Gender Perspectives on the Digital Economy

Synopses of Research Studies from IT for Change's National Gender Fellowships Program, 2022

Acknowledgements

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Editorial

Centering Women in India's Digitalizing Economy

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As gig and platform work become important areas of research across disciplines, questions of gender are increasingly finding their place within dominant disciplinary paradigms and discursive frameworks therein. While important insights emerge from studies embedded in broader inquiries, what is lacking is a feminist starting point invested in uncovering the gender order of the digitalizing economy.

For instance, research on gender and flexibilization of work is limited to the experience of women in relation to the flexibility proffered by gig work, concluding either by leaning in to the flexibility, rejecting it, or by assuming a critical but forward-looking stance. It is rare to find tudies of gender in the gig economy that do not engage with the paradigm of flexibility. Yet, as history tells us, moving 'flexibly' between paid work and unpaid work rarely bodes well for women. Interrogating the antagonism of paid-unpaid work prima-facie limits the scope of studies on gender and risks them being engulfed by prevailing vacuities of capital and patriarchy – such as "flexibility."

Similarly, the declining labor force participation rate of women in India has contributed to entrenching another limiting framework: inclusion. Claims of inclusion by the gig economy have assumed vibrant salience against the grim context of persistent decline in women's work; distracting from how women are faring in an economy-wide sense, and how the economy, in turn, is churning women away from core and formal sectors of employment.[1] How does digitalization and its attendant phenomena interact with the status of women in different contexts? What historical, regional, and structural forces create the conditions for women to take up gig work; and where do they go from here? How have social hierarchies like patriarchy adapted, resisted, or acquiesced to the forces of digital technologies?

In an attempt to explore some of these fundamental questions of gender and the digital economy beyond established frameworks, IT for Change invited proposals from young Indian women scholars to study ongoing changes in women's work lives across different regions, contexts, and sectors of work. This compendium showcases summaries of empirical research conducted by 10 research fellows who have each undertaken an endeavor to understand women's work through a feminist-justice lens, particularly in the face of digitalization of different sectors of the economy and women's lives.

1 Chakraborty, S. (2020). COVID-19 and Women Informal Sector Workers in India. *Economic and Political Weekly, 55* (35). https://www.epw.in/journal/2020/35/commentary/covid-19-and-women-informal-sector-workers-india.html

Expanding existing taxonomies of gig work beyond previously explored sectors and occupations, Arya Chandran L. and Aishwarya Shridhar investigate the work lives of women in fishing and sex work, respectively. Arya's research, grounded in the deeply gendered occupations of fishery in Kochi, Kerala, uncovers the dual challenge faced by women fish vendors. Facing stiff competition from emerging online platforms that leverage network effects to capture the market, as well as from independent male fish vendors who are better equipped with digital skills to establish themselves as online fish-sellers, these women seek public digital infrastructures to catch up with platformization of fish selling. Aishwarya's research on webcam models in India calls attention to how digitalization coupled with an economic downturn is pushing women into online sex work. Drawing from interviews with Indian webcam models, this study demonstrates the significant risks and investments borne by women who rely on online sex work for income.

Highlighting the limits of women's inclusion in India's formal economy, Rhea D'Silva and Aparna Asokan document the experience of women workers in tech-design and IT-ITeS sectors, respectively. Aparna finds that working from home in the IT sector has led to an increase in the care work responsibilities of women, and has simultaneously hampered their access to opportunities at work and subjected them to discriminatory behavior. Rhea, on the other hand, finds that the representation and experience of women in different domains is heavily influenced by gender-based perceptions of different occupations. She points to the limitations of the diversity and inclusion discourse in technology and calls for a structural and intersectional approach to inclusion.

Situating the faultlines of caste and gender within the platform economy, Aanchal Dhull's research sketches out how stigma and devaluation of labor persists despite attempts by platforms to professionalize and standardize jobs; digital mediation of work does not replace existing social hierarchies that have historically shaped labor markets. Similarly, Swati Rao and Ann Mary Biju's research on women gig workers in food delivery, ride-hailing, and e-commerce demonstrates that the lack of gender-responsive institutions and infrastructures entail penalties for women in the form of wage gaps and lack of equal opportunity. Rao and Biju's works explore the role of gender-based violence and harassment in shaping the experience of women gig workers.

Studying alternative and equitable models for digital platforms for women workers, Sruthi Kalyani A., Sapni G. Krishna, and Abhiruchi Chatterjee study makerspaces, cooperatives, and government platforms, respectively. While makerspaces in India – premised on ideas of bottom-up collaborative innovation – show limited promise in countering gender inequality in technology and creating space for feminist politics, Sapni concludes that given the right policy frameworks, platform cooperatives can unskew the benefits of technology in favor of labor rights. Similarly, while charting the creation and eventual waning of a public platform for small women producers, Abhiruchi calls for public digital infrastructures that are transparent and prevent usurping of data value by private entities.

Through meticulous fieldwork and secondary research, these fellows demonstrate the failings of commercial digital platforms under capitalism, exacerbated by an unequal and gendered society. They identify the limits and dangers of an uncritical exclusionary analysis of women in the gig economy, as well as highlight emerging alternative models that can enhance women's access to economic empowerment. As the world of work undergoes changes, these summaries offer meaningful prompts to think about digitalization, gender, and labor.

I

Expanding existing taxonomies of gig work

Opportunities and Challenges of Market Digitalization for Coastal Women Fish Vendors in Kerala

Arya Chandran L

Introduction

Fishery has been the traditional occupation of women in India for many centuries. Along Kerala's 590-kilometer coastline, women play an active role in post-harvest operations (Dhanya, 2013).[1] There are 15,629 women fish vendors in the state compared to 3,034 male vendors (Marine Fisheries Census, 2016).[2] There is a clear gender-based division where women work in shore-based activities like drying, processing, cleaning, and vending fish, while men work in fishing. More recently, technological advancements and digitalization have transformed traditional markets by moving them online and making use of electronic or digital marketing systems. The digitalization of fishing and related activities has resulted in cost-effective advertising and has enabled marketers to expand their customer base. Equipped with the ability to track customer needs, products are now more easily available to customers and have increased customer satisfaction.

With the digitalization of fish markets, women fish vendors have noticed that local customers who previously relied on traditional markets have now shifted to purchasing on online platforms. For these women, these online platforms are new and unknown entities, both in their vastness and in their potential impacts on the fish trade. Broadly, this paper attempts to understand and explore how digitization has transformed the livelihoods of women fish vendors in Kerala by focusing specifically on the Poonthura, Neendakara, and Kasaragod coasts. More specifically, the study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- What are the opportunities women fish vendors receive because of digitalization?

- What are the challenges they face due to digitalization, and how do these challenges affect women's livelihood participation?

- What limitations do women face in accessing digital technologies, and how can these be eased to develop a women-inclusive digital market?

Methodology

The study takes a qualitative approach with a descriptive research design. Women fish vendors as well as online fish traders were interviewed for the study. Semi-

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1 Dhanya, G. (2013). Status of women employed in seafood pre-processing unit in Alapuzha. *Fishing chimes*, 33(1), pp. 41- 45.
2 Marine Fisheries Census. (2016). Central Marine Fisheries Institute. www.indiaspend.com/uploads/2021/10/14/Marine_ Fisheries_Census_INDIA_2016.pdf

structured interviews were conducted with 30 women fish vendors, between the ages of 32 and 65, from three different coastal communities: Poonthura in Thiruvananthapuram, Neendakara in Kollam, and Bekal in Kasaragod districts of Kerala. The interviews mostly took place in the homes of women vendors or in their neighborhoods. In addition to these interviews, three focus group discussions were conducted with women vendors in the three coastal communities mentioned above. Five men who are currently engaged in online fish sales through various social media platforms were also interviewed for the study.

Key Findings

Even though women play a major role in coastal economies and household economic management, they are seldom considered the primary breadwinners, but rather, subsidiary earners who enter the labor market when their husbands or fathers fail to meet household expenses. None of the women who participated in the study completed upper primary education, and some were illiterate. Lack of education is a major factor that has excluded women from being able to utilize the digital arena for fish trade.

FreshToHome, Licious, Daily Fish, BigBasket, and Online Kochi are the major e-commerce sites that sell fish in Kerala. These websites have a wide variety of fish displayed, along with diverse dressing options such as steak, whole, curry cut, fillet,

and ready-to-cook. These bigger online merchants have the potential to reach a large number of customers and have facilities to store fish either via cold storage or Individual Quick-Freezing (IQF) methods. They source from multiple merchants at various harbors and use traditional and digital marketing strategies such as video and print advertisements, emails, mobile text messages, and social media. Apart from these bigger online merchants, there are local online sellers who sell fish on social media platforms as well. A majority of these online stores are owned by young men who are not part of coastal communities; they are largely run by men who have lost jobs during the pandemic, in an attempt to find alternative income sources. These men buy about 30 to 100 kilograms of fish from the harbor or bigger markets daily, and sell them within a 20-km distance. They update their daily catch on Facebook or WhatsApp groups and customers place orders via calls or messages. This segment of sellers – those who sell fish on social media platforms that households can easily access – pose a major challenge to local women vendors. It is a business that is relatively easier to start for anyone with minimal access to digital technologies. Since fish vending does not require a license, anyone with sufficient purchasing power could go to the harbor or the main market and buy enough fish to start a business. As customers gravitate towards such small, localized online businesses, women's time burden increases as they have to stay longer in the market to sell fish. Women vendors who were interviewed for this study mentioned losing sales because they could not offer online payment options. Moreover, most women enter the fish trade with no capital, and borrow the amount needed for their daily trade as running costs from money lenders or neighbors, putting them at a disadvantage against competitors who buy fish from the harbor. The lack of capital also prevents women from adopting innovative strategies or technologies that would benefit their business.

As digital marketing of fish opens up a lot of opportunities, the same could be benefited by women vendors too. Women vendors typically have greater knowledge of fish, fish markets, and harbors than new-age fish sellers. The opportunity to run their business on a digital platform can help them reach several new customers. By availing subsidies and interest-free loans provided by the government to fisherwomen for trade, women fish vendors, either individually or in groups, could begin selling their products online, as well as offer other value-added products such as dry fish, allowing them to continue practicing their traditional livelihoods, and achieve economic empowerment.

