

"The gig economy is a great opportunity to increase women's participation in the labor market by allowing more flexibility." Discuss.

The idea of gig economies is a relatively new one. Borrowed from musicians, a 'gig' describes a one-night performance, however, in the context of general employment, it covers the self-employed who work on temporary, short-term contracts and on zero-hours contracts¹ (Alex de Ruyter, 2019). The gig economy involves the exchange of labor for money between individuals or companies via digital platforms that actively facilitate matching between providers and customers. (*BEIS and the Institute for Employment Studies*).

Although economists haven't yet reached a consensus on the actual definition of gig economies, it has often been described as work via a connection between consumers and workers through a platform (Brinkley, 2016)). Gig work not only includes services like food delivery, transportation, freelance services or logistics, but it also includes accounting consultants, cybersecurity professionals and even people working on blockchain architecture. Such activities take place through platforms such as Uber, Peopleperhour, Malt, Friverr and many more.

Interestingly, the increasing popularity of the gig economies among women can be attributed to its flexibility. Growth of the gig economies causes the "casualization" of workers and this is highly favorable to women (De Stefano, 2015). More and more women are incentivized to work because they are able to utilize their time at their own discretion. Since the work is said to be flexible, women can manage the burden of simultaneously carrying out unpaid work at home and paid work in their professions, especially after starting families. This is the largest "fringe benefit" from gig work and is the primary influencing factor.

Automation, and development in computer science are creating larger and fairer mediums for females to employment. Unlike the traditional form of employment where a lot of time is wasted in work politics, discrimination and inefficient ways in which resources are allocated, the gig economy avoids such problems through reducing rigidity and allowing for more breathable work regimes.

Gig market is a "job market" that is more faithful to the term "market." This is because the allocation of jobs, would be through the "invisible hand." The forces of demand and supply will, to a greater extent, determine the wages. If an economy's labour supply is already inelastic, as in case of near to full employment, the entry of women into the labor market would win them higher wages. Consequently, the "invisible hand" cannot distinguish between male and female, thus increasing fairness. Among those already employed in the gig economy, approximately 46% are women and 54% are men as compared to 51% and 49% in the population as a

¹ A zero-hour contract is a type of contract between an employer and a worker, where the employer is not obliged to provide any minimum working hours, while the worker is not obliged to accept any work offered.

whole. This further reinforces the fact that gender equality can be observed in the gig economies. (Green, 2018)

The premise assumes that since gig work will be “flexible,” women will be able to better allocate time to their work. Thus, the bet on the gig-based platform to increase Female Labor Force Participation (FLPR) seems natural. The data, however, show little statistical improvement. Firstly, the data collection infrastructure for the gig economy is not as robust. This may suggest a certain level of inaccuracy implied by incompleteness as gig work is generally not included in the standard labor force survey definitions of employment. (Kasliwal, 2020)

Incomes earned through gig work can be primary (i.e. the main source) or secondary (additional income). There may be a trade-off between earnings and the ability to choose one’s working time (Samman, 2019). In intensely competitive markets, women have to work for longer hours just to make the same amount of money. This takes away the flexibility that was sought for. If the goal is to add to the cumulative household income, working in gig economies would be profitable as it would increase the marginal private benefit to the women. However, for pregnant and single mothers, who need high incomes as well as flexibility², solely gig work would not suffice.

Moreover, gig work can be divided into 2 categories — primary and supplemental — it is important not to conflate the two because they’re different with respect to the pay levels and job security. Supplemental gig work may provide flexibility, but primary gig work does not, while primary gig work may provide ample money and supplemental gig work may not. This will vary between professions. For example, a handyman will earn less than a coder employed in the gig economy³.

The “flexibilization” may benefit the employer more than the employee, allowing them to use “on-demand” labor, better respond to market fluctuations by easily adjusting the number of employees they have. In the sector there is an individual responsibility to find work. Short and numerous provider-client relationships may have two added complexities. One being that, more time has to be spent into managing these relationships, and the rating/review system adds more pressure on the employees. The other is that greater amount of time will be wasted in “searching” for the right contracts.

Flexible doesn’t necessarily mean less work. Women are already bogged with domestic work and child care at home, it may be hypothesized that the lack of separation between the paid and unpaid work may lead to more anxiety and overtime. Flexibility as a driving factor may be overrated in terms of how important it may be for improving

² Another survey from Flexjobs showed that in the sample 2% were from gen Z, 35% from the baby boomer generation, and 21% from the millennial population (gen X) These women need larger sums of money to run their households.

³ Statistics show that 25% gig workers(£) earned an hourly salary of £7.50, which was the national minimum wage (in 2017)

women's participation in the labor market. "Flexibility" may not be the panacea. In fact, in the UK, 38% of women who had worked in the gig economy had exited this work, compared with 25% of men (Balaram, 2017)

The advent of gig economy made us believe that the problem of managing unpaid care at home and paid work at office specially for women is sorted given the flexibility offered by gig platforms by letting women determine their work hours as per their convenience. Fixing the problems faced by female gig workers, covering gaps hindering their inclusion in the work force and need for the corresponding privacy and social security laws might make this belief come true. The question of whether the gig economy will improve women's participation in labour market by allowing more flexibility is a resounding "yes." The gig economy will allow women to enter the work force, however, the natural progression for most of them would be to get out of the gig economy and into the traditional one. Mostly because the gig-based platforms are not mature enough.

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