

Gender and Work: Women in India's Gig Economy

Manish K. Verma¹, Shivani²

¹Dean & Professor, ²Research Scholar

^{1,2}ASSS, Department of Sociology, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow

Abstract

This study explores the participation of women's participation in the gig economy in India, examining both the opportunities it presents and the challenges it imposes. The gig economy, characterized by temporary, flexible jobs, the gig economy offers women a means to balance work and family responsibilities, providing a pathway for financial independence and self-sufficiency. However, despite these benefits, women in the gig economy face significant barriers, including unequal pay, lack of workplace protections, and societal stigma. This paper utilizes secondary literature and data to analyze the socio-economic, cultural, and structural factors that influence women's engagement with gig work in India. The findings suggest that while gig work allows women greater flexibility, it often traps them in lower-paying, precarious jobs, exacerbating gender-based disparities. Furthermore, traditional gender norms and the lack of digital literacy limit women's access to higher-paying roles within the gig economy. The paper concludes with recommendations for improving the work environment for women, such as the implementation of stronger legal protections, better access to technology, and policies addressing wage equality and job security. By addressing these challenges, the gig economy could provide a more sustainable path to empowerment for women in India.

Keywords: Gig Economy, Women Empowerment, Labor Stratification, India, Gender Inequality, Social Protection, Workplace Protection, Flexibility

1. Introduction

The word 'Gig' was first created in the 1920s by musicians and referred to as 'engagement' during that time. The concept of engagement was linked to a range of other terms, such as participating, aiding, and witnessing musical performances. Afterward, the term was used in a wider context and came to be known as the 'Gig Economy'. It describes individuals who provide for themselves by either being self-employed or working for a limited duration. There have been a few research studies carried out to comprehend this terminology. Consequently, freelance work has been known as a 'gig' since 2009.

The gig economy, characterized by temporary, flexible jobs facilitated by digital platforms, has rapidly transformed labor markets worldwide. Offering non-traditional work arrangements, it has attracted a diverse workforce, including women seeking to balance professional aspirations with personal responsibilities. In many ways, the gig economy challenges the structural barriers that have historically

limited women's participation in formal labor markets, providing an alternative space for financial independence and self-empowerment.

Despite these opportunities, the gig economy presents a paradox. While it offers flexibility and income opportunities, it often perpetuates gender-based disparities such as unequal pay, lack of maternity benefits, safety concerns, and limited upward mobility. These challenges raise critical questions about whether the gig economy truly empowers women or reinforces existing inequalities.

2. Literature Review

Lehdonvirta, V. (2018) sought to comprehend workers' limitations when practicing temporal flexibility. It discovered structural and cultural-cognitive limitations that restrict workers' ability to control scheduling. It was also found that employees have created unofficial methods, utilizing tools and forming communities to overcome these limitations. It was also suggested that concentrating on results instead of worker autonomy is a more effective approach to evaluating flexible work setups. Liang, C. et al. (2018) investigated if there was a gender wage gap in the gig economy and analyzed the level of disparity in job application tactics between genders, focusing on bid timing, job selection, and avoiding monitoring.

Hunt, A., & Samman, E. (2019) sought to summarize the experiences of workers in the 'on-demand' gig economy, which usually offers jobs that are less skilled and lower paying compared to other types of gig work. It also emphasized the effects on women, who experience challenges from poverty and intersecting inequalities. Prabhat, S. et al. (2019) sought to examine the influence of ride-hailing apps on the Indian market. It also studied the difficulties and possibilities introduced by ride-hailing apps. Additionally, it provided insights from a research project on Uber drivers in India.

Gupta, S. (2020) sought to highlight the advantages of connecting the economic rights of workers (such as employment, income security, and social protection) with the social aspects (such as labor rights and gender equality) of development. Different proposals were suggested on how developmental research can enhance livelihood opportunities in these emerging work arrangements.

Hunt, A., & Samman, E. (2020) sought to investigate the introduction of on-demand platform models into the domestic work industry in South Africa. It argued that the platform models continue the same trends of everyday mistreatment seen in the field of domestic work. Additionally, on-demand companies have upheld the underappreciated and predominantly unguarded work of marginalized women domestic workers. Kasliwal (2020) studied the challenges encountered by female gig workers and evaluated gig platforms in meeting their requirements, while also identifying gender disparities and offering recommendations for improvement. Roy, G., & Shrivastava, A. K. (2020) investigated the significant functions of stakeholders in the gig economy. It also showed how different factors impact the expansion and significance of the gig economy in both India and the rest of the world.

