IT for Change

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Ghost in the Machine:
Gender, Human Mediation, and Power in India's Domestic Work Platforms

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About IT for Change

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About the Author

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She previously worked with the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA, India), where she led the design and development of a Women's Enterprise Support System, to enable sustainable and scalable cooperatives owned, managed and run by informal women workers, as well as managed the organisation's research, advocacy, and communications teams. Salonie was a fellow at the Institute for the Cooperative Digital Economy and has worked with the ILO in Geneva. She holds an MSc Gender, Development and Globalisation from LSE and a journalism postgraduate diploma from ACJ (India).

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Abstract

The platformization of domestic work represents a unique phenomenon shaped by the feminization of care, household-based labor, intimate employment relationships, and the digital gender divide. However, emerging platform scholarship has focused predominantly on masculinized sectors such as ride-hailing and delivery, under-theorizing care work and its distinct dynamics.

Addressing this gap, this paper draws on empirical evidence from India's platformized domestic work sector to theorize how mediation reshapes workers' employment experiences. The findings challenge dominant platform disintermediation narratives by documenting the persistence of human agents within digital infrastructures and analyzing their influence on workers' employment access and arrangements.

Three distinct intermediary roles emerge: enabling platform access through 'phygital' infrastructures, mediating employer-worker introductions, and resolving workplace conflicts. These intermediary functions reconfigure power relations within domestic work employment, producing what the paper argues are affirmative rather than transformative effects. In other words, there is a persistence of socio-cultural and economic marginalizations within platformised domestic work, often exacerbated by platforms (through intermediaries).

Through qualitative research grounded in Fraser's social justice framework, the paper foregrounds women workers' lived experiences and standpoints to substantiate these claims. In doing so, the paper advocates for feminist analytical approaches within platform studies.

Keywords:

Platforms, Domestic Work, Intermediaries, Mediation, Feminized Care Work, Gender and Labour, Women's Collectives, Social Justice

Introduction

The gig and platform economy has profoundly reshaped traditional employment structures on a global scale. Characterized by short-term contracts, task-based labor, and the erosion of worker protections, this economy has fundamentally altered the employer-employee dynamic (De Stefano, 2015). Recent scholarship underscores the dual nature of these platforms: while they offer opportunities for employment, visibility, and formalization of work, they also reproduce and, at times, exacerbate existing inequalities, particularly marginalizing women from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Surie & Koduganti, 2016; Gurumurthy et al., 2019). The rise of platformization in domestic work raises critical questions about the nuances of women's participation, their access to these platforms, and the broader implications of technological intermediation on labor dynamics.

In India, mirroring global trends, the 'gigification' of services has become widespread. The domestic work sector, characterized by a high degree of feminization and informality, has also felt the impact of the platform economy (Rathi & Tandon, 2021). However, the integration of platforms in this sector differs significantly from more dominant gig economy sectors like ride-hailing and delivery. A key factor contributing to this divergence is the digital divide, particularly in terms of women's access to digital platforms, compounded by the gendered nature of domestic work. Despite some attempts to digitize the sector, including the recent pilot project–InstaMaids–by Urban Company, the sector remains largely 'ungigified.' Platforms in this space primarily function as brokers between workers and employers, operating outside the actual work arrangements and focusing solely on facilitating connections between the two parties (ibid).

The idea of disintermediation[1], often claimed by platforms (Flanagan, 2018; Woodcock & Graham, 2019; Kasliwal, 2020), quickly unravels upon closer examination of their operations in the domestic work sector. For workers, access to platforms is mediated through human agents who facilitate platform discovery, onboarding, and usage. Despite the critical role of these human agents, research on their function remains limited. Existing literature either focuses on sectors outside domestic work or examines platform models themselves as intermediaries, largely overlooking the human agents who enable platform access for workers. Meanwhile, the digitalization of domestic work is predominantly experienced on the employer (i.e., the platform's customer) side, where platforms cater to paying customers by providing access to worker data, such as their name, religion, age, and so forth, which serves as the platform's primary commodity.

The presence of human agents on domestic work platforms, in the context of fast-paced digitalization of services in India, raises a central question: Why do domestic workers utilize human intermediaries to navigate digital work platforms, and what does this reveal about power and agency within the platform economy?