Recommendations

To this end, this paper proposes the following recommendations that will help women vendors to utilize digital technologies to trade fish. A systematic evaluation and audits of the existing public financial schemes, policies, projects, and programs for women fish vendors must be put into effect. These financial schemes must take into account the emerging digital economy of the fish trade, and make necessary additions to existing lending frameworks. Additionally, government schemes must also aim to provide technical and educational support to help women fish vendors onboard and navigate digital platforms.

1. Introduction of a license for fish trade, similar to those required for the sale of food, will prevent the entry of resellers into the fish trade. This will ensure only fresh and unadulterated fish enter the market, fostering customers' trust in women fish vendors.

2. Digital literacy programs that specifically address digital marketing could be provided to women vendors. Younger women who have joined the fish trade could be taught to use mobile banking, trading online through social media or other digital platforms, who in turn, can offer support to older women vendors.

3. Beyond the existing financial schemes for fish trade, the government can expand its scope to provide financial support to women to meet initial investments in getting freezers and storage boxes, a necessity while trading online.

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Behind the Screen: Indian Women on Adult Webcam Platforms

Aishwarya Shridhar

Introduction

Although literature on Indian webcam models is limited, webcam platforms are extremely popular in India. Stripchat, an award-winning webcam platform which sees over 90 million users per month, noted that a significant percentage of its users are from India and "Indian" being one of their most searched categories.[1] The growing popularity of these platforms represent a transition from offline sex work to online sex work, accelerated by the Covid-19 lockdowns and the need for remote work.[2] While the recent recognition of sex work as informal work in India was regarded as a step toward establishing sex workers' rights,[3] online sex work remains unacknowledged due to being hidden and occupying gray legal status.[4]

This study aims to illustrate the experiences of Indian women who use adult webcam platforms as an income source. It conceptualizes webcam modeling as work by understanding the motivations, working conditions, investments, risks, and mitigation strategies of webcam models, and the practices they adopt to maximize benefits accorded by the platform. The study also analyzes the design of adult webcam platforms and its impacts on working conditions, remuneration, and practices. Further, it explores the long-term goals, aspirations, perceptions, and practices of Indian webcam models with reference to the sociocultural and economic context of India. Through this, the study calls attention to the growing popularity of webcam modeling in India, especially post the Covid-19 pandemic, and highlights another dimension of women's informal labor mediated by digital technology.

Methodology

The study uses quantitative methods to analyze general trends about webcam modeling in India and qualitative methods to understand models' subjective experiences. The site of research was a popular webcam platform noted to have a large number of Indian users. Data was collected from 108 streams, which included date and time of observation, anonymity practices, audience size (with and without

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1 Stripchat. (2020, December 11). *Live Cam Industry in 2020. Before and during the lockdown.* Stripchat Blog.
2 Hamilton, V., Barakat, H., & Redmiles, E. M. (2022). *Risk, Resilience and Reward: Impacts of Shifting to Digital Sex Work.* arXiv.
3 Venkatesh, J. (2020, October 16). *NHRC recognises sex workers as informal workers: What advisory means on ground.* The News Minute.
4 Mehta, M. (2021, March 20). *"Digital Courtesans"- The case for decriminalizing online sex work in India.* Project 39A riminal Law Blog.

tokens[5]) and stream quality. Quantitative analysis showed significant associations between audience size and stream quality, audience size and the hour of streaming, and the proportion of users with and without tokens based on audience size. Additionally, the study conducted 11 interviews with webcam models on the platform, each lasting about 30 minutes.

Key Findings

Contrary to the prevalent impression of webcam modeling as "non-work" which justifies the non-recognition of webcam models as workers,[6] evidence from the study confirms it is a form of work. The labor performed on these platforms may not align with mainstream notions of work, but is equivalent in terms of motivations, investments made, and time spent. A key finding was that most participants started webcam modeling due to job loss during the Covid-19 lockdowns, with it soon becoming their primary source of income. Investing in cameras and an internet connection are necessary means to maximize popularity and earnings: our quantitative data shows that higher quality streams correlated with larger audience sizes. Participants also invested time in planning and researching for their business.

Most participants reported working full-time to establish and maintain their viewer base. Quantitative analysis showed that most viewers joined the platform between 00:00 and 06:00 IST, thus limiting webcam models' ability to maintain "flexible" working hours. Respondents saw themselves as entertainment service providers, which involves affective labor not limited to sexual acts, but also conversation and other interactions. Affective labor is also expended in the self-regulation of negative emotions that arise due to frequent verbal abuse by viewers. Together, these findings confirm the necessity of recognizing webcam modeling as a form of work requiring affective skills, business acumen, and time investment.

Findings also indicate the webcam platform's design has an impact on models' security and privacy, user engagement, and working conditions. As platforms do not actively regulate viewers, many chat rooms become unusable due to spam and verbal harassment. Models are responsible for handling this with platform features such as blocking, but many are unaware of these options. Lack of regulation is also evident in the minimal protections offered against recording models' streams.

5 Tokens are the virtual currency used for payments on adult webcam platforms. They are purchased by viewers to pay to models, and cashed out by the models.
6 Hernández, A. (2020). The Many Sides of a Coin: Exploring the Cost and Value of Tokens in Chaturbate. In Selected Papers of #AoIR2020: The 21st Annual Conference of the Association of Internet Researchers. Concordia University.

Models expressed distress about their streams being recorded and displayed on different websites. Besides the attendant privacy concerns, this increased exposure does not involve any supplementary remuneration, but creates additional risks.

Platforms also do not cap the number of workers allowed. The constant, ever-increasing influx of new models leads to an increase in scammers (webcam models who take money but do not perform), provoking viewer mistrust even in genuine models, who are expected to engage in unpaid interactions to prove themselves. Models also feel compelled to decrease the rates they typically charge due to competition from newcomers who attract viewers by doing more for fewer tokens. The platforms' design thus facilitates a competitive environment within which models act as individual entrepreneurs, but are simultaneously constrained by the platform and are vulnerable to security threats.

The emergence of unregulated, offline studios that recruit women for webcam modeling and offer them a workspace pose an interesting challenge to some aspects of platform design. These establishments provide hardware and offer set-up assistance to models. Most importantly, studios offer direct payments. Payouts from the platform are undesirable due to disruptions in international wire transfers and limited payment options. However, despite offering some formality, the studios also act as intermediaries, charging commissions, and imposing other restrictions.

One objective of the study was to explore socio-economic and cultural differences in the experiences of Indian webcam models. As India's sociocultural context makes webcam modeling especially risky due to pervasive community surveillance and stigma, webcam models keep their work hidden. To preserve their anonymity, most models wear a mask which makes them feel more secure about their privacy. A shared understanding of the cultural context and negative consequences of being outed seems to make viewers (who are usually Indian) more accepting of masks. For some models, this anonymity enables them to use webcam modeling as an outlet for non-conforming ways of expression. But they are largely exceptions. Most models do not consider this "good" work, especially for a woman. Participants stated they would quit if they found better opportunities.

Besides this socio-cultural backdrop, the economic position of women in India is an important factor. Some models could not link their bank accounts to the platform due to poor financial literacy, and therefore, had to rely on a third party to receive

payments. This reliance on others undermines the supposed independence these platforms offer women.

Success in the profession is incumbent on models' ability to leverage digital technologies to encourage audience interaction, but a persistent gendered digital divide means several models interviewed for this study could not utilize these features. The lack of digital fluency also means some models remain unaware of security concerns related to digital technology. These findings suggest that the limited digital capabilities of Indian women working on webcam platforms and the particular social, cultural, and economic risks they are subjected to impact their practices and hinder their effective use of these platforms.

Recommendations

Changes in platform design are crucial to improve webcam models' working conditions, security, and remuneration. These changes could include abolishing the system of voluntary payment by viewers, securing webcam models an assured source of income. Additionally, giving models greater control over who may view their streams and by enforcing technological solutions to prevent stream recording will allow women to access a safer working environment. Platforms could also reduce commission rates and offer support to newcomers.

Community support can be leveraged to ensure webcam models' wellbeing. Communities could help webcam models collectivize and identify external sources of support. Providing mental health services can help webcam models who face isolation, stigma, and work-related anxieties. Community endeavors can be initiated to improve models' financial and digital literacy and offer rehabilitation support.

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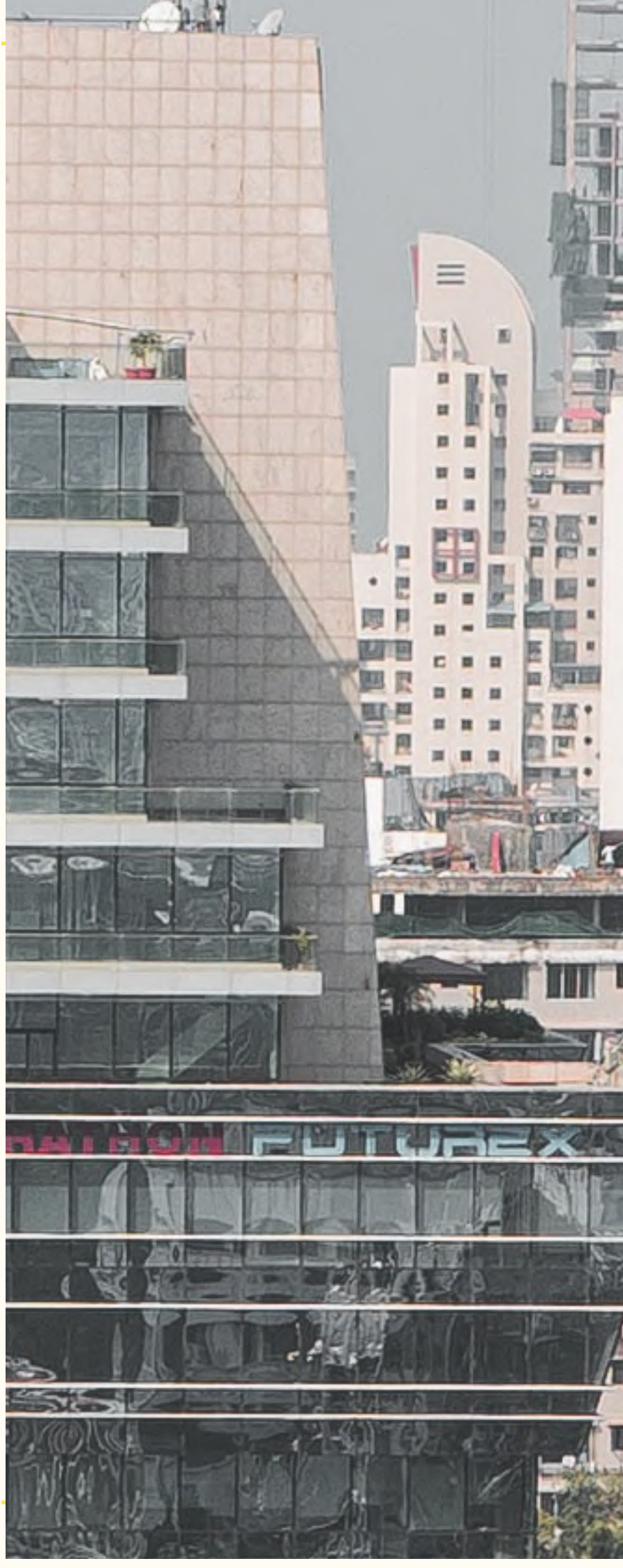
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II

