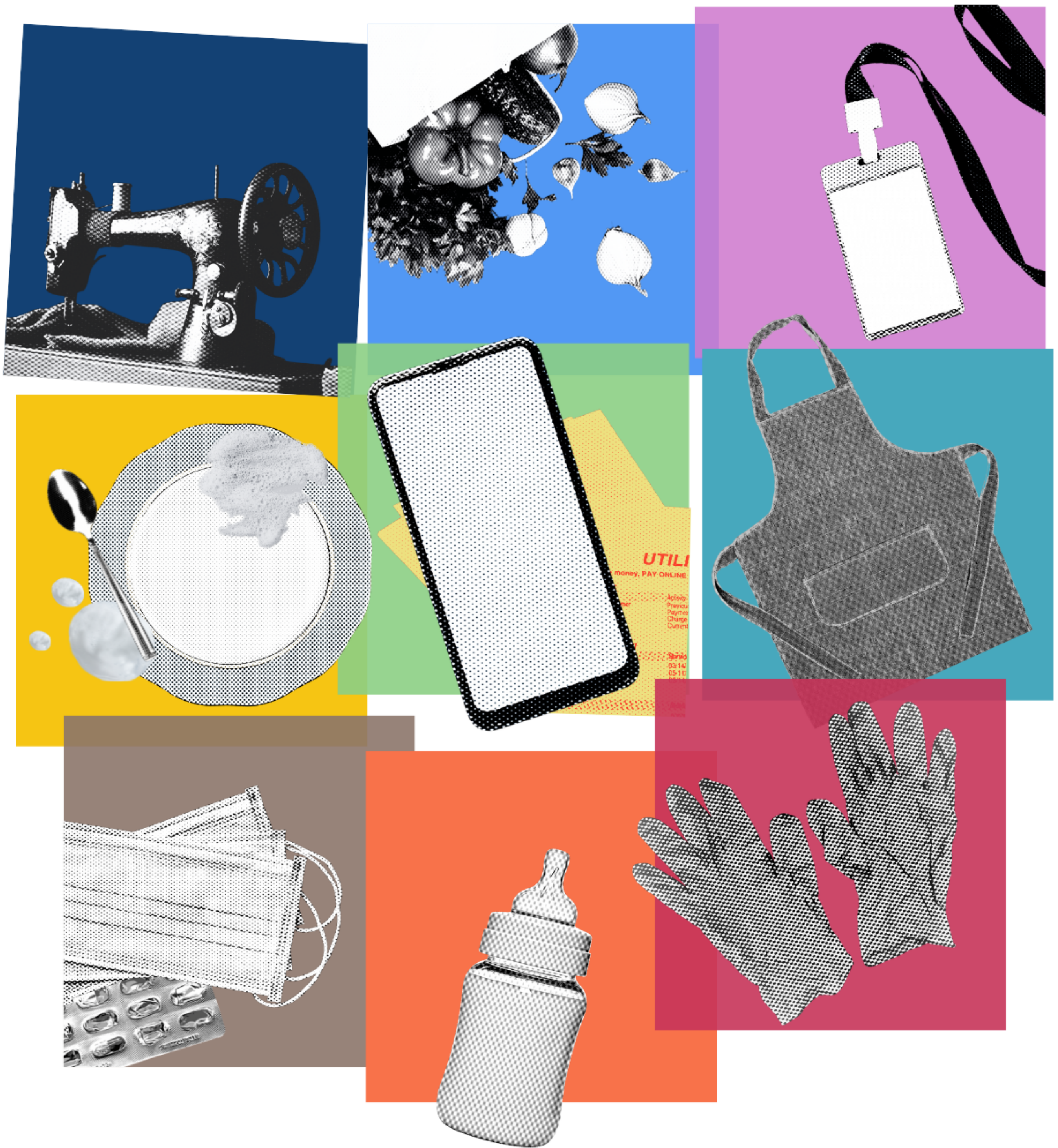

The Unbearable Lightness Of Being A Gig Worker

Analyzing Value Creation In Platformized Labor Relations In India Through The Prism Of Social Reproduction Theory

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Abstract

The starting point of this paper is that the value extraction apparatus of digital labor platforms can be understood only by deploying a ‘reproductive lens’ and not through an exclusive focus on their algorithmic optimization strategies in mediating the labor marketplace. Rooted in an in-depth empirical exploration of the experiences of 19 women and men workers in India’s burgeoning gig economy, it unpacks the specific strategies through which digital labor platforms selectively embed themselves in the traditional sphere of informalized labor relations in order to extract surplus value from the reproductive realm.

Our research demonstrates three main strategies through which digital labor platforms extract value from the sphere of social reproduction.

The first pertains to a totalizing commodification of workers. The institutional order of algorithmically-mediated, entrepreneurial governmentality erected by digital labor platforms, building on the normative disembedding of waged work from the social contract of labor-capital relations, enables a complete subsumption of the worker.

The second sphere of value extraction emerges at the level of the family unit, what we refer to as the “quintessential gig household”. This pliable household structure collectively materializes the flexibility rhetoric of platforms, absorbing many members of the household into gig work rhythms, albeit in ways that implicate capital’s continued ability to appropriate the polyvance of women’s labor.

And finally, the whole of sociality is recast as a social factory that furthers platform capital accumulation. Institutional relations of social cooperation are subsumed into capital accumulation circuits, building off and entrenching social power hierarchies undergirding labor markets, recasting structural oppression as individual humiliations.