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1 Disintermediation here refers to the removal of traditional intermediaries (agencies, for example, in the case of domestic work) and platforms' claims of connecting workers directly to the employer

By answering this question, the study seeks to uncover the underlying power dynamics and the extent of agency afforded to workers in an economy that often claims to democratize access to work but may, in practice, reinforce existing hierarchies. My main thesis is that despite platforms' claims of disintermediation, human intermediaries exist and play a critical role in the platform economy, informing the ways in which domestic workers access and experience digital platforms.

There are two important caveats in this paper, which I flag. First, the influence of domestic work platforms on workers is vast, and I only focus on the specific dynamic of intermediaries and workers. This is a smaller portion of the big picture, and should be understood as such. Further, various human agents mediate workers' access to and use of digital platforms. I identify three broad types[2]: platform-based intermediaries, community-based intermediaries (including husbands, children, and friends), and collective-based intermediaries (support structures for workers affiliated with a group, including unions, cooperatives, social enterprises). A recent Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) report presents empirical research on community- and collective-based mediators (Surie et al. 2025). This paper focuses specifically on platform-based intermediaries.

Platform-based intermediaries are human agents employed by platforms, who are responsible for onboarding domestic workers, i.e., creating their online profiles; connecting them with potential employers; and (in cases) helping navigate conflict in the worker-employer relationship. These intermediaries are remote workers and only communicate with workers on call or through text. Because they speak to workers and create their online profiles, they act as 'phygital' touchpoints for platforms by collecting, digitizing, and commodifying workers' data.

The second caveat is that this analysis is grounded in a social justice framework. I approach this inquiry from the perspective of domestic workers, examining how the rise of digital platforms has shaped their socio-economic and political lives. A part of my central question is whether these changes have shifted power and agency to domestic workers—women who have long been denied access to resources, choices, identity, and influence. Fraser's (1995) conceptualization of redistribution, recognition, and representation as fundamental dimensions of social justice provides the philosophical and analytical foundation for this study.

In the next section, I briefly summarize the literature around platforms, intermediaries, and domestic work in India. Following this, I present my empirical findings and discuss them through the selected Fraserian lens.

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2 This classification of intermediaries into three categories - platforms, collectives and communities - is based on my fieldwork wherein I did not speak to other categories of intermediaries, such as private agencies, Churches, and so forth, who continue to exist and influence domestic work access for workers

Literature Review: A Summary of What Existing Research Tells Us

This literature review synthesizes key contributions from existing literature on the gig and platform economy, particularly its intersection with human intermediaries and domestic women workers' experiences. The review critically examines the access and use of the platforms and its implications.

Globally, the rise of platform-based domestic work reflects broader trends in the gig economy, including the increasing commodification of labor and outsourcing of personal services. However, there is significant regional variation in how platforms operate and, subsequently, the experiences of workers. In high-income countries, platforms often emphasize convenience and consumer satisfaction, while in low and middle-income countries, they serve as a critical employment avenue for economically marginalized populations (Berg et al., 2018).

Platform-based domestic work introduces a layer of algorithmic control that shapes workers' experiences. Research highlights how algorithms determine task allocations, workers' ratings, and access to opportunities, often without transparency (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016). Domestic work offered via platforms is understood as "work on-demand apps" that are algorithmically matched to employers, with a contract of service often for one-time or short-term tasks, including wages set by the platforms (De Stefano, 2015); "marketplace platforms" that are algorithmically shortlisted based on the requirements of the employers, where the worker can negotiate their wages and "digital placement agencies" similar to the traditional placement agencies with their operations being digitally mediated and acting with more agency over the worker's wages and grievance redressal (Mewa, 2020).

The platforms act as intermediaries between employers and workers–termed independent contractors / partners / professionals, rather than employees of the platform–who perform tasks and a commission is charged by the platforms upon task completion (Ghosh & Zaidi 2021). In domestic work, platforms charge employers a commission - similar to a finders fee - rather than charging domestic workers (Tandon & Rathi 2021). Fairwork India 2023 report estimates that around 3.03 million platform workers are employed across India's 11 most popular platforms, primarily in cab services, e-commerce and food delivery.