Highlighting the limits of women's inclusion in India's formal economy

Diversity and Inclusion in the Technology Industry: Gendered Experiences of Women Designers in India

Rhea D'Silva

Introduction

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) is a mainstream tech industry discourse premised on the idea that 'diverse teams create better, more inclusive products'. However, DEI policies have thus far only been marginally successful.[1] Taking a critical view of the DEI discourse in technology, this study explores how inclusion is actually 'made' in the everyday interactions and decisions made in design teams of tech firms. It analyzes the understanding(s) and practice of DEI among technology companies in India by looking at existing policies and initiatives. India has a growing tech industry. Coupled with the diversity the country is known for, DEI is fast becoming an important goal. The paper thus examines the constitution and operation of tech design teams through the lens of gender and its intersections with caste, class, sexuality, and dis/ability. In doing so, it explores the gap between the current discourse and actual DEI practices in the tech industry, thus offering valuable insights for the formulation of improved and robust policies in the future.

Specifically, the research seeks to answer the two following questions:

1. What is the industry understanding of diversity, equity, and inclusion as constructed and presented in the literature produced by tech companies?

2. How is inclusion (understood as diversity, operationalized), made and remade in the daily workings of diverse teams and what implications does this have on the team members' comprehension of the design 'process'?

Methodology

Using qualitative methods, this research seeks to go beyond standardized ways of knowing to generate authentic and valid knowledge of women's experiences. The focus on meaning and meaning-making practices of social actors within a given context makes interpretive research design a suitable choice for this project. To compliment this ontological position of relativism, the paper chooses a feminist methodology that begins in gendered experience, is mindful of difference, and has an interest in questions of power that favor an investigation into DEI.

Keeping intersections of identity – gender, caste, sexuality, disability, and work experience – in mind, four women were selected from Twitter and two from among persons introduced to the author through personal contacts. Eighteen semi-

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1 Pedulla, D. (2020). Diversity and inclusion efforts that really work. *Harvard Business Review, 12.*

structured interviews were conducted with six women between the ages of 20 and 45 over a period of five months. While four were employed as UX designers, one was a UX writer and another, a UX researcher.

This paper analyzes a mix of DEI policies from six tech companies, both international and homegrown, having offices in India, using discourse analysis to look for patterns across the texts. Discourse analysis allows the identification of company values and principles regarding DEI that emerge from the texts of diversity reports, statements, and blog posts put out by companies.

Key Findings and Analysis

The interviews revealed that design teams of tech companies have generally maintained gender parity, especially over the last few years. Respondents echoed the sentiment that interactions within these teams were "less hierarchical" and "more comfortable". However, product managers and developer teams, with whom design teams must interact on a regular basis, are male dominated. Respondents described their interactions beyond the design team as "aggressive" and often "intimidating". According to one participant, "most of them seem to be quite aggressive…it's difficult to convince or challenge them…".

While design teams have adequate representation of women; developers, product managers, and even product designers are generally male. Organizational roles in tech companies also appear gendered – technical roles are seen as masculine and creative roles as feminine. The gendering of organizational roles and the difference in the perception of their value to the organization is very apparent in these cases.

This study also spotlights the limited representation of women in managerial positions. Participants reported that their promotions take longer than those of their male counterparts. Besides, the valorization of stereotypically masculine traits prevents women from seeing themselves as "manager material". The ingrained masculinity of tech careers can be seen from the fact that women are forced to "degender", that is, "exchange major aspects of their gender identity for a masculine version", even as the industry does not demand a similar "degendering" from men.

Women designers' experiences show that being aggressive and submissive are both problematic in the workplace. This is called the Tightrope Bias, defined as

circumstances in which "a narrower range of behavior is accepted from some groups than from the dominant group" and can result in backlash "when someone does not conform to these expectations".

In addition, the study shows that women are "talked over" or have had their opinions dismissed or undervalued, especially at high level meetings with fewer women in the room. The intersection of age and gender is often a reason they are not taken seriously. Women respondents reported experiencing what is known as the Prove-It-Again bias, a phenomenon where certain groups need to "provide more evidence of their competence to gain the same recognition as their colleagues".

Existing DEI policies fail on several counts. A policy that compartmentalizes identity categories is counterproductive; an individual's experience in the world is determined by the intersections of their gender, sexuality, disability, and other social identities However, most DEI policies, including those that may be formulated with the best intentions, lack an intersectional approach. This is very clear from both the interviews conducted for this study as well as the discourse analysis of DEI policies. Interviews revealed that women-focused hiring practices that understand women as a homogenous category, without considering the intersections of caste, class, age, social background, dis/ability, and sexual orientation, are convenient, but a mistake. The intent and motivation of a DEI policy has a bearing on how it will be

implemented. The lack of intention makes a DEI policy a public-facing exercise or, as Sarah Ahmed calls it, an "institutional performance".

Conclusions and Recommendations

These findings point to the need to reflect on DEI policies and practices in India. Hiring decisions must be made in such a way that employers not only take gender but also its intersections with caste, class, gender, age, disability, and sexuality into account, for it is at the intersection of identities that true diversity lives. Women and other marginalized identities must have a hand in drafting, modifying, and implementing DEI policy in organizations. This step is imperative to maintain the original intent and motivation of the policy. The state must play an active role in ensuring compliance of companies operating within its territory, not only in the formulation but also in the implementation of DEI policy.

As a country that is a significant contributor to tech work globally, we must take the initiative to change the established narrative when it comes to the place of women in managerial positions; acknowledging that if diverse teams are to create better products, strengthening the decision-making capacity among the traditionally disenfranchised is paramount. Nurturing and promoting talent within the company, rather than lamenting the lack of female managerial talent (as has been documented in interviews), is one possible solution. Considering behavioral attributes like outspokenness, detachment, and confidence as masculine and, more importantly, desired traits, is complemented by the value placed on "rational" and "objective" ways of knowing, determined by cultural notions of what constitutes valid knowledge. However, to do differently requires an epistemological shift – a change in what is considered valid knowledge. Rather than paying lip service to DEI, we must see the value in diverse lived experiences. This, together with the dismantling of oppressive structural conditions will unearth the true potential of DEI to impact design.
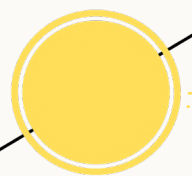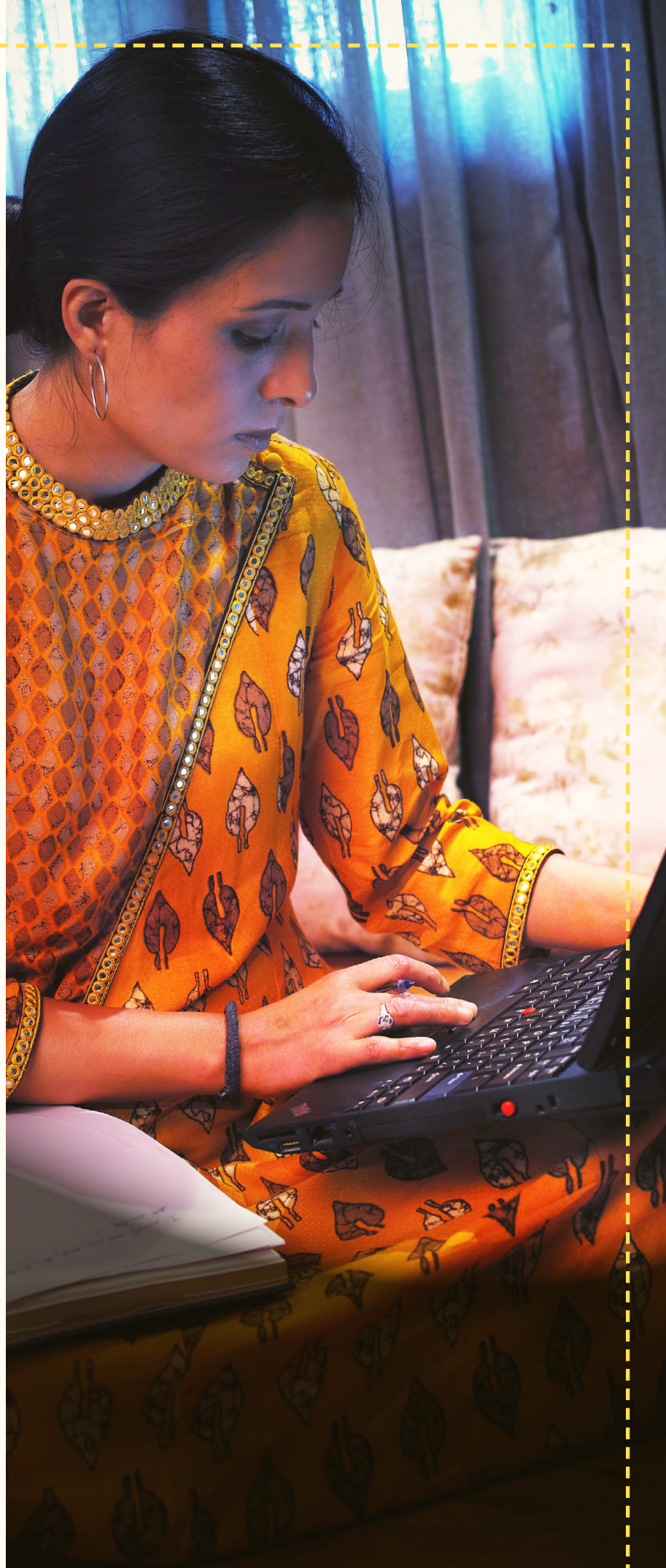
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Gendered Dimensions of Remote Working: A Study of Decent Work Indicators for IT-ITES Workers in Post-Pandemic India

Aparna Asokan

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has reshaped work universally, and many firms and organizations have adopted remote working wherever feasible. This shift has impacted women and women's work in unique ways. Recognizing this phenomenon, the study attempts a gender-responsive assessment of this issue within India's Information Technology-Information Technology enabled services or IT-ITeS sector. More specifically, it aims to answer the following research questions:

- How has remote working impacted decent work for women employees in the IT-ITES sector in India, particularly with regards to three areas, namely, opportunities at work, rights at work, and social security?