Put together, these findings advance thinking about platform labor relations beyond the narrow zone of waged work and algorithmic managerial control and open up the space to develop and engage with a more expansive understanding of both the social relations of labor and value generation in the platform economy in order to reorient it towards a feminist economic future.

1. Introduction: The Case for an Analytical Perspective on the Platform Economy That Re-centers the Living Being

> "I have three children—two boys and a little girl...They support my work, and so I have no tension. My elder son does some cooking. Although he goes to college, he also does a part-time job and helps fetch his siblings from school. I would encourage other women to take up jobs like these too. We are no less than men. "
>
> – Suganthi, ride hailing worker in Bengaluru, India, press interview, March 2019
>
> "Father, why don't you get a better (more dignified) job than doing this food delivery?"
>
> "Son, this is okay. Feeding people is holy work."
>
> – An exchange between a food delivery worker and his son in a recent Indian film examining the plight of gig workers in India, 'Zwigato' trailer.

We begin with these two vignettes as they remind us that in order to comprehend the platform economy, we must first center the living being of workers' lives and social worlds. As Woodcock and Graham have perceptively observed, "Trying to make sense of [the platform economy] without focusing on workers is like studying astronomy without ever looking up at the stars" (Woodcock & Graham, 2019). The social relations of platform work can be deciphered only by moving beyond a narrow focus on algorithmic control at the point of gig work production, and widening one's perspective to unpack reproductive practices and relations that sustain such work arrangements (van Doorn & Shapiro, 2023).

A nascent body of scholarship on the platform economy from this standpoint of social reproduction theory (SRT) is slowly emerging. Research has focused on the rise of the leisure economy enabled by the new regime of social production of reproductive services of on-demand work platforms (Fumagalli & Morini, 2020).

The pervasive feminization of labor in the gig economy (Benvegnù & Kampouri, 2021) and the new gendered compact between the patriarchal household and the state undergirding new home-based work arrangements, such as online microwork (Gurumurthy et al., 2021) have received attention. Attempts have also been made to de-center the "productive" activity of "platform work" and focus instead on the role of non-economic institutions such as governments, communities and families in "making the worker" (Posada, 2022). Building on these explorations, this research paper attempts to further our understanding of the "vital subsumption" of the sphere of human relations into platform capitalism (Fumagalli & Morini, 2020).

In specific, the paper attempts to bring in a feminist social reproduction perspective (Bhattacharya, 2017) to understanding value creation in the platform economy. The so-called triangular relations of the gig economy—between the platform intermediary, worker and client —have been recognized as masking the workings of the platform firm's value extraction apparatus of algorithmic demand-supply matching (Joyce, 2020).

The digital labor platform should be understood to be an instantiation of the new platform mode of production that has proliferated across the economy. The defining characteristic of the platform mode of production is data valorization. As infrastructures of intermediation that enable interactions between two or more groups of economic actors, platform firms ceaselessly aggregate transactions data in order to generate algorithmic intelligence towards optimization of the entire system for aggrandizing private value through unilateral market control (Srnicek, 2017). The value generated by continually deploying the aggregate behavioral data of worker-client transactions towards unilateral control of the market of labor exchange has also been identified as enabling intensified exploitation of workers. (Gurumurthy et al., 2019).

But what is important to underscore is that it is not as if datafication processes of digital labor platforms generate value only from the algorithmic optimisation of workplace transactions. As feminist scholarship on social reproduction highlights, value generation in capitalism is not confined to the sphere of waged work. On the contrary, it is dependent on the entire complex of non-economic institutional relations that produce the most valuable commodity under capitalism–the waged worker (Mezzadri, 2021). Changes to the mode of production are accompanied by shifts in the ways in which this sphere of social reproduction is valorized for capital accumulation.

This paper explores how the value extraction apparatus of digital labor platforms encloses the sphere of social reproduction into the circuit of capital, exhibiting a historical continuity with the processes of value generation in the evolution of capitalism. In the spirit of feminist SRT theory that urges the centering of the majority world in all theory-building, our starting point is how the platform economy continues the "ironic reversal" of post-Fordist capitalism–where "long-standing informalized labor patterns of the global South are being mirrored in the North" (Chakrabarty, 2000, cited in Campbell, 2016).

Rooted in an empirical exploration of the experiences of women and men workers in India's burgeoning gig economy, we unravel the specific strategies through which digital labor platforms selectively embed themselves in the traditional sphere of informalized labor relations in order to extract surplus value from the reproductive realm. In specific, the paper aims to address the following research questions:

- In the platformization of labor relations, what are the modalities through which the sphere of social reproduction is appropriated for capital accumulation?
- What is the impact of such appropriation on gendered power relations?
- What does the co-constitution of social reproduction in the platform labor relations mean for a feminist future of work agenda?

2. Methodology

Methodologically speaking, our research framework de-centered the productive sphere and recentered the sphere of social reproduction (particularly worker households), reflecting an important feminist value of co-constitution of life and work in the everyday lives of workers, families and communities (Mezzadri et al., 2021)

Our data collection tools were qualitative, with the focus being on capturing the subjective experience of female and male workers interpellated in the platformised circuit of capital accumulation and its effects on space and time boundaries (on waged work and the work that is life, navigating the labor market and other domains of social life, and associated pressures and costs).