Bonet et al., (2013) describe labor market intermediaries (LMIs) as entities that stand between the individual worker and employer with specific requirements. Tandon and Rathi (2021) interpret platforms themselves as labor market intermediaries for domestic workers, comparing them to traditional intermediaries such as agencies. These intermediaries facilitate employment negotiations between the individual worker and the employer.

Though 'platforms' are recognized as intermediaries (Berg et al. 2018), this research will emphasize the intermediaries as human agents, who enable domestic women workers to access and use digital platforms.

Access to platforms in the gig economy necessitates workers to own an analog or smartphone and possess digital literacy skills to optimally use the platform (Rathi & Tandon, 2021). However, the Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023 by the GSM Association reveals stark inequalities in India—a 11% gender gap in mobile phone ownership and an even more stark 40% gap in Internet access. The report further indicates that only 29% of women have access to smartphones compared to 48% of men, significantly limiting women's participation in the gig economy. This disparity is exacerbated by male members often owning or controlling shared devices. These patterns reflect deeper socio-cultural norms that restrict women's autonomy and hinder their digital inclusion.

As a result, the registration pathways vary: some workers rely on proximate intermediaries such as family members, neighbours, or agents, while others provide personal information to platform-based company representatives, often with no clarity on how their data is used. Self-registration is primarily an option for workers with higher digital literacy. In contrast, those with limited skills depend on platform-organized onboarding camps, which are accessible only in select localities deemed profitable for companies to target (Rathi & Tandon, 2021).

Additionally, depending on the material assets required for the work, the gig platforms often require the workers to own specific assets before their entry or during use, where the purchase and maintenance of these materials/ kits are borne by the workers (van Doorn & Badger, 2020). For instance, a domestic worker using Urban Company must deposit ₹16,000, which is said to cover the cost of joining, training, and cleaning kits that are significant to their work (Kalia, 2023).

Even after registration, workers face hurdles in effectively utilizing digital platforms. The specific mode of engagement and terms of employment–the contracts provided by the platforms–are usually in English, and the platforms rarely explain their content to the workers. The experiences of women workers around the terms of the formal contract vary intra- and inter-sector (Ghosh & Zaidi, 2021).

The platform economy employs a dual strategy of incentives and penalties to keep the workforce productive and disciplined. The incentive may be monetary benefits for targets met, high ratings, work in rush hours, getting recruits for the platform, tipping by customers, or drawing customers to use extra services from the platform. Meanwhile, penalties are usually in the form of wage cuts for not complying with the various rules set by the platform—punctuality, uninformed leaves, low ratings, refusal to accept bookings or assignments, incomplete tasks, or non-completion of a minimum number of daily bookings (Ghosh & Zaidi, 2021).

Low digital literacy and limited smartphone skills hinder workers' ability to navigate platform interfaces, accept assignments, or track payments efficiently. This inefficiency, coupled with algorithmic opacity, perpetuates information asymmetry, leaving workers unaware of broader platform structures or grievance redressal mechanisms (Rathi & Tandon, 2021). Most workers interact solely with a single point of contact for assistance and grievances (Prasanna et al., 2024).

The platform economy perpetuates the hierarchical relationship between the platforms, the employer, and workers by centralizing all controls and data with the platform. This is further compounded by factors such as the lack of regulations, the prevalence of individual contracting, and the lack of dialogue with the workers (Heeks, 2017). Additionally, the constant algorithmic surveillance–such as tracking GPS data, mandating task-related updates, along with the monitoring by male family members–exacerbates women workers' vulnerability, diminishing their agency and reinforcing systemic inequities (Rathi & Tandon, 2021).

Despite the growing body of literature on the platform economy and platform-based work, there remains a significant gap in understanding the role of human intermediaries in facilitating workers, especially women with low digital literacy, to navigate the platforms, particularly during conflicts or concerns. As mentioned at the outset, most literature situates platforms themselves as intermediaries, without unpacking and drawing attention to the human agents who exist within platform systems, particularly in domestic work, and influence worker-employer relationships (Flanagan, 2018; Woodcock & Graham, 2019; Kasliwal, 2020; Tandon & Rathi, 2021; Dewan, 2022). This research seeks to address this gap by investigating how human agents mediate access and usage of platforms for domestic women workers, providing critical insights into an understudied facet of the platform economy.