- As relevant stakeholders, what can the government and employer organizations do to accommodate the needs of women employees working remotely?

Methodology

The data for the study was collected through qualitative interviews and a survey. The survey received 215 responses from employees of major IT-ITES companies across product, services, and BPO/BPM sectors. For the embedded qualitative enquiry, six individuals working in the IT-ITeS sector were selected based on their gender, work profile, years of professional experience, and neurodiversity to ensure that they were representative of the segment being studied.

Key Findings

Based on the survey responses and the interviews with research participants, the study arrived at the following key findings:

Employment opportunities at work

- Over 43% of respondents to the survey agreed that remote working has resulted in a loss of work-related opportunities in their workplace. Of this, the percentage of cis-female respondents who experienced loss of work-related opportunities is higher (45.83%) than cis-male respondents (41.73%).

- The majority of respondents indicated a loss of networking (67.9%) and socialization (80.95%) opportunities due to remote working. Interviewees suggested that remote working has augmented communication barriers, partly

due to the reliance on asynchronous modes of communication.

- While more cis-female respondents (63.63%) in the non-managerial/lower-managerial cadre believed that their opportunities for upskilling have increased since the shift to remote work, fewer cis-female respondents (53.84%) in the higher managerial roles (upper and middle management) reported the same.

Rights at work

- Though the time spent on childcare responsibilities increased among employees in general, cis-female employees spent 30% more time on childcare compared to cis-male employees, even after shifting to remote work.

- Over 58% of respondents believed that their self-assessed productivity increased while working remotely. Interview inputs indicated that employees tended to work extra hours on most days. More cis-female respondents (76.04%) said they experienced an increase in working hours compared to their male counterparts (73.04%). Since the advent of remote work, leisure time for cis-female employees reduced from 1.9 hours per day to 1.7 hours, whereas the same increased for cis-male employees from 2.3 hours per day to 2.6 hours.

- Remote working experience has been more stressful for women. A moderate correlation exists between work-related stress and their considerations to leave employment.

- More than 33% of respondents believed that their activities are tracked during remote work for the purposes of productivity monitoring and data security. Interviews indicated that individual employees are not very aware of the specific surveillance mechanisms employed by their organization.

- One in three respondents experienced some form of flexibility stigma1 while working remotely. Many of them believed that in a hybrid setup, employees working from an office would receive more favorable treatment compared to those working from home.

- Interviews indicated that most establishments have inadequate work-from-home policies pertaining to Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH), overtime pay, shift allowance, etc.

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1 Flexibility stigma is a penalty associated with seeking flexibility in work. It is based on the idea that those who avail flexible working arrangements are likely to contribute less at work.

Social security

- Over 80% of survey respondents confirmed that their organization has provided the necessary infrastructure to undertake remote work. However, some employees deemed the remote work allowance insufficient to meet the additional expenses incurred by them by way of an internet connection, electricity usage, etc.

- The survey indicated that 13.5% respondents experienced a reduction in social security benefits provided by the organization while working remotely.

- A fifth of survey responses indicated that the maternity benefit available in their respective organizations in case of remote work is much lower than the legally mandated number of days.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the study indicated significant gender-based differences in how remote working impacted IT-ITES employees in India. However, the current legal and regulatory frameworks do not sufficiently address the decent work deficit arising from remote work or its gendered impact. It is essential that the relevant stakeholders adopt gender transformative remedies to address this issue and secure gender parity in the future of work. To this end, this study makes the following recommendations:

For the Government

- In addition to setting maximum working hours, the state may also consider implementing a law recognizing the right to disconnect after assessing its practicality.

- Pay for overtime work, currently provided by very few organizations, is a fair labor practice. To this end, the government must mandate overtime pay for work over 40 hours a week, and determine the rate of such pay as well.

- Payment of shift allowances is not mandatory under current laws. Taking into account the physical and mental health impact on employees working unsociable hours, the state must ensure that employees are adequately compensated. This is specifically important for employees working the night shift as they tend to get less rest during the day.

- Creche facilities, as provided under the maternity benefit law, may not be accessible to employees working remotely. To this end, employers may be instructed to provide assistance in the form of childcare allowance or partial/full reimbursement for daycare.

- While the existing law primarily recognizes adoption and parenting rights of individuals and heterosexual married couples alone, it is vital to extend these benefits to the members of LGBTQ+ community as it would enable them to have a more meaningful and productive life. Upon doing so, it would also be important to revamp workplace laws and policies in an inclusive manner, which would include (among other things) allowing parental leaves for non-binary parents.

- The Information Technology Act, 2000 and the related rules and amendments which currently deal with monitoring and surveillance practices already specify that consent and knowledge of the concerned person is required for data collection. In addition, the law must make it mandatory for companies to ensure that employees comprehend how this data will be used, and that consent is renewed over time.

For employers

- Organizations must update and align their POSH policies with the specificities of remote work. POSH training modules must include information on acceptable online behavior. Organizations must provide reasonable assistance to submit complaints virtually, where necessary. For example, an option can be provided to submit complaints through an email or a portal on the official website in cases where that is not the prevailing practice.

- Companies must create a robust after-hours work-related communication policy. Those in managerial roles must be advised on the circumstances under which employees can be reached after stipulated working hours, including through asynchronous modes of communication like emails.

- Companies must provide periodic sensitization and awareness training on aspects that have a direct impact on employee wellbeing while working remotely, such as ergonomics, data protection, etc. They must focus on making

employees aware of the various monitoring practices deployed by organizations and periodically obtain consent from their employees.

- Employers must adequately compensate employees for expenses incurred while setting up a home office and for other increased expenses on internet, electricity, etc.

- Organizational policies should ensure that people and information are equally accessible to all employees, and that the organizational design is decentralized to enable such access. This could have a significant impact on the inclusion of women employees who are more likely to continue working remotely if given a choice.

- Organizations must consider adopting family-friendly working arrangements and gender-neutral parental leave policies. Organizations may also provide monetary assistance on care services like early childcare.
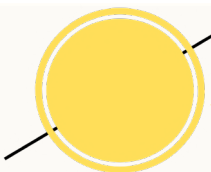
Aparna Asokan

Legal academic and an independent researcher.

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III

Situating the faultlines of caste and gender within the platform economy

Embodying Skill and Stigma: An Exploratory Study of Professional Cleaners and Salon Workers in the Gig Economy

Aanchal Dhull

Introduction

Existing literature on platform economy has highlighted the precarious work conditions and various mechanisms of control exerted by platforms that undermine the agency of gig workers. However, the composition of the workforce and hierarchies within occupations are aspects that have been overlooked in this literature. Often, gig workers are constructed as "professionals", thus the services come with the promise of efficiency, convenience, and formalization through training, factors that set them apart from "regular" services. This paper examines how historically stigmatized jobs of cleaning and beauty work are rebranded in a digital context. Based on the narratives of beauty workers and cleaners, it examines whether platforms challenge or further reinforce the stigma attached to these historically marginalized occupations.

The paper illustrates how professionalism is defined and achieved through training, where platforms largely focus on digital literacy, soft skills, and client interaction. It further explores how gender and caste shape workers' experiences. The paper finally explores the challenges of standardizing body work (work carried out on one's own body or on the bodies of others) through a rating system, and how asymmetrical power systems between the clients and workers reinforce cultures of servitude, instead of a professional transaction.

Methodology

The platform chosen for the study was Urban Company, an online services Indian start-up that offers both cleaning and beauty services. Urban Company is widely popular in metropolitan cities.1 The study compares the two occupations by engaging with the experiences and narratives of 10 cleaners and five beauty professionals in the Delhi-NCR region The initial few contacts with gig workers were established by booking services from the platform; the rest of the respondents were approached through snowball sampling. It was observed that after booking a few services, the platform tends to send the same professional, based on their ratings. To avoid such instances, a snowballing method was more appropriate and also offered the possibility of a diverse sample. The respondents came from varying caste locations, including Scheduled Caste, Other Backward Class, and the General category or Upper Caste in both professions. While the cleaning sector

1 Salman, S.H. (2020, May). Urban Company FY20 revenue jumps 103% led by demand in beauty and wellness. Mint. https://www.livemint.com/companies/start-ups/urban-company-fy20-revenue-jumps-103-led-by-demand-in-beauty-and-wellness-1589281546102.html

is dominated by men, beauty services are mostly provided by women, except for hairdressing-related services. The format of the interviews was semi-structured and focused on various themes, including the training process, occupational trajectories, client interactions, and the experience and perception of the workers' occupation.