Using a purposive sampling methodology that relied on snowballing, we selected and interviewed 19 workers across four metropolitan cities in India: Kochi, Kolkata, Mumbai, and New Delhi between March–May 2023. All workers belonged to on-demand platforms spread across four sectors: food delivery, ride-hailing, salon services (also referred to as personal grooming or beauty work), and home repairs. A comprehensive interview schedule was developed for these interviews, consisting of a set of demographic questions to aid some preliminary quantitative analysis, as well as a set of open ended guiding questions to delve into the lives and livelihoods of the platform based gig workers from the lens of social reproduction theory.

Respondents were associated with the following platforms—Uber (ride hailing, active in India since 2013), Ola (ride hailing, active in India since 2010) Swiggy (food delivery, launched in India in 2014), Zomato (launched food delivery services in India in 2015), and Urban Company (erstwhile UrbanClap that began offering on-demand home services in India in 2014). The range of years of platform work among the respondents varied from four months to 10 years, with the median being three years. The sample comprised eight men and 11 women, with no particular association of any type of gig work with gender. Additionally, it was common to see workers associated with more than one platform in their sector (eg, ride hailing workers who were associated with both Ola and Uber).
See Table 1 below for the respondent demographics.

Table 1. Gender and sectoral distribution of the research sample

Sector	**Men**	**Women**	**Total**
Food delivery	3	4	7
Ride hailing	2	5	7
Salon services	2	2	4
Home repair	1	0	1
Total no. of respondents			19

All women respondents identified as Hindu, while men belonged to Hindu, Christian, and Muslim communities. Information about caste background could not be obtained from all. Of the seven respondents from whom this data was obtained, five belonged to other backward castes.

As the sample size was relatively small and interviews were semi-structured, manual qualitative coding was adopted as the primary data analysis method, to distil key themes from the interviews using a grounded theory approach informed by feminist social reproduction theory. All responses have been pseudonymized in order to protect the confidentiality of research participants.

3. Findings: The Three Strategies of Value Extraction by Labor Platforms From the Sphere of Social Reproduction

Our research demonstrates that there are three main strategies through which digital labor platforms extract value from the sphere of social reproduction. The first pertains to a totalizing commodification of workers. The institutional order of algorithmically-mediated, entrepreneurial governmentality erected by digital labor platforms, building on the normative disembedding of waged work from the social contract of labor-capital relations, enables a complete subsumption of the worker.

The second sphere of value extraction emerges at the level of the family unit, what we refer to as the "quintessential gig household." This pliable household structure collectively materializes the flexibility rhetoric of platforms, absorbing many members of the household into gig work rhythms, albeit in ways that implicate capital's continued ability to appropriate the polyvance of women's labor.

And finally, the whole of sociality is recast as a social factory that furthers platform capital accumulation. Institutional relations of social cooperation are subsumed into capital accumulation circuits, building off and entrenching social power hierarchies undergirding labor markets, recasting structural oppression as individual humiliations.

Each of these three strategies is discussed in detail in the subsequent sections.

Strategy 1. The Totalizing Commodification of Workers

Studies of digital labor platforms in the Global South have demonstrated how they selectively embed themselves in informal labor markets by filling in for historical institutional voids–monopolizing the role of information analyzers and advisers, credibility enhancers, aggregators and distributors, and dispute adjudicators in the market niches they occupy (Heeks, 2021).

Their institutional regime of datafication is geared towards ensuring the “network embeddedness” of the workforce in the platform’s algorithmically engineered labor exchange, while strategically maintaining a “normative disembeddedness” from the social contract of labor through the full abdication of the decent work guarantees of the formal employment contract (Woods et al., 2019). This abdication, as we show below, erects a regime of entrepreneurial governmentality that normatively disembeds waged work from the social contract of labor-capital relations which effectively puts “life” to work.

1.1 Flexploitation—no remainder time to pursue life outside capital

The intensified casualization of employment in the platform economy exhibits a historical continuity with regimes of “flexploitation” (Bourdieu, 1998) i.e., “the creation of a generalized and permanent state of insecurity engineered through a concerted manipulation of the temporality of the means of production. Here, the subsumption of life-time into platform labor relations, evidenced by the blurring between the productive and reproductive spheres, is central to the value extraction processes engendered by datafication regimes.

To start with, the majority of workers interviewed did not buy into the platform narrative of empowering flexi-work. 16 out of 19 of our respondents were working “fulltime” on platforms, clocking an average eight hours a day, with many of them viewing platform work as the only option plausible within a situation where their overall employment choices were constrained. A bulk of the respondents stated post-covid economic shocks and lack of employment alternatives with commensurate earnings as the key motivation for them to join and stay in platform work. 10 out of 19 identified as primary earners in the household. Therefore, neither were platform earnings “supplementary”, nor were platform arrangements temporary stand ins for formal working arrangements. In fact, the women workers in our sample underscored the fact that only the flexibility of platform work arrangements would enable them to navigate and balance their care work burdens at the household level with waged work. Food delivery worker Padma who was formerly employed as a nurse, candidly shared the double-edged predicament–the flexibility of timings that platform work offered was the only way to balance the double burden of household duties with waged work even though formal employment offered her a better deal on the whole.

> “I used to work in a hospital. After we purchased our own house, I found it difficult to continue as the commute became an issue. My mother lives with me, my son is very young, and my daughter is in school. Taking days off to deal with children’s sickness or schooling is very difficult in a formal job. So though the earlier job was much better, I chose to leave it and work in food delivery instead–there is flexibility to stop work when I have to.”
>
> Padma, Food Delivery worker

However, it was clear that the flexible timings did not result in gains for life-time outside waged work, Instead, life-time rhythms were increasingly subject to unpredictable interruption by the call of the digital workplace. Nancy, a food delivery worker who moved to gig work from a customer care job in order to reap the benefits of flexible timings, explained how the ostensible convenience of flexible timings did not materialize in the everyday. Instead, there is an overwhelming loss of control due to unpredictability of the average time of a micro-gig assigned.