Finally, as mentioned in the introduction, I use Fraser's understanding of social justice to analyze workers' experiences of platforms. Fraser (1995) argues that redistribution, recognition, and representation are immutable facets of achieving social justice, and although they are not easily pursued simultaneously, each facet is a necessary aspect of social justice. By redistribution, Fraser refers to economic resources, such as income and social protection; recognition, alluding to ideas of culture (such as valorising marginalized identities or stereotypes); and representation as necessitating democratic inclusion and participation where all groups have an equal political voice. Further, Fraser articulates how measures to achieve social justice could be affirmative, achieving some level of justice, without shifting or undoing underlying structures of disempowerment, or transformative, changing fundamental structures that contribute to injustice. I use these framings in my analysis of domestic work platforms.

Methods

Feminist epistemologies, particularly standpoint theory (Harding, 2014; Hartsock, 2019), underpin my research, emphasizing the value of marginalized groups' lived experiences in understanding power and inequality. This approach aligns with my focus on women domestic workers navigating digital platforms, challenging universalized narratives of labor and technology by highlighting intersecting oppressions of gender, class, and caste. My socio-cultural and economic position influenced the research process, prompting reflexivity and a commitment to shifting power toward participants through data collection and writing.

This was reflected in the choice of tools-engaged, semi-structured interviews (n=8)[3] and non-participant observation. I began interviews seeking informed consent, and also with an open-ended question of "tell me something about yourself", enabling the interviewees to decide the area of questions, which I steered thematically.

In terms of sampling, I employed a mixed approach combining purposive and convenience sampling strategies. For platform intermediaries, I used purposive sampling to identify key interlocutors who could provide insights into platform operations and worker relations. The purposive approach was essential given the relatively small and specialized population of intermediaries. I found that platform intermediaries, or staff employed by platforms who mediated worker-employer interactions and work relationships, were primarily women, who had a higher socio-economic status than domestic workers, but lower than employers[4]. Their choice of occupation, as intermediaries, ranged from ease of work given the remote nature of working, need of a job, and work satisfaction in facilitating employment for marginalized domestic workers.

For platformized domestic workers, I utilized convenience sampling due to practical constraints and the vulnerable nature of this population. Many domestic workers face time limitations, mobility restrictions, and concerns about employment security that make random or systematic sampling approaches challenging. Convenience sampling allowed me to access workers through existing networks, community organizations, and platforms themselves, while respecting their circumstances and availability. Given that feminist standpoint theory emphasizes the epistemic privilege of marginalized groups' lived experiences, this approach was methodologically appropriate—the specific selection of individual workers was less critical than ensuring their voices and perspectives were centered in the research.

Further, workers' personal information, names of platforms were anonymized in order to protect both the participants' privacy and safeguard myself[5]. Participants–both for domestic workers and platform-based intermediaries–were offered monetary reimbursements for any costs incurred, as well as compensation for their time and expertise[6]. To access my research participants, I utilized a combination of my professional networks, mainly through my employment with the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)7, and platforms themselves.

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3 Apart from the interviews conducted for this paper, I rely on primary qualitative data collected for my PhD, which included semi-structured in-depth interviews with domestic workers, key informants, intermediaries (platform-based, husbands of workers (n=45); as well as non-participant observation.

4 An exception was when platform owners acted as worker-employer intermediaries–they held a similar socio-economic position as employers of domestic workers

5 Through the paper, I use pseudonyms for all participants indicated with an * next to the name

6 In deciding the amount of compensation, I referred to the State's minimum wage policy, and also gave participants several options in terms of how to receive the money (cash, bank transfer, etc.)

7 SEWA is a national trade union of 3 million informal women workers, across sectors of work and including domestic work (SEWA, n.d). I was employed by SEWA's federation of cooperatives between 2019-2025, supporting worker-owned cooperatives in becoming sustainable, scaling, and adopting digital technologies

I reached out to platform owners over email, which I found on their websites, or through social media platforms, through private messages. All the owners/founders I reached out to were open to being interviewed, and also further linked me to their staff, platform intermediaries, whom I also interviewed.