Key Findings and Analysis

The narratives collected during interviews suggest that platforms undermine factors such as caste and class of a worker through the use of mechanisms like worker ratings, which ultimately determines the number of gigs a worker receives from the platform. While the narrative of 'hard work' is continually reinforced during the training period of workers, the arbitrariness in the rating system contradicts the imperative of hard work that professionals are trained to embody. Though the platform has rebranded the work of cleaning and, to some extent, destigmatized the job by changing its nomenclature to "housekeeping" (Mhaskar, 2015),2 it fails to guard its workers against the larger social inequalities embedded in servitude (Ray & Qayum, 2009).3 For instance, some workers reported that they are often asked to perform extra services that had not been booked and most times workers comply to ensure high ratings. The hierarchical relationship between workers and clients, underlined by social structures of caste and gender, together serve as the backdrop against which these services are offered.

In contrast to professional cleaners, the stigma associated with beauty work does not arise from the nature of services alone but is also deeply gendered and linked to women's mobility and sexuality (Gopal, 2013).4 For instance, most workers felt the burden to assert their "respectability" to their family members and even their clients. One of the respondents shared how, despite being the primary earner in the family, her profession is looked down upon by her family and neighbors. Beauty workers have to assert their respectability not only to their family, but also to their clients.

One of the key features of platformized body work is the standardization of services. Much like cleaning, beauty work is standardized through training professionals. However, beauty services are distinctive from other services in that the output or the result is difficult to quantify, since it is subject to a client's expectations and

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2 Mhaskar, S. (2015). Locating Caste in a Globalising Indian City: A Study of Dalit Ex-millworkers' Occupational Choices in Post-industrial Mumbai. In *Dalits in Neoliberal India* (pp. 127-152). Routledge India.
3 Ray, R., & Qayum, S. (2009). *Cultures of servitude*. Stanford University Press.
4 Gopal, M. (2013). Ruptures and reproduction in caste/gender/labour. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 48(18), 91-97.

interaction with the professional. The emotional and physical responsiveness to a client's needs is difficult to translate and input into the rating system (Black & Sharma, 2001).5 The interviews of workers illustrate how they constantly struggle against poor ratings despite their "best" efforts.

What is common among the two professions is the temporal scale or what Sharma (2011)6 terms as "temporal professionalism" in the gig economy, where most jobs are time-bound and the pressure to maintain ratings creates new forms of hierarchies between workers and clients. For instance, most professional cleaners follow the mandate of minimal interaction with their clients and "quietly" perform the job, thus invisibilizing the professional as well the work. On the other hand, beauty workers have to be emotionally responsive to their clients' needs and not appear "talkative" at the same time. The rating system leaves no scope for workers to resist or show discontentment against their clients in case of a conflict or the final output of the service.

Conclusion

Professional cleaning and beauty work stand in contrast with domestic work platforms where the profiles disclose the caste and religion of the worker,7 thus reinforcing caste-based hierarchies in the profession. However, with cleaning and beauty work, respondents suggest that the platform does not emphasize their caste or class, but rather work experience. However, the undervaluation of this labor by clients, through asymmetrical power relations, continues to reinforce the

5 Sharma, U., & Black, P. (2001). Look good, feel better: Beauty therapy as emotional labour. Sociology, 35(4), pp. 913-931.
6 Sharma, S. (2011). It changes space and time! Introducing power chronography. In Packer, J, Crofts, SB (eds.)
Communication Matters: Materialist Approaches to Media, Mobility and Networks (pp. 66-77). Wiley.
7 Rathi, A., & Tandon, R. (2021). Platforms, power and politics: perspectives from domestic and care work in India. The Centre for Internet and Society.

culture of servitude. Despite the change in nomenclature and mode of services, the labor processes remain undervalued by the platform as well as consumers. The study, however, is limited in its scope due to the small sample size, hence these trends cannot be generalized. The study nevertheless paves the possibility for further research in the area. I suggest that to study caste and gender, both macro (workforce composition) and micro research (workers' narratives) need to be deployed to understand social hierarchies in the professions.

Recommendations

The dynamics that emerge from platformization are unique to the various sectors of work, and are largely determined by the historical context of said occupations. The study confirms that professionalization may not necessarily formalize these sectors. Although gig workers' labor is closely monitored and standardized through a rating scale, the employers' perception of this labor remains rooted in the larger social fabric, which looks down upon cleaning and body work. As a result, many workers often perform extra labor upon client's request, especially professional cleaners. While the clients have a rating and a feedback mechanism, the workers are denied such possibilities (Huws, 2014).[8] However, at the level of policy, it is recommended that existing systems of supporting workers become accessible and strengthened by the platforms.

Further, the rating systems need to be revisited across platforms. The rating systems are often treated casually by service users; however, it has a long-lasting impact on workers, as their visibility on the platform is based on these ratings. Low ratings may result in deactivation of workers' profiles. Rating systems need to be cognizant of the structural inequalities between the workers and clients. As suggested by the respondents, the rating system should either be dismantled or have a two-way rating system, where the workers can also rate clients.

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8 Huws, U. (2014). Labor in the global digital economy: The cybertariat comes of age. NYU Press.

Aanchal Dhull

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Read the complete paper here

Regulating India's Gig Economy: Towards a Fair Future of Work for Women

Swati Rao

Introduction

Increasing platformization and emerging forms of digital work were expected to improve women's labor force participation in India. However, the underpaid and unstable nature of work offered by the gig economy calls for caution and scrutiny. The precarity associated with gig work is detrimental to the interests of all workers, but the impacts are especially exacerbated for women workers who must not only navigate poor working conditions but also contest strict social norms to participate.

This research explores the constraints faced and the costs borne by women in the gig economy in India. It analyzes whether contemporary platforms are equipped to address these constraints and investigates existing policies to understand how women can participate in gig work in ways that center their agency, security, and inclusion.

Methodology

The study uses an exploratory approach to examine opportunities and challenges for women gig workers along five dimensions: safety and security, wages and benefits, dispute redressal, data protection and privacy, and collective bargaining. In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 women gig workers, five men gig workers, and two trade union representatives across four cities: Chennai, Bengaluru, New Delhi, and Raipur. Gig workers interviewed belonged to three sectors: beauty, care and wellness (Urban Company); ride sharing (Ola and Uber); and food delivery (Swiggy, Zomato, and Dunzo).

Additionally, the study examines the terms of use (ToU) and privacy policies (PP) of five platforms – UrbanCompany, Uber, Ola, Zomato, and Dunzo – to identify specific conditionalities that address women's inclusion in the gig economy. Finally, it conducts a regulatory analysis of the current legal provisions that have implications for gig workers, especially those that pertain to women, in order to identify points of potential intervention.

Key Findings

A key finding of the study is that women gig workers embrace the opportunities for independence, empowerment, and agency that gig work provides. The lack of entry barriers in the gig economy particularly benefits women who had little or no access to formal education or training. However, a majority of women workers interviewed

expressed the desire to eventually exit the platform economy and engage in formal and stable jobs.

For women who do not rely on gig work for their financial security, the flexibility of gig work is usually a route to empowerment and independence. Education, household care duties, and family constraints on working hours were some reasons women engaged in part-time gig work. However, most women interviewed for this study engaged in gig work on a full-time basis. They struggled to balance their typically 40+ hour work week with household duties and reported several instances of burnout and dissatisfaction with work.

While the gig economy was expected to improve the financial and workforce inclusion of women, this study reveals that it has, instead, had a gendered impact where gender-based socio-cultural inequalities are replicated and intensified. The pervasive problem of gender-based harassment and violence persists for women gig workers in sectors of driving, domestic work, and beauty services, irrespective of the platform intermediary. Respondents pointed out that platforms did not sufficiently vet clients and were unresponsive when intimated about mistreatment by clients. Women had to take preventive measures themselves, like not driving at night or to locations known to be unsafe, not entering houses for jobs without a female family member present, and alerting other gig workers about problematic clients. Even with helpline numbers and emergency buttons, platforms shifted the onus of safety and security onto women themselves, forcing them to rely on male family members for their protection.

Even though platforms institute standard rates for gigs, the women workers interviewed revealed the existence of a pay gap and narrated several instances of male workers earning more than them. However, they attributed this asymmetry to male workers' ability to take up jobs that they could not opt for. For instance, women working for ride-hailing apps admitted that they were unable to take up work during holidays and weekends due to household responsibilities, and therefore, had to forgo surge pricing and other incentives that male drivers could avail. Since drivers are typically penalized for cancellations, women workers, who are more likely to cancel due to safety or security concerns, not only find themselves unprotected, but are also disproportionately sanctioned by platforms. While platforms allow women workers to cancel jobs owing to customer behavior without

incurring a penalty, most women refrained from using this option as they were not aware of the situations under which they could exercise this option. Gamification of ratings further disadvantages women workers who, burdened with domestic tasks, are not able to invest significant time in competing for jobs with male workers. This is particularly true for ride-hailing apps where women and men bid for the same jobs, unlike beauty services where the jobs themselves are gendered.

Gig work also disrupts the employer-employee dynamic which leaves gig workers with the feeling that they work for an "app" and not a person. Women expressed a strong preference for human-led, as opposed to automated, grievance redressal system since it made for a more empathetic experience. Language skills, followed by a lack of technological know-how and digital skills, emerged as constraints on women's ability to access redressal mechanisms. Women admitted to not being able to change their language preference on the app or access helpline numbers, thus preventing them from navigating the app features to their benefit.

In addition, customers' ability to access workers' personal data through the apps particularly compromised women's safety and overall wellbeing. While most respondents expressed skepticism regarding the privacy of their data, their main concern was regarding customers' access to personal information such as phone numbers and addresses which were given out by customer service executives on clients' requests. For the women interviewed, concerns about digital surveillance by platforms, which they had already accepted as a part of their job, were overshadowed by security and safety issues arising out of improper storage and communication of personal data.

In the absence of formal workers' unions that would negotiate with platforms and policymakers to address women's specific concerns, informal networks emerged as a deciding factor in correcting such asymmetries. Women who were a part of these informal networks expressed greater satisfaction with their working conditions on platforms.