> "For me, a good day at work is when there is no wait time at the restaurant. Some days, the food will be packed and ready before I reach the restaurant. Those days are my favourite. On the other hand, there are some days when I have to wait for a long time to pick up the order. This is especially inconvenient when it falls closer to my break at 3 pm because delays then mean that I'll end up late to pick my daughter up from the anganwadi (child care center).
>
> Nancy, food delivery worker

Similarly, Jayant,a ride hailing worker, reflected on how longer work days had become inevitable for him in order to maintain a particular level of earnings, which was not the case in his previous employment with a private firm:

> "In IBM, for 22 days in a month, I would make between 70,000–75000 Rs. a month [$800–835/865]. And I could make additional money on weekends / free time. But in Ola, Uber, there is only hard work with no money. Even if I drive for 14–16 hours a day, as the rates are unpredictable, I don't have the guarantee that I can earn at a particular level."
>
> Jayant, ride hailing worker

With the entire day being organized around the logic of serving as the disposable on-call workforce, there was no "remainder time" outside of the capitalist circuit to pursue just life (Tadiar, 2013).

Workers also fully understand and have internalised the costs of these "inflexibly flexible" regimes (Morini, 2007). For example, food delivery worker Alka reflected on how the choice not to work on Sundays came at the cost of losing crucial incentives. Indeed, the full irony-of flexible rhetoric came to light when workers spoke about situations that involved cancelling shifts to deal with emergencies:

> "There is a problem with Urban Company's cancellation policy. For example, in one month, you can cancel one booking. If you cancel two bookings, your profile will be blocked. Recently, one coworker got into an accident and had to cancel all his bookings on the day of the accident..[more than two]. So he was permanently blocked."
>
> Faisal, salon services worker

In concluding this section, a final point needs to be made, which relates to the platform's full disavowal of all forms of institutional support for even basic operational problems at the workplace (something that can be taken as foundational in formal employment contracts). This emerged as a serious gap across all our interviews. Customer care services that do not provide quick and effective professional solutions, technical glitches that prevent work order fulfilment or lead to fights with customers, customer frauds and misbehaviors, even dealing with serious workplace risks such as accidents, are fully offloaded onto workers themselves with platforms offering no scaffolding.

Therefore, if on the one hand, digital labor platforms with their regime of data valorization have created an unilateral, opaque algorithmic regime through which living labor and life time are subsumed into the capital circuits, this is underscored by a full externalization of all costs of reproduction to the worker, again made possible by the normative disembedding of labor exchange from the social contract of labor.

1.2 Commensuration through obfuscation—putting "life" to work

The Catch-22 of the algorithmic work control systems that ensure the "network embeddedness" of workers in digital labor platforms is centred on erecting a new paradigm of entrepreneurial governmentality in the social relations of work. Workers are 'freed' from the traditional employment contract and re-made into "entrepreneurial workers'' who are engaged in the perpetual affective labor of generating, and bettering their reputational scores in the hope their future employment prospects can be secured (Doorn, 2014). The evaluation infrastructure that platforms use to allocate and manage work performance is illustrated best by the worker rating system, to which platforms often tie work allotment and even permission to participate in it. The unexplainability and lack of specifics in the ratings system engineers an opaque and non-transparent reputational regime where entrepreneurial workers are forced to enact a constant "modulation of affect" (Moore, 2019). Here, occupational performance intersects with the performance of (ambiguous) socio-cultural aesthetics of being 'zany' (Ngai, 2012) or being hyperattentive to the behaviour of clients.

Arunima, a high rated salon services worker, who prided herself on rarely getting a poor rating, espoused this through the language of "unbeauty"—that it was her zaniness to meet client requirements rather than self-presentation that kept her reputation high:

> "Rating is everything. If the rating is bad, you don't get a job. My rating is 95. When we read the rating / review which gets updated after three days, and it is a good rating, our hearts are full. Every time I'm allocated to a new client and I meet them for the first time, I don't know anything about them, but they know me because of my good reviews and rating. That's why I keep working hard–I only think about the fact that nothing bad should happen to the client. Nothing for me. If you look at me, I am "unbeauty".
>
> Arunima, salon services worker

Sapna's narrative below further highlights how rating systems may be fully removed from improved occupational performance, which means that maintaining reputation becomes a moral obligation that is the sole onus of the worker, one which is not embedded within a larger work contract where the employer has any reciprocal responsibilities:

> "I always give my best to deliver the task. But sometimes I don't get the expected level of rating response from the customer. Second, the name of the customer does not appear on the app and the feedback appears after three days of delivery. So, I don't know how to track the particular customer over the poor rating. At least, I must know the particular points for areas of improvement."
>
> Sapna, salon services worker

In other words, ratings systems structure the affective labor performed by workers to fit themselves into productivity parameters not as an exchange worthy of consistent or useful reward, but solely as a mechanism of intensified exploitation to locate profit for capital (Jarrett, 2015a). Arguably then, with the platform freed from any obligation to guarantee work quality or entitlement, work becomes the speculative project of making oneself "more appreciable" (in whatever ambiguous way the platform suggests it), in the hope that these investments will increase one's value, and thus one's employability. As workers perform the labor needed to shape themselves into ideal entrepreneurial subjects, their own technical knowledge/skills appear as mere accessories to the machinery of the platform (Marx, cited in Moore, 2019). The normative disembeddedness of the platform then runs in parallel with its ability to extract value as a "device of commensuration"(Doorn, 2014) that organizes orders of worth by subsuming many (or all) diverse forms of work into an evaluation infrastructure.