Main Findings & Discussion

There is much to be said about who intermediaries are and how they come to occupy these roles. However, in order to be concise and precise, I will focus my discussion on the act of intermediation—what is it that platform-based intermediaries do and with what effects on workers? Domestic work platforms, through their intermediaries, play three key roles with respect to domestic workers: (i) facilitating access to platforms and job opportunities, (ii) serving as the first point of contact with employers, and (iii) managing conflicts and aiding in resolution. In this section, I analyze each of these roles from the perspective of domestic workers and with a social justice lens.

Access to Work and Employment

Regarding access, I found that domestic work platforms do not require workers to have internet access or smartphone literacy, allowing even those who are not digitally connected to find jobs through these platforms. Workers typically learned about platforms through referrals from other workers, marketing efforts by platform intermediaries who visited their neighborhoods, or online searches. They are able to self-onboard via a smartphone, onboard through a WhatsApp chat, or call the platform intermediary through a centralized number. Regardless of how they discovered the platform or whether they onboarded independently via a smartphone, all workers were eventually contacted by a platform intermediary. Rohini*–a platform intermediary–explained why:

> At [platform name], those who are looking for jobs, I connect with them and speak to them. First, we create their profile. What kind of job do they want, what location do they want? What hours and what time. We note all this, take their Aadhar and register their profile. Then when they match, when the client [employer] selects their profile, we then tell them that there is a possible job. If they want it, we share the client's number, so that they can speak to the client and join the work.
>
> [Rohini, Maid Operations, age unknown, Bangalore, 2024]

Part of Rohini's job is to create or complete the workers' profiles and pass on potential work to the workers once their profiles were live on the platform. Workers expressed how using platforms facilitated easier access to employers, intermediaries sent across contact details of potential employers, and workers could call them to understand if the offered work suited them. Anita*, Zainab* and Pragya*, who are domestic workers on a platform in New Delhi, shared similar sentiments regarding why they sustained the use of platforms for work.

> There are many challenges [to finding work offline]—there are people who don't care, people who ask for money—like agents who take commission and employers who don't pay all that well. The pay isn't as great [offline]. [In finding work online], we can connect to the employer on our phones, speak to them, and figure things out without stress.
>
> [Anita, domestic worker, 24 years, New Delhi, 2024]

> There is an advantage with looking for work through platforms, that I call them not just once, but twice or thrice. And the madam on the platform tells me if there is work available...
>
> [Pragya, domestic worker, 37 years, New Delhi, 2024]

Zainab, a home-based worker engaged in stitching and dependent on nearby garment factories and middlemen for work, turned to domestic work platforms in search of what she saw as 'easier work' with better pay. Having never worked as a domestic worker before, she used the platform as a gateway into the sector, bypassing the traditional reliance on worker networks to secure employment.

Access to work was also the main selling point used by platform intermediaries to market platforms to workers. In all my interviews with intermediaries, the ease of employment access was mentioned as a primary benefit for domestic workers.

> Earlier, workers had to go door-to-door and ask for work. But [platform name] operates in a way such that they can stay at home and find work. They do not need to go anywhere. So the issues that they faced in going out to look for work, that is not there anymore... they come to your house and ask – is there work? Or they go to the apartment watchman and ask—is there work in these apartments? [Platform name] has stopped this.
>
> Now they also think that if we leave this job, [platform name] will be able to get us other work. This tension they had has gone away that if we get laid off from this job, we will find it very hard to find other work. So if they don't want to do a particular job, they trust [platform name], that we will find them work.
>
> [Rohini]

Rohini also brought up this idea of workers being able to leave undesirable employers, having the platform's assurance that other work would be available. Palak*, who is a platform founder, added to this:

> Domestic workers have the upper hand. They have options. Whatever job roles are available in the area, they get to know about it. And they can choose from the ones which they feel... that will give them more salary, or that will give them more comfort, or is nearer to their house. So there are many factors based on which they can decide. It's not whichever comes up that they have to take... So this is the benefit they are getting - they can judge the work, and they can themselves decide whether they want to opt for that job.
>
> [Palak, platform founder and owner, age unknown, 2024]