Lastly, labor laws have failed to address the shifting employer-employee dynamics in the platform economy. There is an absence of specific provisions for social security benefits for women gig workers, which is acutely telling of the questionable regulatory approach to a gendered form of work. While India's Social Security Code 2020 envisages legal recognition and welfare provisions for gig workers, concerns with identification and registration of beneficiaries, division of responsibilities between the union government, states, and platforms, and potential implementation issues raise doubts regarding its efficacy. The e-Shram portal, a national database introduced with the aim of helping unorganized workers access benefits during the Covid-19 pandemic, is predicated heavily on gig workers' digital literacy, documentation, and financial independence, which limits the extent to which women gig workers can avail their labor rights. The cumulative impact of these omissions is that women gig workers are left without social security benefits, maternal and childcare benefits, protection from sexual harassment at the workplace, and grievance redressal mechanisms.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Given these regulatory gaps, the study calls for provisions that expand the scope of terms such as employers, employees, and workplaces; implement data protection safeguards; and hold platforms responsible for providing safety and social security benefits specifically targeted at women gig workers. Statutory protections under labor laws, rather than the welfare-based approach envisaged in the Social Security Code, are the need of the hour. In addition, the e-Shram portal needs to be strengthened by adopting a hybrid model which allows for both online and offline registrations, simplifies registration and documentation requirements, and shifts the onus of registration from the workers to the platforms.

Besides, the current lack of government regulations should not preclude platforms from implementing gender-responsive policies such as setting up internal committees that address incidents of violence and harassment and support women

workers in pursuing legal redressal. Training managerial and customer service staff to understand concerns specific to women, clearly communicating company policies and establishing helpline numbers in a host of different languages will go a long way in improving women's experiences on platforms. It is also incumbent on platforms to reorient the system of incentives, ratings, and penalties so that it benefits women equally. This can be done by predicating financial incentives on the quality of jobs performed, rather than on the number of jobs taken or the hours worked.
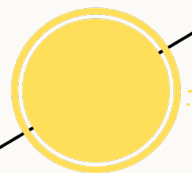
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A Study of Online and Offline Women Service Providers' Safety in Kochi's Platform and Gig Economy sectors

Ann Mary Biju

Introduction

The gig economy introduced newer forms of "anytime-anywhere" employment. Flexibility of gig work attracts a wide range of workers, particularly women, who can potentially balance both work and family. However, gender-based violence and safety threats, particularly in the form of cyberattacks, and even physical threats are reported by platform workers. In 2020, a 44% rise in cybercrimes against women was recorded in India (Muthyanolla & Kancharla, 2021).[1] In this context, an evaluation of the nature of threats faced, and safety features available on gig work platforms and platforms providing avenues of gig work to women becomes crucial.

This study attempts to evaluate perceptions about safety, nature of occupational threats faced, availability of safety features, their usage and satisfaction, and aspirations of women workers through primary research inputs from respondents across six categories of online and offline platform economy sectors in Kochi, Kerala. The classification is made to evaluate the nature of safety threats faced – such as verbal abuse, cyberattacks and physical assaults, or a combination of them – and contextualize it within the nature of their specific professions. The larger goal is to contribute towards building an emphasis on the overall safety of women workers involved in the platform economy and for platforms to ensure adequate redressal support for workers' professional, mental, and physical safety, whether they become part of platforms briefly or join them as aspiring permanent workers.

Objectives

- Determine sector-specific perceptions of safety, work satisfaction, threats faced, redressal mechanisms available, and aspirations of women in online and offline sectors of gig work.

- Determine if offline workers using platforms are safe from cyberattacks and if online workers are safe from physical threats.

- Compare perceptions of safety between women employed in female-centric sectors, and   gender-neutral and male-dominant sectors.

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1 Muthyanolla, S. K., & Kancharla, B. (2021, September 28). *While number of 'crimes against women' decrease, cyber crimes against women increase by 44% in 2020.* FACTLY. Retrieved from https://factly.in/data-while-the-number-of-crimes-against-women-decrease-cyber-crimes-against-women-increase-by-44-in-2020/

Methodology

The primary research focuses on the safety and occupational threats faced by women performing platform-based work in both offline and online categories of gig work. Convenience and snowball sampling methods were used to gain access to women gig workers. Respondents filled out surveys and participated in a follow-up interview about the general state of women workers in their profession. The online category of research participants consisted of 32 women who use social media for their profession, including eight influencers, 14 freelancers, and 10 e-commerce dealers. The offline category consisted of 18 respondents, including seven delivery workers from Swiggy, Zomato, and Erado; five cab drivers from SheTaxi, and six caregivers from Care Guardians (name changed).

Key Findings

Online category

Survey findings:

- Nine out of 32 respondents in the online category stated that they have faced some form of attack on the platforms they utilize for their work.

- Four out of 32 reported having faced a combination of cyberattacks and verbal abuse. This is closely followed by respondents who only faced cyberattacks.

- Most respondents who faced attacks reported it to their respective platforms, while few others chose not to report it. A smaller number of respondents did not personally face attacks but reported crimes on others' behalf. Four respondents hadn't used any options to report attacks.

- About 10 respondents stated that they were fully satisfied with the mechanisms to report crime online with equal reporting in numbers for partial satisfaction. Six respondents were disappointed with the available options, due to restrictive options in crime reporting and an inability to follow up on their reporting.

- Eight out of 32 respondents indicated their desire to expand their business and content reach in order to land better opportunities. Two respondents saw their online profession as a launchpad toward other mainstream professions.

Qualitative findings:

Cyber safety

- Hate comments from people with opposing ideologies were rampant. The expectation that influencers must stick to their niche area of work was prominent and the articulation of political beliefs or views was met with online hatred. One respondent stated, "When it comes to women users, if they are very good at their jobs or if they are assertive or politically active, they are targeted easily."

- A majority of respondents pointed to the lack of robust guidelines on social media platforms to prevent cybercrimes.

- A number of respondents, particularly in the influencer category, complained about platforms' delay in taking down reported content or pages that impersonate them.

- A handful of respondents were satisfied with the features offered by online platforms to hide comments with abusive language, as well as platforms' ability to identify and remove vulgar usage in different languages.

- The level of safety was directly correlated to the type of content that respondents dealt with. For instance, the question of safety was deemed irrelevant by e-commerce food vendors while it was a crucial issue for influencers.

- Redressal mechanisms and satisfaction:

- Respondents opined that there must be more support from platforms for free

expression and ideologies.

- Few respondents reflected on the need for a feature that allows platform users to identify the people who disturb women through multiple fake accounts.

- A number of respondents suggested that platforms add additional features that would allow users to take further actions and not be limited to mere blocking and reporting crimes to platforms. One model and influencer stated, "Some features, as an additional or alternative step to blocking and reporting without necessarily having to go to the cyber cell, should be provided by the platforms."

- A mechanism to filter out unpleasant comments and direct messages received, as well as faster responses from the platforms to take down accounts sending unsolicited and derogatory pictures were suggestions made by a few respondents.

Offline category

Survey findings:

- Five out of 18 offline workers faced some form of attack or adverse situations during or in relation to their jobs. Two respondents reported having faced cyberattacks, and two others had faced verbal abuse. One respondent reported facing a combination of cyberattacks and verbal abuse.

- A single worker reported the attack she had faced, while four others did not report the incident.

- Most workers reported lack of any technical redressal mechanisms on platforms except for food delivery applications. Care workers and one woman merchandise delivery agent relied on supervisors to report issues.

- In terms of aspirations, respondents who took up work along with studies aspired to move out of the gig economy, acquire student placements and work in the private sector. Workers who worked for years in their profession wished to stay in the same profession or turn their side gigs into businesses.

Qualitative findings:

Platform safety

- With the exception of care workers' platforms, most platforms were found to

support customers instead of offering adequate redressal mechanisms for workers in case of a dispute. A Swiggy worker reported a case where her payment was detained following an alleged false complaint by a customer.

- A delivery worker reported being stalked by a man who held pictures of her taken without consent while driving around the city on duty. She dealt with the case herself by calling up and talking to the perpetrator sternly.

- Delivery workers pointed to the lack of access to customer care helplines after the completion of order deliveries as a safety threat. Explaining one of the incidents she faced, she said, "At night, an inebriated person with a cash-on-delivery order told me to come inside. What if I had been attacked?"

- For care workers who were women, staying at another home for work invited negative remarks that, in turn, had implications for their safety.

Redressal mechanisms and satisfaction:

Respondents repeatedly pointed to inadequate or non-existent mechanisms for reporting crimes, the most common mechanism being to contact the supervisor.

Several workers suggested that a mechanism of rating clients, and not just workers, must be put in place.

At present, there are no redressal mechanisms for cab drivers as SheTaxi doesn't oversee their work. Hence, workers take up personal precautions, such as carrying instruments (such as a pen or pepper spray) that might offer protection from potential unpleasant situations.

Caregivers interviewed for this study reported complete satisfaction with the safety and redressal mechanisms offered by their respective platform. A WhatsApp group of all workers working on the platform was also utilized to report any issues.

Recommendations

Improvements to existing safety mechanisms: Additional features to prevent the rampant creation of fake accounts by perpetrators, mood-indicating features for users of platforms to serve as caution against unpleasant situations, and provisions to filter out rude/obscene messages must be modifications made to the platform safety infrastructure.

<u>Elaborate provisions to report attacks:</u> Complainants should be provided with additional or alternative options to elaborate their experience of harassment, rather than close-ended questions.

<u>Robust safety features for offline workers:</u> Platforms must be re-designed to offer workers the option to record and report, in detail, any customer behavior that has caused them harm. Though a redressal portal is available for care workers, the complaints presented are not on record, an option that must be made available.

<u>Intimation of redressal status:</u> Complainants must be intimated with the status of the complaints they have registered with the platforms and should be made aware of actions taken by platforms in response.

<u>Mandatory awareness session for offline workers and peer groups:</u> New entrants into various fields of offline work must be provided compulsory training and awareness sessions on the expected customer service, provisions to register complaints, and clear steps to be followed to use all features of platforms. Peer-support teams can also help in providing a sense of community.