Furthermore, as workers labor everyday to plot, organize and carry out their activities in ways they believe can "improve" their value within such an infrastructure, they stumble upon obfuscations that actively prevent them from achieving a "positive realisation of affect" (Moore, 2019). For instance, food delivery worker Jacob shared how even "if the customer forgets to update the address on the food delivery platform and they complain about non-delivery, we still get penalized". Similar insights were shared by Madhavan, food delivery worker:

> "If we brave the traffic and still get the order delivered as soon as possible, the app will immediately show a message that says 'oh ho, this is too late. But if the customer takes even hours to come collect it, the message shown is 'Great job. You did a perfect delivery'."
>
> Madhavan, food delivery worker

In fact, worker experience of the platform's evaluation infrastructure always being stacked against them holds out not only the asymmetric power relations entrenched by the algorithm, but also a state of "endless toil" or what Smith refers to as "disembodied exhaust" (Smith, 2016) which workers believed was deliberately engineered by the platform in order to extract unfair economic gains:

> "You must complete 80 orders in order to be given the incentive. After completing 79 orders, they will do their best not to let us reach 80. Sometimes, after the 79th order, the app malfunctions and locks us out for a few minutes, saying it's a technical issue. Once the time to get the incentive is over, the app goes back to normal. I feel like they do this on purpose."
>
> Nancy, food delivery worker

The inability to carve out a predictable pathway to achieve a positive realization of affect means that commensuration by obfuscation becomes the organizing principle of this new regime, with "life" being put to work".

Strategy 2. The "Quintessential Gig Household"

Maria Meis coined the term "housewifization" to refer to capital's strategy of integrating women workers into the accumulation process.The domestication of women and the transformation of their identities into housewives, dependent on the income of the husband (irrespective of their economic contributions to the household), became the model that upheld the sexual division of labor under (industrial) capitalism, both expanding labor supply rates, and ensuring higher rates of exploitation (Meis, 2014). Keeping the reproductive sphere as the center of our exploration gave us glimpses into how processes of housewifization were being recast in the models of platform capitalism, through a more fluid, unstable, but collective configuration of labor divisions, which implicate gender in varied and contingent ways. We refer to this configuration as the "quintessential gig household".

2.1 From double burden to collective dispossession

The quintessential gig household is a household in which all members collectively enact the social contract between the platform and the worker through a bricolage of livelihood strategies that sustain the worker's contract with the platform. These include decisions relating to joining and staying in gig work, negotiating distribution of domestic and care work responsibilities between generations (older parents and older children), as well as navigating the day to day synchronization of gig work rhythms with household rhythms. We refer to these as quintessential because we found that the platform regime of flexi-work is contingent on the externalization of the full costs of reproducing labor to the household, which then materializes in a new household regime of enacting flexibility that becomes normalized and ubiquitous. Most households in our study were found to be inter-generational—i.e., included parent(s) and children of the gig workers, and sometimes another sibling, taking the average size to about four to five members. Essentially then, the choice to pursue gig work and the strategies to sustain the rhythms of "inflexible flexibility" had to be constituted within and through this configuration. Here, gender, includes but is not limited to, the meanings and practices constituting the distinction between women and men (Blair, 2010) that construct the paradigm through which the polyvalence of women's labor could be appropriated.

Take the case of Sapna, a single mother working with Urban Company, a salon services platform. For Sapna, the decision to work with Urban Company meant "settling for beauty work" even though she actually aspired to have an "office job." She also had to negotiate an explicitly agreed timeshare arrangement with her mother so that she could work part time, even though she knew that choosing the "part time" option on the platform would mean reduced job allocation and earnings:

> "I have to get my daughter ready in the morning, pack her tiffin and drop her off to school, so I cannot work in the morning. My mother manages her once she is back from school, my father and brother have a full time job. Right now, I can only work part time, but when my daughter grows up, I plan to go back to full time work."
>
> Sapna, salon services worker

Here, gender not only constructs the specific ways in which the households of gig workers materialised the sexual division of labor, it also embodies all the contradictions contained in making "flexploitation" palatable to the gig household—i.e, embracing precarity with lower pay, while ostensibly being able to "go out of the house and work".

Madhavan left a full time job in the formal sector to work for Swiggy just to "pass time" and "earn some extra income", stating that it was his wife who had a "real" job and got paid a good salary. However, even though he worked part time and his wife worked full time, the contract enacted by his household served to legitimize the primacy of his wife's role in caregiving / household support.

> "There is not much need for help in the house. Father is healthy, he will do his own things. No one needs that sort of care in the house. And my wife does all the cooking and all. She cooks for everyone."
>
> Madhavan, food delivery worker

Organized as a specific set of meanings and practices round the sphere of the household (reproduction), gender here becomes the configuration by which Madhavan's household is able to absorb the ambivalence of gig work (insecure, low paying work) with his identity as the head of the household, despite his diminishing economic contribution to the household.

2.2 The gigification of housework

Secondly, the quintessential gig household became the terrain on which gig work platforms were able to mobilize women's labor towards a more entrepreneurial responsibilization of the gig household, albeit within the limits set by the hierarchical organization of work.

