safety and security, unstable incomes, and high dependence of workers on the platform. The extraordinary pandemic situations further deepened the existing gendered intersectional inequalities, making women workers' positions more precarious, insecure, and vulnerable. The short-lived expectations, deteriorated work–life balance, and the absence of perceived social justice (van Doorn 2012; Salminen and Kaartemo, 2018) inspired strategies of resistance from the women workers in Urban Company. Women forged resistance via informal unionism by capitalising on the potential of digital tools and informal kin networks to express grievances, mobilise 'sociality of empathy', garner internal cohesion, and co-ordinate/launch protest actions.

However, the critical limitations of informal unionism included the *ad hoc* infrastructural resources: the workers mobilised financial resources, not in a systematic manner or as reserve funds, but only in response to specific needs (e.g. helping fellow workers in distress) and weak organisational efficiency: the workers did not have well-defined roles and structured leadership mechanisms to maximise the efficiency of their organising. Instead, among the worker-participants in informal unionism, three women emerged as crucial players, particularly in mobilising fellow workers and resources, and voicing their demands. Nonetheless, the alliance with the traditional trade unions enabled them to overcome their limitations, particularly in systematically articulating resistance strategies. The alliance of informal unions and traditional trade unions, rather than being oppositional, is a prospective arena for new forms of worker resistance in the gig economy.

Another crucial limitation of the struggle was the inability to direct protest strategies upon the customer and the state, thereby pressurising the company by attaining societal power and institutional backing. The key reason the Urban Company workers' October 2021 struggle was successful is mainly that the discourse of injustice against women workers had captured public attention and bothered the company's reputation in the competitive market. Also, at that point, the company had no prior experience dealing with workers' protests. The tactic of digital disruption by workers had failed considerably, but the DLPs indeed fear the boycott or non-opting of their platform by customers. This insight offers a new entry point in thinking about resistance in the gig economy, where developing 'discursive power' (directed towards customer solidarity and gaining state support) can partly be an effective option. Therefore, it is important to recognise 'visibility' in the public sphere (e.g. traditional media, social media, and civil society) as a crucial asset to worker power. It is also noteworthy that against the December 2021 workers' struggle, Urban Company was also hesitant to pursue legal measures after a point (they withdrew the petition against protesting workers), fearing state regulations in the gig economy. The Urban Company women worker's resistance signifies that when capital reinvents and reimagines the labour process, the labour is equally capable of inventing new forms of resistance strategies.

Note

1. As per the Sustainable Development Goal India Index and Dashboard 2020–2021 Report published by NITI Aayog, Government of India, the capital city, New Delhi, had 199.88 internet subscribers per 100 population and a mobile tele density of 190.61 per 100. Moreover, according to the Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI) 2019 Report, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Delhi have the highest proportion of women internet users.

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