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Ann Mary Biju

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IV

Studying alternative models for digital platforms for women workers

Her 'Right to Tinker': Gendered Perspectives of Participation and Generative Justice in Indian Makerspaces

Sruthi Kalyani A

Introduction

Makerspaces are venues for collaborative innovation that challenge the traditional hierarchies of corporate organizational structures. As institutions that encourage learning-by-doing and open-source cultures, makerspaces provide all members availing their venues access to tools and community services. While techno-optimistic imaginaries of these spaces visualize a modern society with democratized access to technological innovation tools and methods, the question of how far the promises of an open-source ecosystem have empowered women's participation in a digitalizing economy via the creation of innovative coworking community spaces remains crucial to scrutinize.

While they break away from top-down user-centric designs, studies on makerspaces in China and the United States reveal a hyper-feminization of work culture and labor precarity that are increasing with the magnitude of new technologies being introduced into collaborative design practices. Studies on Indian makerspaces and the dynamics of female participation are almost non-existent. This is a gap that the present research seeks to fill by assessing the digital technologies and social innovation outcomes of seemingly inclusive innovation spaces. Although a nascent phenomenon in India, the national developmental goals of innovation and digitalization make these innovation spaces an important area of study. A detailed exploration of the Indian case will contribute to the formulation of gender-sensitive policies and feminist praxis by addressing the various intricacies within such emerging countercultures. Accordingly, this paper investigates the current realities of makerspaces in India to study their gendered performances and outcomes.

Deliberating on the gendered perspectives of the "bottom-up circulation of unalienated value" (Eglash, 2016)[1] – considered a basic principle of generative justice – this paper examines the extent to which makerspaces have given rise to newer forms of social critiques and paved the way for the potential creation of feminist technologies. Furthermore, the study also examines whether emerging technologies in the digital ecosystem will lead to an unalienated labor value. More specifically, the analysis in this paper is based on the following parameters:

<u>Women's participation:</u> the extent of female participation and alternate forms of value creation in Indian makerspaces,

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1 Eglash, R. (2016). An introduction to generative justice. *Teknokultura. Revista de Cultura Digital y Movimientos Sociales*, 13 (2), pp. 369-404.

Production of feminist technologies: the presence of feminist technologies and policy provisions, if any; and

Women's agency over participatory design: the discourse of justice and personal agency as it appears in the everyday practices of these emerging innovation spaces.

Methodology

The research is based on qualitative, semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 makers and 10 owners of makerspaces in India. Of these, eight makers and four owners identified as female. All makers and owners interviewed were able-bodied, heterosexual, and university graduates. The makerspaces identified for this study were privately run and situated in tier-1 cities. The sites were initially chosen through purposive sampling, followed by a snowballing exercise. For information on the demography, type of workshops, and mentorships, log and information records were accessed through the owners.

Key Findings

This study finds that the participation of women in these spaces is dismally low. Makerspaces in India reveal a predominant pattern of male ownership, with a notable absence of women-only and feminist spaces. Lesser participation by women results in fewer feminist technologies, thereby limiting the potential creation of tools that respond to women-centric needs. The study finds that the technological outcomes of private makerspaces, even those designed by female makers, are less likely to be feminist in their orientation. As one of the makers interviewed noted, the main priority is to "fit into the maker community" in order to create competent products, rather than the production of feminist technologies. It follows then, that marketability rather than the idea of contesting masculinities is the underlying motive of design.

The relative lack of feminist technologies can be linked to another finding of the study that concerns feminist self-identification and the possibilities of activism in makerspaces. The interviews conducted for this study revealed that more than half of the makers, irrespective of gender, do not prefer to label themselves as feminists. Furthermore, unlike makerspaces outside India which act as sites for political activism, there is a remarkable absence of an activist culture in Indian makerspaces. Hacktivism, as it is called, either by utilizing these spaces for organizing or by

producing protest technologies, is a trend that is practically unseen in Indian makerspaces. In addition, while female makers show interest in participating in workshops and mentorship training, their involvement declines when it comes to accessing makerspaces for the long term. Most female makers utilize these spaces for a period of not more than six months.

The study maps these findings against the three primary parameters outlined in the research questions/objectives – women's participation, the production of feminist technologies, and women's sense of personal agency over participatory design – and makes a multivocal argument such that one parameter leads to the other and is evidently interlinked. Firstly, the active participation of more women essentially opens up the possibilities of reshaping the masculine infrastructures that dominate these spaces. However, that alone does not provide the right to tinker and create. Secondly, with an awareness of what feminist technoscience aims to construct and redefine, these spaces should not only aim for a feminist (re)design of technological artefacts, but also of the conversations and communities built in the physical spaces. Finally, the presence of feminist networks also fosters reflections on labor value, the usefulness of producer-centric design, and belongingness.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Makerspaces have evidently sought to break away from the top-down models of production and make open-source peer production possible. Given the access to open-source technologies and tools, the modes of production and the various forms of network connections that one can establish and nurture in these collaborative spaces, the potential for women's empowerment and production of feminist technologies in makerspaces are immense.

To achieve this, the study recommends granting the female maker an overarching right to tinker, which includes everything from establishing safe spaces for effective participation to ensuring her freedom to share innovations and pursue entrepreneurial needs.

- Firstly, improving the enrollment of women makers calls for the establishment of safe spaces. Besides, the geographical proximity of these spaces and an early-stage awareness and exposure to collaborative tools may invite more participation. Thus, it is recommended that more makerspaces be set up at schools, universities, and libraries to foster the continuity of knowledge over the

developmental stages of makers' creative skills.

- Secondly, the study exposes the lack of women-centric enrollment plans in private makerspaces. This is a barrier to women's right to access tools. Thus, public-private collaborations have to be explored in these places that would essentially subsidize or lessen the charges of entry for female makers.

- Thirdly, we argue for the importance of the feminist label. Given the study's revelation that many female makers tend not to identify as feminists, we opine that an understanding of feminist causes may lead to an awareness of the structural hierarchies persisting in these spaces and leverage the potential for activism offered by these spaces. A sense of what labels them a feminist and what constitutes a feminist ethos within makerspaces can be established in liberal consensus. Feminist knowledge production may not only contest masculine hierarchies but also aid in the production of more feminist technologies.

- Finally, given that being part of networks plays an important role in enhancing the female entrepreneurial spirit, her right to tinker should not culminate merely in the creative design of a product, but also in scaling it up. Thus, peer-to-peer communities should foster women-centric networks that can potentially enhance female makers' involvement in building entrepreneurial experiences.

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Platform Cooperatives in India: Using Policy to Build a Feminist Future of Work

Sapni G. Krishna

Introduction

Platform cooperatives are cooperatively or jointly owned computing-based digital platforms that offer an alternative to corporate platforms that are owned and controlled by capital infusers or venture capitalists. Mainstream corporate gig work platforms are known to produce inequitable outcomes such as absent or poor social security for workers, lack of incentives towards effective technology governance or transparency in use of data, and distorting market competition, while also demonstrating high burn rates of venture capital investment – all indicating the need for an alternative model in the platform economy. In this premise, a look at a different model of structuring ownership of gig platforms merits discussion. The cooperative movement in India has been a vehicle for economic and human development since the 19th century and supported by legislative backing since 1904. It resulted in the creation of multiple successful and long-standing cooperative societies in a variety of sectors, including agriculture, credit, and services such as the Gujarat Cooperative Milk Marketing Federation and SEWA federations.

This paper positions platform cooperativism as a pursuable feminist proposal in the platformized economy, well-suited to India's cooperative legacy. Specifically, it attempts to answer three research questions. Firstly, it looks at whether platform cooperativism can be a feminist answer to the challenges posed by platformization of the economy in the Indian context. Secondly, it examines whether existing regulatory policies are suitable for platform cooperatives to flourish. Lastly, and following from the second question, it seeks to address the regulatory hurdles and gaps in the policy environment that hamper the establishment of platform cooperatives in India. Based on the analysis of these research questions, the paper recommends regulatory and policy changes that can facilitate the establishment of platform cooperatives as an alternative organizational structure in the platform economy.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research methodology, combining a review of relevant literature with interviews and a case study. After a preliminary scoping review that was based on search results from Google Scholar, JSTOR, ProjectMUSE, and ProQuest, this paper undertook an integrative review of over 40 pieces of literature,

including journal articles, reports, books, newspaper reports, and opinion pieces. This was followed by an analysis of relevant grey literature from organizations working on developments in the field of cooperativism in order to understand the scope of platform cooperativism as a feminist solution to exploitative platformization. A desk review was carried out to analyze bills and legislations forming the relevant regulatory framework for platform cooperatives. This was supplemented by in-depth interviews with 16 participants, including workers, government officials, auditors, technologists, researchers, and activists who have used, studied, or been involved with platforms, as well as customers of platform cooperatives. The interviewees were identified based on a review of news articles across media and a snowball sampling method. The paper uses a case study of the Kerala-based platform cooperative Kerala Taxi, and charts its interaction with current laws and policies to explore the current regulatory system. Finally, it also undertakes a comparative study of policy and regulatory measures in Spain, Italy, and France to analyze policy measures that could be adapted to address India's unique situation.

Findings

Based on the theory of relational autonomy, this paper argues that platform cooperatives can provide an ideal space for agency over labor, which can benefit workers in today's platform economy. According to this theory, exercise of autonomy and the agency to exercise such autonomy is relative to external conditions, including social, economic, political, and gendered experiences of an individual or a group of individuals. Answering the first research question, interviews with research participants and the case study of Kerala Taxi point to the lack of agency over work

in corporate platforms. Taxi workers interviewed as part of this study pointed out that in contrast to platform aggregators' promise of freedom and choice, workers find themselves stranded with long working hours, unsustainable pay, and no say in the operation of the platform. In contrast, the platform cooperative was co-designed with workers to have sustainable pay-outs, real control over work hours, and integration of worker welfare into the technical design of the computing platform, thus making it an alternative with better agency over one's labor. This makes a compelling argument for considering platform cooperativism for a feminist future of work in India.

Answering the second research question based on the analysis of the Union and state policy and legislative framework on cooperatives in India, the paper argues for granting separate legal recognition to platform cooperatives as an organizational structure to further feminist policymaking for the following three reasons:

1. This novel organizational structure does not fit squarely under existing legal frameworks on cooperatives or corporate platforms.