This meant that some women were afforded greater legitimacy to their claims for reduced unpaid care work, even if the hegemonic conditions that shaped their roles in the reproductive sphere could not be substantially changed, Sagarika, a ride hailing worker, explained her relief from primary caregiving responsibilities:

> “Everyone in my family including my daughter-in-law and son supports me at home. I don’t feel any kind of burden when I reach home in the evening. Although, before leaving the house in the morning, I always try to finish all household chores.”
>
> Sagarika, ride hailing worker

What was more common though, was for women to retain a nodal role in domestic work, even as male members participated in reducing their burdens to some extent. Shalini explained the care work division between her and her son:

> “My parents are old, so they cannot work. Husband is also out four days a week…so me and my son do the household work together. In the morning, I complete all the work like cooking food, washing clothes, cleaning the house by 10:00 a.m. and leave for work by 10:30 a.m. Then for evening tea, etc. the son comes back from college and he makes it. By six to seven, I also reach home. If I am late some day, he makes food.”
>
> Shalini, ride hailing worker

Shanti as the sole earner of the household is supported by her husband:

> “Since he stays at home the whole day, he helps in the cooking in the morning and evening”.
>
> Shanti, ride hailing worker

What becomes obvious when we connect the narratives of Sagarika, Shalini, and Shanti is that while the concrete modalities of responsibilization in a gig household were different, the complexity of the dependence/absorption that various members of the household experience across the continuum of production and reproduction ends up becoming a general paradigm of the household. In some sense, it becomes possible to see the gig economy operating on the heels of a gigified household, with the pervasiveness of “work” transcending multiple actors / spaces / boundaries.

While the rhythms of the household are synchronized to meet with gig work rhythms, on many occasions this neat separation was unachievable. For women in particular, the blurring is more evident, as seen in statements such as “I take my daughter with me on my morning gigs before dropping her off to school” or “I sometimes check the prices of the vegetables to see if it is cheaper when I am waiting in a certain area.”
On occasions where the rhythms conflicted, work assumed priority. It was common to hear women (and fewer men) speaking about missing Parent-Teacher meetings, living in messy homes, neglecting their health, and missing spending quality time with their children, especially on weekends which were the busiest days for both salon services and food delivery workers. Padma, married to Adarsh, who also worked in food delivery, was fully supported in childcare responsibilities by her mother. She explained how the cadence of holidays/weekends had been altered due to their gig work responsibilities:

> Previously, Sunday was the day when we spent time together as a family. Now, we have no time to sit with the kids and have such a time. Our mentality now is to work 365 days a year. Obviously, we take our children's birthdays and other important festival days off. We consider these very important and don't miss them.
>
> Padma, food delivery worker

Therefore, what we see emerging in a quintessential gig household is not only the boundaries of productive and reproductive work becoming less and less precise and circumscribed parts of life, but the "becoming of gig work" of housework, where housework assumes a gigified form with the qualities of pliability and precarity.

To conclude, we find that the quintessential gig household intersects the platform modalities of labor flexibilization through a pliable household structure that collectively enacts flexibility. Gender plays an important role in organizing these enactments, as well as the contradictions and ambivalences surrounding them, in as much as they are underpinned by motivations defined relationally around family and households(James, 2022). Building off, and feeding into what Morini has termed the "baggage of female experience", this unit becomes the way by which gig work platforms can appropriate the polyvalence of women's labor, while fully entrenching the sexual division that scaffolds it (Morini, 2007). Importantly, because flexibility is necessarily materialized through such a configuration, the role of gendered power relations in surplus creation is not just limited to women bearing a double burden (which most definitely continues to be the case). Italso extends to the enactment of flexibility by a gigified household, pointing to the collective dispossession (Posada, 2022) at the heart of the platform economic model.

Strategy 3. The Social Factory

Platforms are able to re-engineer and feed social relations into capitalist circuits, blurring the boundaries between social mutuality (the non-market social) and work transactions in the sphere of production. In such blurring, they are also able to effectively leverage the social hierarchies of subordination and devaluation for furthering labor exploitation. Social relations are subsumed into capital accumulation circuits, with both cooperation and subordination becoming value producing, recasting the whole of sociality into a social factory. We elaborate on this in the section below.

3.1 The knotted labor of social cooperation

Gig workers relied on various networks of social mutuality that they believed the platform had either no knowledge of, or accorded little legitimacy to, even though these formed an essential and routine part of fulfilment of work orders. Consider the excerpt below, where Alka, a food delivery worker explains her typical experience of delivering an order:

> "In most cases, the location provided on the app is wrong, so we can rarely use the app. We have to call and ask customers to help us find the location. Mostly they are helpful. Sometimes, some customers themselves call us up. They also ask if we can buy things not included in the order, like medicines. The app doesn't know this but buying an extra bottle of water or medicines is just part of our humanity, right? No one needs to know all that."
>
> Alka, food delivery worker

As Alka notes, the labor that she deploys in correcting wrong locations on the app, or buying additional items at the behest of the customer falls outside the algorithmified marketplace (leading her to denote it as extra work). Therefore, the data generated through the transaction already holds the full value of social reproduction, because it is constituted outside the algorithmically-mediated labor marketplace through a mutuality established between the rider and the customer, ostensibly still facilitated by the platform. This labor of social cooperation is value producing not only because it offers a subsidy to waged work, but also because paradoxically, it feeds altruistic acts into commodity circuits.