Anwar, M. A., & Graham, M. (2020) studied how remote gig workers in Africa make a living and maintain their income. It showed how African remote workers on a major gig economy platform overcome different challenges through their resilience, reworking, and resistance strategies. Doshi and Tikyani (2020) sought

to explore the advantages and challenges of gig work in India. It suggested that it could offer good job prospects for individuals.

Chaudhary, R. (2021) sought to investigate how India's expanding platform-based gig economy impacts women's employment and working conditions. It focused on a thorough examination of women's employment within India's top platform companies, exploring different labor practices and the challenges faced by workers, as well as how they affect women's safety, empowerment, and autonomy. Ghosh (2021) sought to investigate the involvement of female workers in the gig economy in India, focusing on women in beauty, domestic work, cab driving, and food delivery sectors in Delhi-NCR, Bengaluru, and Mumbai. Loganathan, M. (2021) intended to evaluate how gig workers affect social sustainability. It examined the measurement of SDG eight indicators in India and contrasted it with the UN and ILO metrics for the same. Moreover, it also discovered substantial chances for enhancing the measurement of this indicator in India. Identifying certain levers to expand the current indicator measures for workers is crucial due to the rise of nonstandard employment like gig work worldwide and the significant informal sector in India.

Behl, A. et al. (2022) intended to investigate the obstacles in the food delivery industry when gig workers entered and studied the relationship between entry barriers on gig platforms where they operated. Different approaches were also developed to decrease these initial obstructions to boost efficiency and offer job opportunities. Chakraborty, R., and colleagues (2022) targeted areas such as women's participation in the formal workforce, the impact of new labor laws, and perspectives from labor unions. It examined possible updates in policy changes and industry-focused observations in the gig economy, encompassing various sectors. Moreover, it was also suggested that it is crucial to discuss the necessary policies for guaranteeing the longevity of this ecosystem.

Tan, Z. M. et al. (2021) sought to conduct a detailed examination of the ethical dilemmas present in the gig economy. They also outlined the basic characteristics of the gig economy, addressing its size and scope, and identified three main ethical issues related to the organization, task execution, and worker status.

Choudhary and Shireshi (2022) sought to comprehend the challenges faced by gig workers, which could be alleviated through efficient regulation via mechanisms. It pinpointed seven distinct aspects of the gig economy that negatively impacted workers' welfare. Some scholars from foreign countries proposed different ideas, while innovative approaches were utilized to alleviate the hardships faced by workers in managing the gig economy in India. Dey, C. et al., (2022) analyzed the factors contributing to the growth of gig employment and explored the different kinds of gig websites along with their features. It also explained the dangers and difficulties that Indian companies encounter when utilizing non-traditional workers from online platforms while providing several suggestions to HR professionals. Kutty, S. H., & Sundararajan, S (2022) sought to explore the factors impacting the workforce. It was mentioned that companies have the option to select the most qualified candidate for a specific project from a larger group of potential candidates worldwide, and employees can choose from a range of temporary job opportunities available globally. Purswani, N. (2022) focused on examining the key factors influencing the trends of the Gig Economy within the Indian context. It also assisted in forecasting future trends and comparing the job satisfaction of male and female employees in both sectors by selecting a larger number of female

respondents subjectively. Reem, A. D. (2022) observed that female participants experienced greater benefits in their personal and professional growth from participating in the Gig Economy Framework than male participants. Additionally, it was also determined that the Gig Economy has the potential to tackle the primary obstacles that impact the nursing workforce in Saudi Arabia, impeding the attainment of Saudization. Singh, H. et al., (2022) set out to encompass different facets, aspects, and factors of both positive and negative aspects of the Gig economy, as well as its impact on the market and traditional employment.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Feminist Theory: Gendered Inequalities and the Paradox of Empowerment

Feminist theory provides a lens to examine how patriarchal systems influence women's experiences in the gig economy. While offering flexibility and financial independence, the gig economy often reinforces traditional gender roles and systemic inequalities. Women are frequently concentrated in roles that align with societal expectations, such as beauty, caregiving, or domestic services, while male workers dominate higher-paying sectors like ride-hailing and delivery services. These patterns reflect deep-rooted gender norms that limit women's access to diverse opportunities.

The "double burden" of paid work and unpaid domestic responsibilities, a core concept in feminist discourse, remains prevalent for women in gig work. While the flexibility of gig platforms helps some women balance work and household duties, it often exacerbates the undervaluation of their labor. Structural barriers, such as the absence of affordable childcare and maternity leave, further hinder their participation and well-being.