2. If either of these frameworks are applied as is to platform cooperatives – i.e., considering it within the ambit of regulatory policy on cooperatives or on corporate platforms, the flaws within them may disincentivize platform cooperatives or the people engaging with them.

3. If it is integrated into either of the current regulatory frameworks on cooperatives or corporate platforms, it would involve making specific changes to accommodate the differences in regulatory policy. Even after changes for the specific case of platform cooperatives are made, it is likely that the scheme of the law may prevent platform cooperatives from flourishing due to the current nature of their objects of these laws.

Recommendations

Based on further analysis of regulations and select policy measures in other countries, this paper suggests a guiding framework for platform cooperatives in India answering the final research question. Such a framework could be implemented through a two-pronged method of easing current regulatory hurdles and making policy decisions that encourage platform cooperativism.

To ease the current regulatory hurdles:

- The bureaucratic hurdles that exist in the current cooperative legal framework should be revised to balance deregulation and regulation.

- Registration of platform cooperatives should be made as easy as registration of new companies.

- Platform cooperatives should be identified as a sui generis body corporate within the larger body of cooperative legislation.

- Structural support should be provided to platform cooperatives through a network of trained officials across levels of bureaucracy to help with compliance. This could also be made a part of incubators to holistically support the growth of platform cooperatives.

- Social audits can be incorporated into the regulatory framework for compliance.

- The financial auditing mechanism under the current cooperative law must be improved.

- Platform cooperatives should be given generous tax breaks to compete with corporate platforms.

- Amendments should be made to the labor regulations under The Code on Social Security, 2020 to harmonize with judicial precedent that platform cooperatives themselves can be employers.

- A regulatory sandbox can be created to analyze how platform cooperatives can benefit from treatment of data as public good.

Policy can be drafted to encourage platform cooperatives in the following ways:

- The Union should create a Platform Cooperative Program Fund and allot funding to states.

- States could also offer technical assistance to platform cooperatives.

- India could also consider a scheme for social and solidarity economy enterprises which offers resources at discounted costs and provides tax rebates.

- The involvement of private funds to seed platform cooperatives should be

considered.

- The partnership funds for apex societies under the Multi-State Cooperatives Act, 2002 can be allowed to seed fund platform cooperatives, with government oversight during the initial two years.

- The digital infrastructure of the country should be ramped to create better access to the internet.

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Impact of Specialized Digital Marketing Platforms on Women's Micro-Businesses in India: A Case Study of Mahila E-Haat

Abhiruchi Chatterjee

Introduction

Women-led micro-businesses are struggling to survive amid the pandemic-induced boost to digital technologies, in the face of existing gender-based digital disparities and a steady decline in women's workforce participation. Their inability to leverage digital marketplaces for their products points to the absence of an equitable and supportive environment for such businesses. National and transnational private e-commerce pose several constraints for women, ranging from high entry barriers to competitive algorithmic ranking that reward sellers offering high production, stocks, free shipping, discounts, and other conditions that render small, women-led enterprises invisible.[1] Given this, there is a need for government-sponsored specialized digital platforms for women micro-entrepreneurs.

One such government-led initiative has been the Mahila E-Haat, a free online direct marketplace, introduced as part of the flagship Digital India program. Launched with pomp in 2016, and housed under the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), this pan-India platform created niche visibility for women entrepreneurs and centers digital accessibility, garnering accolades for its innovation. However, its discontinuation was brought to public notice rather quietly, in a written parliamentary response in 2021, which revealed that only 321 women entrepreneurs used the platform. While it was operational, the platform, unlike most digital marketplaces, did not charge commissions or listing fees, and had a simplified registration procedure, allowing women-led small businesses access to India's booming e-commerce industry.

Using the Mahila E-Haat as a point of entry, this study explores: a) the extent to which government-supported specialized digital marketing platforms have helped women-led micro-businesses expand their markets,[2] and b) the effectiveness of such interventions in enabling women micro-entrepreneurs to transition to digital marketing of their products. To this end, it analyzes Mahila E-Haat's design and implementation, infrastructure creation, and services and sustainability.

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1 Gurumurthy, A., & Chami, N. (2019). From ill-founded delusions to real possibilities: An e-commerce agenda for women's empowerment. *Feminist Digital Justice Issue Paper*, 2.

2 Expansion, in this paper, is understood through increase in market outreach through i) presence (display of products) on digital platforms, and ii) increased opportunities to display products offline in trade fairs, exhibitions, etc., impact on the scale of production, sustainability of the enterprise.

Methodology

The paper combines the analysis of publicly available secondary data on the implementation of the scheme (scale, budgets, resource allocation) with primary data from a pan-India survey of women vendors who benefitted from the marketplace. The survey covered a tenth of the total vendors registered on the platform, i.e., 32 women. Besides the survey, key informant interviews were conducted with one-fifth of the survey respondents to better understand the ground realities. Stratified sampling was undertaken to accommodate representation from each region of the country, viz., north, east, south, central, west, and north-east.

Key Findings

The specialized platform was primarily leveraged by micro-enterprises. Even though women-led businesses of all sizes could list their products on Mahila E-Haat, all survey respondents belonged to the micro-enterprise category. Respondents were categorized into self-help groups (SHGs) (38%), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) (28%), and individual entrepreneurs (34%) based on self-identification, mode of operations, and leadership.

The relevance of the government-instituted platform in facilitating the digital transition of micro-businesses was underscored by the survey revelation that a majority of respondents (59%) were first-time users of digital platforms. By eliminating listing fees, easing the registration process, and doing away with business documentation (PAN and GST)3 that is typically required by e-commerce

3 Permanent Account Number (PAN) and Goods and Services Tax (GST) are both identity documents, in this context, for businesses. Both these documents are essential for tax-filing purposes for businesses in India. Individual women entrepreneurs, home-based businesses, and micro enterprises are less likely to have the requisite documentation.

platforms, the platform became more accessible to micro-entrepreneurs. The housing of the platform in the Rashtriya Mahila Kosh (RMK)4 also contributed to its uptake amongst SHGs and NGOs. However, the platform was not successful in generating sustainable revenues from digital marketing. While 32% of those surveyed received inquiries, none made a sale through marketing on the platform. The lack of business impacted entrepreneurs differently: NGOs and some SHGs had established clientele through offline connections, and their businesses continued to have a steady income flow outside the E-Haat, but individual women entrepreneurs, particularly those operating from home, found it challenging to market and sell their products through other sources and were reliant on the platform. The lack of sales reinforced amongst the beneficiaries a preference for offline linkages even though during the pandemic there was a halt in offline government exhibitions which was a source of income generation for some respondents. Even as the entrepreneurs surveyed (57%) went on to market products on other online platforms (through social media, e-commerce, or independent websites), there remained a widespread expectation for opportunities at offline government exhibitions where the government provides travel and logistics support.

The platform was also undermined by non-responsive support mechanisms and steadily declining financial resources. Although there was a dedicated email address and a WhatsApp number for support, these failed to respond to sellers who attempted to contact the platform. The decline in budgetary allocations for the implementing body (RMK) since 2017-18, and the dwindling programmatic allocation for the platform itself contributed to its demise. Moreover, the lack of integration of knowledge-sharing and peer-learning mechanisms in the program design meant that women vendors operated in silos, not knowing that others faced similar experiences with regard to lack of sales, challenges in accessing support mechanisms, etc.

In addition, while the platform opened up potential business opportunities for sellers (through customer inquiries and calls to exhibitions), it compromised privacy. As a direct marketplace, it made sellers' contact data, including phone, email, and complete postal addresses, publicly available, which rendered micro-enterprises, such as individuals and SHGs that may operate from the home of one of the

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4 The RMK, an autonomous body under the aegis of the Ministry of Women and Child Development, Government of India, was established in 1993, in the aftermath of the liberalization of the Indian economy, to enable micro-credit facilities for women, primarily through women's collectives, and was posited as an organization with the relevant networks to maximize the digital transition of women led-small businesses.

members, all the more vulnerable. Furthermore, the platform's grievance redressal channels were not responsive to vendors, thus leaving them without support systems and processes in case of a threat of violence.

Recommendations

Empower government-supported specialized digital marketplaces. The protracted challenges for gender inclusion in digital marketing platforms, which this study attempted to highlight, make the case for a functional, well-funded, government-supported, and free digital marketplace. Unlike private platforms that collate and analyze data but are opaque about its usage to the very stakeholders it draws the data from, a government-supported platform should keep data publicly accountable and not disincentivize vendors through demanding terms and practices. Such a platform also needs to be equipped with effective support mechanisms, embedded provisions for order placement, digital payments, and an option for integrated logistical support for vendors, given that women-led micro-enterprises struggle with limited time and resources. An in-built interface could also prevent public availability of vendor personal contact details, as communications can be routed through the platform. A blended marketing approach that combines online marketing with seasonal trade fairs would create multiple revenue channels for women entrepreneurs, which the government is best placed to facilitate.

Promote feminist peer-learning, skills upgradation, and knowledge exchange. Building an active community of women entrepreneurs can liberate them from having to navigate the constantly evolving digital domain in isolation. Sustained knowledge sharing through informal online groups as well as formal engagement to share good practices and challenges, collective articulation of development needs, and direct advocacy undertaken with government stakeholders nationally and provincially would shine a spotlight on the specific challenges of women micro-entrepreneurs and small businesses.

Redirect from digital empowerment to digital equality. Even though the choices available to women may have expanded in principle, some options may not necessarily function in their best interest. For instance, women entrepreneurs often do not have the offline production and logistical capacities to match the stringent demands of private digital marketplaces. For marginalized entrepreneurs to effectively leverage digital platforms for their own profit, a paradigm shift is

needed in the way the development discourse perceives technology as inherently empowering, towards the recognition of technology as yet another tool that can imprint and reproduce inequalities and exacerbate intersectional gendered barriers. Interventions need to include policy and programmatic engagement with key stakeholders of digital marketplaces, including Chambers of Commerce, academia, government ministries, and national and transnational private actors. Public and private digital marketplaces that are designed to be inclusive, accessible, gender sensitive and responsive would create an equitable environment for the empowerment of women micro-entrepreneurs.

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