

A Comparative study of Online and Offline Women Service Providers in the Platform Economy in Kochi, Kerala - Submitted by Ann Mary Biju

Introduction

The platform economy with its opportunities to be self-employed workers for anyone who wishes to be part of has been exploring ways to bring in more women in its operations. However, the female workforce who enter the platforms for work has been exposed to different forms of violence, harassment, discrimination, and safety concerns. The gig economy is also found to be posing enhanced threats in cases of sexual harassment and violence. Certain types of gig work for women have been socially accepted for their flexible work hours which will supposedly ensure women's domestic commitments are not compromised. However, the threats faced by women engaging in the gig economy merits a comparative analysis between women providing offline and online services. Jimenez (2019) denotes the physical and psychological risks they are exposed to by being part of the platform economy and pose threats to their employability, safety, and general prospective earnings which they target to earn by being part of the platforms. This is an intersectional inquiry with the objective to look at class discrimination, if any, experienced by the women employed in either offline or online work. The analysis is made more relevant by locating the study in a high literacy state like Kerala where the majority of women entering this work scenario are at least moderately educated or have higher educational aspirations. In such a context, it is useful to look at the respect that women working in offline and online work receive from society in general and their families.

Objectives

1. Determine sector-specific work satisfaction, threats faced, redressal mechanisms available, aspirations of women and prepare an overview on the conditions of women workers in each of the online and offline sectors of gig work identified in this study.
2. Find out the nature of cyber threats and harassment if any faced by women-owned e-commerce businesses, women social media influencers, and freelancers. Determine if offline workers using platforms are safe from cyber attacks.
3. Find out the threats if any faced by women involved in female-centric professions (care work, beauty, sale of food) and evaluate their safety in comparison to workers from other sectors.

Methodology

The methodology for this study is designed in such a way that both an overall and an in-depth analysis of platform-based work performed by women is arrived at. For this, the primary research will utilize surveys and semi-structured interviews for both offline and online workers. Both these

tools are utilized to lay emphasis on the individual perspectives of each platform economy worker. The tools will contain questions that will look at work satisfaction, daily challenges the participants face, the criticism they undergo if any in relation to their profession, and so on.

The sample-set in case of online and offline groups will be arrived at using convenience and snowballing sampling methods. This is because, in the case of both offline and online platform economy workers, a comprehensive list of women or the general population employed in particular roles nor overall statistics of women workers is not officially available. Since the cohort constitutes a rather transient workforce, the possibility of official data being available for study purposes is also highly unlikely.

In each of the two categories, the following will be the cohorts who will be covered as part of the study:

Offline workers-

1. Food and product delivery workers, Cab drivers (workers in Swiggy, Zomato, Rezooy, Uber, Ola applications)
2. Caregivers and Househelp service providers (Life Maid Easy, Task Mario, Freelancers)
3. Beauty service providers (Task Mario, Urban Company, Freelancers)

Online workers-

1. Social Media Marketers (Freelancers over social media)
2. Influencers (Women social media influencers in Instagram, LinkedIn, and Facebook)
3. E-commerce vendors (Women-led businesses of various kinds with a social media presence)

In each of the 6 categories, I hope to get survey responses from 10 individuals and conduct 7-10 semi-structured interviews per category. There will be an intersection between individuals who will respond to both the surveys and interviews as well as there will be survey participants who will not be required to participate in the interviews. The overall sample size of the study will range from 120-150 women platform economy workers.

Theoretical Framework

This study is conceptualised as a qualitative enquiry into understanding the nature of attacks faced by women workers of the platform economy offering online and offline services. The study attempts to primarily categorize the threats faced by workers as cyber and physical attacks and also aims to correlate the nature of threat to the class position of women workers in terms of their educational backgrounds and type of platform economy service they provide. The research also tries to find out the motivations for women to join the platform economy and their future aspirations related to work in the sector and generally in life.