Economic inequalities are another critical concern. Research indicates that women earn less than men in the gig economy due to factors like societal biases, biased platform algorithms, and the prioritization of flexibility over pay. Additionally, the lack of workplace protections—such as safeguards against sexual harassment and benefits like maternity leave—exposes women to greater precarity.

Feminist critiques question whether the gig economy empowers women or exploits their labor under the guise of flexibility. While it offers avenues for financial independence, the systemic disadvantages highlight what feminists term the "paradox of empowerment." To address these challenges, gender-sensitive policies such as equal pay, safer working conditions, and social protections are essential. By challenging patriarchal structures, the gig economy has the potential to become a pathway for genuine empowerment rather than perpetuating existing inequalities.

3.2. Labor Market Stratification: Women at the Margins of Gig Work

Labor market stratification theory explores how work opportunities are distributed unequally across social groups, often reinforcing existing inequalities. In the gig economy, this stratification is evident in the segmentation of work into high-skill, high-paying roles and low-skill, low-paying roles. Women are predominantly represented in the latter, occupying precarious positions such as beauty services,

caregiving, and domestic work. These roles are often undervalued compared to male-dominated sectors like delivery and ride-hailing, perpetuating economic and social hierarchies.

This division reflects systemic barriers that restrict women's access to diverse gig opportunities. Societal norms, safety concerns, and digital illiteracy frequently deter women from venturing into higher-paying or more public-facing roles. Additionally, the informal nature of gig work lacks the institutional pathways for skill development and career progression, further limiting women's mobility within the labor market.

Platform algorithms also contribute to stratification by prioritizing workers with consistent availability and high ratings. Women, often juggling household responsibilities, may find it challenging to meet these performance metrics, resulting in fewer job assignments and lower earnings. This dynamic echoes labor market theories that highlight how structural inequalities disadvantage certain groups in competitive environments.

Moreover, women's concentration in secondary labor markets—characterized by low wages, instability, and limited benefits—exemplifies stratification's broader implications. These positions offer minimal prospects for long-term economic security, leaving women vulnerable to exploitation.

3.3. Workplace Protection and the Paradox of Empowerment

The gig economy's lack of workplace protections poses significant challenges to women workers, exposing them to precarious conditions while questioning the depth of their empowerment. Unlike traditional jobs, gig work typically offers no formal benefits such as maternity leave, health insurance, or safeguards against sexual harassment. This absence of structural support disproportionately affects women, who face unique risks in public-facing roles and often juggle domestic responsibilities alongside gig work. Without legal frameworks or organizational accountability, women are left vulnerable to unsafe environments and inconsistent income.

This vulnerability ties into what feminist critics describe as the “paradox of empowerment.” On the surface, the gig economy appears to provide women with autonomy, financial independence, and flexibility—tools often linked to empowerment. Many women enter gig work to balance family responsibilities while earning a livelihood. However, the flexibility of gig platforms often comes at the expense of security and stability, leaving women with limited recourse in situations of exploitation or discrimination.

Moreover, platform algorithms and incentive structures prioritize productivity and availability, which can conflict with the realities of women's lives. Women, especially those with caregiving responsibilities, may struggle to meet these demands, leading to fewer job opportunities and reduced earnings. This reinforces systemic inequities and raises the question of whether gig work truly empowers women or merely exploits their labor under precarious conditions.

To address these issues, gender-sensitive policies must prioritize workplace protections and safety, ensuring equitable access to benefits such as paid leave and health insurance. Platforms must also implement mechanisms to safeguard women workers against harassment and discrimination. By tackling

these structural gaps, the gig economy can evolve from a site of exploitation to a pathway for meaningful empowerment for women.

4. Gig Economy

The Gig Economy involves companies hiring contract workers for short-term projects. These self-employed workers are typically brought on board for a set timeframe to meet temporary obligations. The term "gig" is associated with a specific time frame, indicating that these workers are hired to fulfill their duties based on the organization's needs. Gig workers consist mostly of freelancers, project-based workers, independent contractors, or part-time hires. The gig economy has seen an increase due to factors such as remote work opportunities and digital platforms enabling mobility. In addition to this, there are also gig apps and digital technology platforms available for connecting customers with gig workers. The greatest advantage of working in this setting is the ability to choose who you work with and set your flexible working schedule. Numerous studies show a growing trend among working people to switch jobs often until they find one in their desired field, resulting in the rapid expansion of the Gig Economy globally (Nair, 2019). The gig economy can be divided into two categories: the digital gig economy, which involves online work, and the physical gig economy, which involves on-demand work through apps (Heeks, 2017).