My fieldwork also revealed that domestic workers typically use platforms as a supplementary tool for finding employment rather than as their primary means. They continue to rely on more traditional job-seeking methods, including word-of-mouth recommendations from fellow workers, referrals from security guards at housing complexes, and connections with private agencies. This way of use is also slightly different from what we have seen so far in the platform economy, where workers often rely on platforms as their main source of income (ILO 2021). This characteristic is due to several reasons, including: the geographically bound nature of domestic work, the gendered digital divide, and the relatively low presence of domestic work platforms.

From these interview excerpts, both from workers and platform intermediaries, it became clear that domestic work platforms were enabling workers to find jobs, through a process that slightly shifted power to the workers–calling employers from their own house, rather than going to the employers, calling platform intermediaries multiple times for work, entering domestic work from other sectors with more ease, being able to leave bad employers due to the safety net of available work from platforms. Using Fraser's theories, I found that platforms were providing some redistributive changes. However, platforms were not transformative in their manner of shifting power to workers, i.e., platforms did not affect underlying structures of power in their actions.

At the same time, it is imperative to note that through enabling access to work, platforms are consolidating, authenticating, and commodifying workers' data. Platform intermediaries facilitate this data consolidation by building trust with workers through the promise of employment, then collecting and verifying documents, such as Aadhar cards, as well as processing workers' personal information (name, address, marital status, photograph).

> We register them... there are few who don't give their Aadhaar card, because something may have happened and they don't trust. Then we tell them that you can give it to us once you get the job, or have spoken to the employer.
>
> [Swati, platform intermediary, age unknown, 2024]

This verified database, as I mentioned earlier, is the data-driven platform's main commodity - the more worker data they have, the more employers they can service, and the more volume of service fees they can collect. By treating worker data as a commodity, platforms shift their core value proposition from labor facilitation to data monetization, i.e., their profits come from selling workers' data to the employer. Further, platforms benefit from a growing worker database, regardless of whether those workers actually secure long-term, stable employment. This model treats workers as data points rather than individuals with agency and needs.

By consolidating verified databases, platforms create a mechanism of surveillance over workers, which could later be used to track, monitor, or even penalize them. This kind of data centralization can reinforce asymmetrical control over workers, where platforms and employers gain more visibility into workers' identities and employment histories, while workers remain largely powerless over how their data is used.

Some platforms use workers' identification documents to carry out background criminal checks, and workers are listed as 'verified' on platform interfaces. This is seemingly to assure employers that the platform maintains a standard of 'quality' in their database. The verification system operates on a presumption of guilt, treating workers as potential threats who must prove their trustworthiness rather than individuals deserving of basic professional respect. This approach perpetuates harmful stereotypes about domestic workers—particularly women and marginalized communities—who are already subject to societal prejudices about their character and intentions. By institutionalizing suspicion through verification, platforms legitimize and amplify these discriminatory assumptions.

Moreover, this system creates an asymmetrical power dynamic that further entrenches workers' vulnerabilities. While workers must submit to invasive scrutiny and prove their worthiness, employers face no equivalent verification requirements. This imbalance reinforces the notion that domestic work is inherently suspect and that those who perform it occupy a lower social and professional status. The 'verified' badge, rather than empowering workers, becomes a marker of their subordinate position—a digital scarlet letter that signals they have been deemed 'safe' for employment by those in positions of authority. Therefore, while they may be facilitating some immediate redistributive justice from the workers' perspective, platforms are also extracting value from workers, reifying, and exacerbating existing power dynamics.

First Point of Contact with Employers

The second role intermediaries play is serving at the point of contact between workers and employers. Once workers are on the platform, intermediaries reach out to workers, informing them of available work. Workers are sent contact information for employers, or vice versa, depending on the platform's model. I find that intermediaries are fairly persistent in asking workers to call potential employers, since the platform's fee depends on this. At times, intermediaries organize a conference call with the worker and employer, as well as the intermediary. However, this facilitation by the intermediary is limited–platforms do not intervene in work and employment negotiations, nor do they ensure that a minimum level of facilities are available to workers–toilets, a place to rest, water, and so forth. While platforms sometimes offer recommendations on pay scales, these are not enforced.