Additionally, such re-engineering of social mutuality produces frictions, the costs of which again are fully borne by the worker. Jayant, a ride hailing worker, gives an example of the frictions of social cooperation:

> "As soon as the ride is booked, the customer will call the driver and ask him to come to the pick up point. The driver is happy because the customer has called him and confirmed the ride. Once he reaches the pick up point, the customer will say, my wife doesn't have any balance and I'm trying to transfer money to her but I'm unable to. So I'm sending you Rs.500 through Google Pay. You keep the Rs.330 (the ride amount), and send the remaining to her. So the driver provides his number to the customer. The customer will say I have transferred Rs.500, please check. Sometimes driver's don't wait for the confirmation of the payment, and will send Rs.170 to the number that the rider has given him. As soon as driver sends the money, the customer cancels the ride. So the driver has lost Rs. 170. If you go to Ola to complain. Ola will say I cannot do anything because you never started the ride. They ask us to go to the police station to file an FIR. I almost got scammed like this, but because I had learnt about this in our WhatsAppgroups, I got saved."
>
> Jayant, ride hailing worker

Jayant's account provides a detailed explanation of the vulnerabilities experienced by the driver within the algorithmified process of ride hailing. Jayant's statement that "the driver is happy because the customer has called," explains how the platform edifice provides them a zone for establishing "trust" on either side, which then also becomes a way for workers to gauge the authenticity of the transaction and maximize acceptance rates. It also provides a glimpse into the extreme information asymmetry drivers experience in making decisions about the value of the ride.

Shanti, a ride hailing worker explained this information asymmetry in the following manner: (We don't know anything about the customer, we don't know who they are, whether the person is under the influence of alcohol or not, or is smuggling something, we literally don't have a clue).

In such a situation, performing an altruistic act (helping the customer's wife) may seem minor, particularly when the rest of the parameters of the ride (distance, pay, and indeed the customer themselves calling to confirm) look appealing. Here again, this transaction already holds the full value of social reproduction because it has transcended the sphere of production through the customer's request to the driver to "help his wife". In addition, with the platform fully transferring the full risks/costs of sustaining this edifice to the worker (Go the police station and file a complaint), and retaining full immunity through an opaque algorithmic management apparatus (we can't do anything because the ride was cancelled), the workers are left with no meaningful recourse options. Effectively then, they fully absorb the costs of these frictions, offering a subsidy to the platform. And finally, by taking on the role of educating and alerting fellow drivers on scams like these through WhatsApp groups, a role which is directly value producing for the platforms, but remains unacknowledged at large by them,not to mention unpaid.

Both these vignettes demonstrate platform capitalism's ever expanding tendency to bring all labor "inside the knot" (Huws, 2014).Therefore, the imperative is to centre the amorphous and nebulous forms of the labor of social cooperationco-operation in the platform mode of production. This necessarily means that we must relinquish reductionist binaries of productive/ unproductive, paid/unpaid labor (Mezzadri), and pay attention to the centrality of all labor for capital, and more so, capital's totalizing control over the relations of both production and reproduction.
Workers on the other hand, simultaneously experience an erosion in value, either because such labor is neither seen nor recognized by the platform, or because they bear the full costs of its ensuing frictions. More so, because relations of social cooperation are constituted through pre-existing caste/class and gender based hierarchies, the value erosion also extends to an experience of incessant devaluation, which, as we argue in the next section, builds on, and intensifies surplus extraction strategies of platforms, through an individualization of the humiliating conditions of work.

3.2 Structural oppression recast as individualized humiliations

The informal labor market in India structures worker experiences in very specific ways based on unequal power hierarchies (Gooptu, 2013). This means that the surplus extraction of platforms through the subsumption of social relations, is both contingent on and attendant to hierarchies of subordination and devaluation that unfolded at various sites of the service delivery chain. Take this example of a worker explaining his experience of entering a large shopping mall in a city in order to pick up an order, which inserts him into an interaction with security staff stationed at the entrance of the mall:

> "The second we try to approach this mall through the front doors, the security people say 'no, you can't enter through here' as though we are beggars. Once, I told him that I haven't stepped in shit for you to speak like this."
>
> Madhavan, Food delivery worker

Jayant, ride hailing worker explained how they constituted the new underclass for harassment by traffic policemen:

> "As soon as the cops see us waiting, they will find some ways to harass us. Either they will say you cannot wait here, or they will say you need to wear a uniform, it's like they are waiting to harass us. If you look around, you will find there are parking areas for black and yellow cabs, even for auto rickshaws, but nothing for us. We are actually worse than even auto-rickshaw drivers."
>
> Jayant, ride hailing worker

Many food delivery workers also reported being routinely asked to "leave food at the doorstep", a practice that is associated with caste based notions of purity/untouchability, with one of them making specifically noting how the customer would pick up the food from the place where it was left, the minute the worker would turn around and would walk away.

When asked about whether they thought about reporting these humiliations to platforms, responses were mixed, sometimes contradictory. A set of workers who routinely rated the platform poorly on all counts, or tried calling the helpline to report grievances, claimed that it made no difference ("*Uber will do nothing*" or "*Zomato does not care for anyone other than the customer.*") For many others, because these exchanges arose in a more atomized way through the interstitial spaces that populate urban service work, i.e, with customers, cops, restaurant staff, security guards, etc. They were seen as being subjectively produced through social/culturally laden encounters, rather than intersecting structurally with platform labor relations (Gooptu, 2013).
For example, one food delivery worker said that she thought it was natural for people to be angry when they are hungry, justifying any wrath she experienced at the hands of the customer when the food order was delayed. In fact, the narrative of "difficult customers who must be managed" was a carefully cultivated subjectivity with most workers— "there will always be people who harbor backward notions" or "how can you blame the platform when the worker is dressed in chappals (slippers)...he must groom himself professionally" were common way of explaining away caste/class based antagonisms that were encountered.