4.1. The Role and Participation of Women in India's Gig Economy

The adoption of technology platforms has led to an approximate 85% employment rate in India's informal sector. Research reveals that women who have been controlled in household chores or caregiving are now engaging in the gig economy in India. This is because of the convenient working hours that allow them to work four to five hours a day through a company platform, earning enough to meet their family's financial requirements (Times of India, April 2022). Currently, women have the option to pursue different job opportunities that allow them to work part-time from home or any location that suits their needs, enabling them to balance work and family responsibilities. The main factor contributing to the increase in women leaving the workforce is the challenge of juggling household duties alongside their professional careers. As a result, these gig platforms frequently offer the opportunity to effectively juggle and harmonize work and family responsibilities. Despite numerous studies showing that an increase in female participation on this gig platform could boost workforce participation rates, the actual statistical improvement has been minimal (Kasliwal, 2020). Women tend to choose job opportunities that provide freedom and flexibility to balance their work and personal life, often keeping them close to their homes. Women should also have the ability to choose between societal expectations and personal fulfillment when selecting work.

Multiple studies have also identified a lack of access for female informal workers in India. Despite numerous regulations and guidelines established regarding social security in factories and construction sites, there is still inadequate enforcement. Women in the informal sector lack the same benefits of maternity leave as women in the formal sector. A significant disparity exists between gig work and traditional domestic work, which has negative effects on social security schemes (Ghosh, 2021). Uber, Amazon, Ola, Swiggy, Zomato, and Flipkart are among the biggest employers of the gig workforce. Many of these digital platforms provide job opportunities for women who take part actively, benefiting from a flexible work environment and making a decent income in the gig economy. Women engage in beauty

and wellness services through platforms like Urban Company, Door Task, and House Joy due to the flexibility they provide, in contrast to traditional salaried positions (Chaudhary, 2021).

Various factors, such as educational attainment, fertility rates, and age of marriage, contribute to the underrepresentation of women in the gig economy as female workforce participation decreases (Chaudhary & Verick, 2014). The digital gender gap is seen as a significant reason for the low level of women's involvement in the workforce, according to Mawii (2019). Relying on technology and digital abilities for job opportunities can negatively affect Indian women who are not familiar with these tools (Chaudhary, 2020).

4.2 Reshaping Family Dynamics, Gender Roles, and Women's Social Mobility

The gig economy has significant sociological implications for traditional family structures and gender roles in India, offering both opportunities and challenges for women. Traditionally, Indian households have been shaped by patriarchal norms, where women are primarily responsible for unpaid domestic labor, including caregiving and household duties. In this context, gig work can offer women new opportunities to earn an income while maintaining flexibility, which can challenge and transform these gendered divisions of labor.

Reshaping Family Dynamics and Gender Roles

The flexibility of gig work provides women the opportunity to engage in paid employment while balancing family responsibilities, a crucial factor in a society where women are expected to prioritize the family unit. Women, particularly in urban areas, are increasingly choosing gig work to reconcile career ambitions with family needs, allowing them to step outside the traditional domestic roles. This shift is particularly relevant in the context of India's joint family system, where women's autonomy has historically been constrained by collective familial expectations (Nussbaum, 2003). Gig work, especially when facilitated by digital platforms, allows women to participate in the labor force without disrupting family responsibilities.

However, this shift does not come without its tensions. Despite the autonomy that gig work offers, women still face the societal expectation of performing traditional roles, such as caregiving. This results in what is known as the "second shift," where women engage in both paid and unpaid labor. This dual burden can limit the long-term benefits of gig work, as women are still expected to balance domestic duties with economic participation (Hochschild & Machung, 2012).

Long-Term Implications for Agency, Autonomy, and Social Mobility

The gig economy offers women a platform for greater economic autonomy, but the nature of gig work also raises questions about its long-term impact on women's social mobility. While gig work provides short-term financial independence, it lacks the job security, career development opportunities, and social protections offered by traditional employment. This lack of stability can undermine women's long-term agency and autonomy, especially in a labor market that is increasingly characterized by precarious work.

The absence of benefits such as health insurance, retirement plans, and maternity leave places women in vulnerable positions, particularly in the context of long-term social mobility. While women may

experience immediate empowerment through flexibility, the lack of legal protections and structural support limits their ability to build sustainable, upward social mobility (Graham & Woodcock, 2018). Over time, the lack of stability in gig work could exacerbate gendered inequalities, as women might struggle to secure long-term financial independence and may face challenges accessing resources needed for career advancement.