Further, I found employers demanding workers of specific religion and caste backgrounds, rejecting those who were deemed undesirable–often Muslim women or women from caste-oppressed communities. This selection of workers is based on systemic ideas, often caste-based, and literature on domestic work in India has indicated how employers do not select workers based on their skill or experience, as much as they do based on who the worker is–her caste, religion, marital status, and other characteristics (Neetha, 2009). The role of intermediaries here is to sort through their database and offer employers specific workers' information, thereby enabling discriminatory selection processes that disadvantage marginalized workers. In doing so, intermediaries reified the devaluation of socio-cultural traits, enabling social injustices of recognition. Empirically, this was also different from other sectors of work, since these were not algorithmic decisions, but rather made by these human intermediaries. Insofar, intermediaries play the role of a gatekeeper, and their own social location and internalised biases inform which workers they link to work.

In some cases, platform intermediaries accompanied workers to their initial meeting with employers. Their presence offered workers a sense of security, particularly as they entered a private household with little knowledge of what to expect and from a position of economic and social vulnerability. However, this was rare, and most of the workers I interviewed went to their first meetings alone.

Following the initial contact between workers and employers, intermediaries played a role in managing outcomes. They systematically followed up with both parties to assess whether the meeting had been successful and whether employment would proceed. When matches resulted in hiring, intermediaries promptly updated workers' online profiles to reflect their unavailability, maintaining the platform's accuracy and efficiency in terms of database management.

From the workers' standpoint, intermediaries served as vital trust-builders. They provided essential reassurance about the platform's legitimacy and demonstrated its tangible benefits to potential workers. This "phygital" approach—combining digital infrastructure with human touchpoints—proved particularly valuable for women domestic workers, helping to bridge the gender digital divide while simultaneously expanding the platform's worker database. The personal interaction offered by intermediaries created a sense of security and accessibility that purely digital platforms often lack.

Conflict Resolution

The final role of platform intermediaries, made clear through my fieldwork, was that of conflict resolution between workers and employers. From the analysis of access and first contact, it is already clear that platform intermediaries are not neutral actors. They operate within socially structured environments that shape their interactions with workers. Their own social positions, biases, and assumptions influence how they mediate between workers and platforms, shaping workers' experiences. This is a particularly important consideration when analyzing the conflict resolution role of platform intermediaries.

The nature of mediation, or the tone of the intermediary, offers an insight into how platforms view domestic workers and their labor. By this, I mean that employers remain the main revenue channel for domestic work platforms; therefore, appeasing their paying customers (employers) is a priority even during conflict resolution processes. Often, it is the worker who is asked to compromise her position during a conflict, and 'adjust' to the employer's need or demand. The intermediary's role is to push the worker towards this compromise–Rohini articulated this to me:

> "We tell them...if you go to another household, you'll have to face things there as well, so you should try to connect with the client [employer], or do things their particular way...if you absolutely cannot, you cannot make it work, at all, then you can leave the job. This is what we say... If there is such a situation, we can't gauge it from here. That is why they must try and understand first.
>
> [Rohini]

This employer-oriented form of reconciliation, particularly given in the domestic work context where power is already skewed towards the employer, platforms do not seem to be shifting facets of social justice. Rather, they seem to be reinforcing the injustices, particularly those of recognition, i.e., pushing and maintaining workers' lower socio-cultural status, identity in the employment relationship, and the market more broadly.

Platform intermediaries claimed to engage in 'soft advocacy'—gently encouraging employers to provide better workplace conditions or improved terms of employment, rather than enforcing any terms or conditions. In some cases, they blacklisted abusive employers. I found that these efforts did lead to some improvements in working conditions. However, soft advocacy was not rooted in a rights-based or justice-driven perspective. Workers were not explicitly recognized as legitimate workers, as minimum labor standards were neither ensured nor enforced. Platforms themselves did not establish contracts or mandate social protections, either directly or through employers. Instead, soft advocacy was driven more by a sense of charity toward poor women than by a commitment to workers' rights.