The "absence" of the platform here then, does not just bring into sharp relief the full externalization of the responsibility for providing decent working conditions, but it also undermines any possibilities of collective political action across worker classes through an individualization of exploitative conditions as occurring in specific encounters.

Thus, the platform apparatus of generating wealth by feeding the multitude of social cooperation into productive circuits runs in parallel with the corresponding individualization/

atomization of working conditions, again made wholly possible by such an apparatus. In gig work, subjectivities are required to be resilient to various forms of instabilities, and subjects are required to take full responsibility for their personal well-being rather than associating stress with poor working conditions. This has the effect of fostering the denial of any social corporeality or of any corporeality "of class" (Morini, 2007).

4. Concluding Thoughts: Towards a Feminist Future of Work in the Platform Epoch

This research study is yet another addition to the growing body of research that demonstrates the importance of the "reproductive lens" in digital labor studies (Jarrett, 2019). Digital labor platforms generate value not just through algorithmic optimization of the transactions in the productive sphere–the marketplace of labor exchange, but equally from the sphere of social reproduction. Through a normative disembeddedness from the social contract of capital labor relations, digital labor platforms enable a totalizing commodification of workers, erect a new regime of the "quintessential gig household" that extracts the polyvalence of women's labor to the utmost, and re-cast the whole of sociality into a social factory that furthers platform capital accumulation. Traditional socio-structural hierarchies (of gender, class and caste, in this particular case) that shape informal labor markets are entrenched through platform capitalism's 'formalization of the informal', its evaluation infrastructure which obfuscates work, and its reification of flexiwork arrangements, without any attention to the household level (and social) accommodations that are essential to materialise the always-on-call gig workforce.

Gig work itself is conducted as a process of social reproduction of capitalist labor relations within the context of the reproduction of an accelerated neoliberal paradigm of worker subjectivity and productivity (Moore, 2018). This disallows the formation of class solidarities for political action and offers a stronghold to pre-existing regimes of footloose employment in the labor markets of the Global South.

Put together, these findings advance thinking about platform labor relations beyond the narrow zone of waged work and algorithmic managerial control. It opens up the space to develop and engage with a more expansive understanding of both the social relations of labor and value generation in the platform economy in order to reorient it towards a feminist economic future. This transformation requires action on two counts. First, platform labor must be re-embedded into a social contract where decent work is guaranteed. This needs attention to ensuring fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management and fair representation in the labor contract between platform firms and their workforce,as efforts such as Fairwork Decent Work Index have attempted through research-based engagement. Additionally, it needs a focus on building an economy of care.

Social policy needs to re-examine the received wisdom on what constitutes productive work, and pay attention to the labor of social care—who performs it? Under what conditions? How can its costs be socialized?

We need more feminist political economy approaches that can unearth the various forms of labor in platform work, the actors implicated in such labor, the multiplicity of ways in which these are concealed by the platform apparatus and the forms of exploitations these foster, and whole-of-economy policy mechanisms to redress the same.

Similarly, we need to examine how value generation in the platform epoch can be re-oriented towards greater democratization instead of monopolization as is the current trend. Let us take the particular case of the digital labor platform. An essential public infrastructure—the marketplace for labor exchange—is privatized and monopoly rent is generated by the platform capitalist, in perpetuity, under the dominant platform model. What if this public infrastructure of a platform system with attendant data processing and intelligent generation capabilities is publicly provisioned and optimized for greater efficiency for the actors and with a view to democratize its gains?

This is not a theoretical speculation. It was experimented with in the state of Kerala between August 2022 and October 2024 when the government piloted a publicly owned platform for ride hailing called Kerala Savari. It had government approved fare cards and no surge pricing (at a fixed 8% service charge in contrast to the 20–30% variable commission charged by private platforms) in order to create a fair marketplace for drivers and customers. Unfortunately, the government-mandated fare chart was seen by drivers as not competitive and technical glitches also impeded user uptake. The government has temporarily suspended the platform in order to re-evaluate its techno-institutional design and is planning a relaunch (Mathrubhumi, 2024).

It is well-recognized that such public platform alternatives may need a teething period but public investment in enabling them to take off must be seen as essential for building a fair and free platform economy. With time, a model like Kerala Savari can be embedded in an institutional ecosystem for protection of rights at the workplace around this platform. Special attention must be paid to vulnerable segments of the workforce and their needs (protection from workplace harassment for women workers), recognition of skills of workers (freedom of workers to determine route maps) and macro-economic objectives (insistence on energy efficient vehicles as part of sustainable transportation policy). Public investment in the platform ecosystem and institutional independence in its functioning by involving a sectoral ombudsman or an apex worker organization like a cooperative federation can bring the network scale needed for such alternatives to succeed. In comparison, one-off micro-initiatives, such as a localized platform cooperative without public digital infrastructural backing may struggle in this regard. Further research is needed to study how such models can be built in agriculture, manufacturing, and different services sectors.

In the long term, we need to move towards a new platform society paradigm where the platform mode of production is separated from its embeddedness in capitalism. It must be re-embedded in a feminist economics vision of centering human flourishing, social care and a zoe-centred egalitarianism, where embodied andaffective social life is recognized to be intrinsically and inseparably connected with the rest of life and matter on this planet (Braidotti, 2016).

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