Ultimately, for the gig economy to become a true catalyst for women's empowerment, policies and practices need to be reimagined to ensure that women can access not only flexible work arrangements but also long-term benefits, such as healthcare, childcare, and retirement plans. Creating a more inclusive and supportive environment will enable women to leverage the gig economy for sustained autonomy and social mobility, rather than reinforcing existing inequalities.

5. Challenges Faced in the Gig Economy

The document 'India's Emerging Gig Economy: The Future of Work for Women' brought attention to the mistreatment and bias experienced by female workers in the gig economy. The employment status in the execution of the Code on Social Security, 2020, was also disclosed. Women workers in the gig economy struggle because they lack legal protection in their workplace. Sexual harassment is frequently experienced by women in office-based jobs. However, this platform does not take responsibility for offering legal protection to these female employees. According to <https://www.equaltimes.org>, Indian law does not provide protection or security for women workers. While having the flexibility of a working environment and financial freedom on this platform, it also brings the challenge of inconsistent income, as one study suggests that women struggle with unpredictable hours. In addition to handling their household chores, they received little help from their families in generating income (Chaudhary, 2021). In the gig economy, there is a problem with unequal wages, as research has shown that women often work in lower-paying roles because they feel they are not valued as much as men. This leads to prejudice against women and forces them to focus on household duties, making it challenging for them to earn money during busy times.

Cultural and social norms significantly influence women's participation in the gig economy, particularly in societies where traditional gender roles are deeply entrenched. In India, these norms often act as barriers to women's full engagement with gig work, despite the flexibility and independence that it offers.

One of the key challenges is the cultural expectation that women should prioritize family responsibilities over paid work. In India, the traditional division of labor assigns caregiving and household duties predominantly to women, which limits their ability to engage fully in the gig economy. While gig platforms offer flexible working hours, the burden of household chores and child-rearing often takes precedence for women, especially those in joint family systems. This restricts the time and energy women can invest in gig work, contributing to their underrepresentation in certain sectors, particularly those that require mobility or irregular hours (Nussbaum, 2003; Heeks, 2017).

Moreover, societal stigma regarding women working outside the domestic sphere further limits their participation. Women who choose gig work, especially in public-facing roles like ride-hailing or delivery, may face disapproval from their families or communities, particularly in more conservative or rural areas.

This resistance is often rooted in the belief that women should remain in domestic roles, challenging the growing trend of women seeking economic independence through non-traditional employment (Graham & Woodcock, 2018).

Additionally, the digital gender divide exacerbates these challenges. In many parts of India, women's access to smartphones, the internet, and digital literacy remains limited, particularly in rural areas or lower-income households. This limits women's opportunities to participate in the gig economy, where digital platforms are key to connecting workers with jobs. Research shows that digital exclusion is a significant barrier to women's economic participation, further marginalizing them from emerging labor markets like the gig economy (Hunt & Samman, 2019).

To overcome these cultural and social barriers, it is essential to implement targeted policies that not only support women's access to technology but also foster a cultural shift toward gender equality in the workforce. Increasing digital literacy, providing safety measures, and challenging social stigmas will enable women to take full advantage of gig economy opportunities.

6. Conclusion

The gig economy has emerged as a transformative force in labor markets worldwide, and its potential to empower women is both evident and complex. On one hand, gig work offers women greater flexibility, autonomy, and financial independence, enabling them to balance family and professional responsibilities in ways traditional employment often does not allow. In India, where women have historically been confined to domestic roles, the gig economy presents an opportunity to break free from traditional gendered labor divisions, offering avenues for financial and personal empowerment. However, the benefits of gig work for women are tempered by significant challenges. While flexibility is a key advantage, it also comes with a precarious nature that lacks job security, benefits, and long-term career advancement opportunities. Women in gig roles often face systemic barriers such as unequal pay, limited access to higher-paying opportunities, and a lack of legal protections, including maternity leave and health benefits. Moreover, cultural and social norms continue to shape women's experiences in the gig economy, with women often being concentrated in lower-paying, less secure roles due to societal expectations about women's work and mobility.

To truly harness the potential of the gig economy as a tool for women's empowerment, it is crucial to address these structural and societal barriers. Policy reforms that provide better legal protections, promote gender equality in gig platforms, and enhance women's access to technology and education are essential. In the absence of such reforms, the gig economy risks reinforcing existing gendered inequalities, rather than challenging them. By addressing these challenges, the gig economy can become a more inclusive and empowering space for women, contributing to broader social and economic equality.

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