In some cases—particularly when a platform was smaller or in its early stages, before hiring dedicated staff—I found that platform owners or founders themselves took on the role of intermediaries. In these instances, the intermediary's social location was often similar to that of employers. This dynamic significantly shifted power toward workers during conflict resolution, as they now had an advocate directly intervening in the employment relationship and from a position of relatively high power. Vishakha*, the founder of a now-defunct platform, described this dynamic during our interview:

> This 'how dare you say no to me' was a very difficult thing for us to manage, and actually that ended up becoming my full-time job. All I did was...a large part...because my staff was basically also coming from, say, a middle-class background, servicing these elite homes. Even there was a power dynamic that existed even with the staff. It's only when I got onto the call, was that power dynamic equalized, you know. I spoke in English, I would speak their language, I would say I'm really sorry, this is the reason...so the power imbalance is balanced essentially just by me.
>
> [Vishakha, platform owner, age unknown, 2024]

This shift, along with the broader role of intermediaries, led to some affirmative aspects of redistribution, recognition, and representation. However, once the intermediary was removed, and in structural terms, the conditions of platformized domestic work remained unchanged.

To conclude this section, I offer an analysis and directions for future research. Domestic work platforms in India have not yet undergone full-scale 'gigification' in their business models. As a result, workers have not experienced the extreme precarity and control seen in other platformized sectors. However, this may not last. Urban Company's recent pilot of gig-based 'InstaMaids', which offers employers access to domestic workers in '15 minutes' is a concerning shift in the sector, through which the platform is reducing workers to dispensable commodities and care work to transactional, rather than intimate and relational.

As such platform models scale, and with a potential influx of capital, they may introduce algorithmic management, stricter rating systems, and more precarious work arrangements, reducing workers' autonomy while increasing their dependence on platform-controlled job allocation. Experiences from platforms like SweepSouth in South Africa suggest that domestic work platforms can evolve into mechanisms of worker exploitation and surveillance over time (Mutandiro 2024). Comparative research between the contexts of India and South Africa, given the similarities in histories, could be particularly useful. Similar trends could emerge in India as platforms seek to maximize efficiency and profits, shifting risks onto workers while consolidating control over job access and employment conditions. Without regulatory safeguards or worker-led interventions, platformization may deepen vulnerabilities rather than improve work opportunities for domestic workers.

Conclusion

Platformized domestic workers are affected to a high degree by the presence of human intermediaries on work platforms. Through their three main roles-access to platforms and work, first contact with employers, and conflict resolutions-intermediaries can and are informing workers' experiences of employment, particularly when analyzed from the perspective of social justice. However, platform intermediation is inherently limited—while platforms create a structured space for job-seeking, the primary and most enduring relationship remains between the worker and the employer, setting constraints on how much and what manner of mediation can occur.

Platforms operate in a highly capitalist context, with a singular goal of profit maximisation. As venture capital funding starts to flow into the sector, this tendency of growth at the expense of workers will, perhaps, become more evident. For now, some platform owners and intermediaries did suggest that their motivation to build the platform came from a sense of charity or 'helping' disempowered domestic workers find decent work. However two things were still true - one, that the sentiment maintained a highly differentiated power model between workers, employers and platforms; and two, the feeling of charity did not prevent the commodification of workers' data for revenue generation for the platform and driving higher profits for the owners. I therefore contend that regardless of their motivations, platforms benefited from the power dynamics that disenfranchised workers, and they further employed their 'goodwill' to gather and use workers' data for their own growth. For these reasons, platforms could perhaps have some degree of affirmative function in achieving social justice for workers, but would never transform power relationships between workers and employers in their existing form.

Here, I find that alternative employment models, such as cooperatives and other worker-owned democratic collectives, have the potential to shift power and agency to workers in a transformative way (Hiriyur 2022). By positioning themselves within the platform economy, cooperatives can bypass traditional intermediaries, as well as new forms of intermediation through platforms. Through this, democratic collectives have the potential to reconfigure the domestic work sector, allowing workers to themselves become intermediaries, on their own terms.

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