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ACCESS, MOTIVATION AND EMPOWERMENT

A CASE STUDY OF

FEMALE FOOD DELIVERY WORKERS

IN KERALA, INDIA

UNNIMAYA U G

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Access, Motivation and Empowerment: A Case Study of Female Food Delivery Workers in Kerala, India

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Abstract

This study examines the determinants and empowerment outcomes of women's participation in platform-based delivery gig work in Kerala, India. Drawing on Kabeer's empowerment framework and self-determination theory (SDT), it examines how access to resources, intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and structural constraints influence women's experiences in platform delivery gig work. The case study is based on survey data from 43 female gig workers, as well as in-depth qualitative interviews. Descriptive statistics reveal that younger, educated women consider gig work as a part-time occupation, whereas older, married and women who are the primary earners of the household consider it as a primary occupation. Access to smartphones and two-wheeler vehicles is a key entry barrier. This study highlights how perceived autonomy coexists with algorithmic control and structural constraints. It concludes that gig work may offer short-term empowerment for women, but its transformative potential depends on broader institutional support and policy intervention.

Keywords

platform delivery gig work, empowerment, motivation, female labour force participation, gender divide, Kerala

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Introduction

Goldin (1994) in her acclaimed study on the relationship between economic development and female labour force participation illustrates how women's participation in the labour market exhibits a U-shaped relation with respect to economic development. The 'U-shape' is indicative of how the shift from agriculture to industry corresponds to a decline in female labour force participation, owing to a rise in household income and prevalence of rigid gender norms. In contrast, the shift from manufacturing to the service sector corresponds to an increase in female labour participation, owing to increased opportunities, relaxation in gender norms and women's increased access to education. India in its post-reform phase had experienced a rapid shift from an agrarian to service-oriented economy. However, female labour force participation remains among the lowest globally (Deshpande & Kabeer, 2024). According to the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation's Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) data (2024), the female labour force participation rate stands at 41.7%, whereas that of men is 78.8% in 2023-24. Domestic care duties (43%) and enrolment in educational institutions (37.94%) are cited as the major reasons for women abstaining from the labour market according to the report. Numerous studies have been concerned with this historically low female participation in the labour force (Afridi et al., 2017; Deshpande & Kabeer, 2024). This study contributes to this literature by focusing on a specific segment of urban self-employed women in the service sector – the emerging location-based delivery gig work.

The disruption of the Fordist order in the late 1970s has led to a global spread of informality, precarious job relations and flexibility in managing the workforce (Betti & Borris, 2022). Flexible, white-collar service sector jobs align with the needs of women who have to balance their socially dictated care duties with a career (Betti & Borris, 2022). Although standard employment relations were never

the norm for Global South economies, the shift towards service sector-centred economic growth accentuated the spread of this employment relation in India as well.

Gig work, which is described as digitally mediated service delivery work, is the latest manifestation of the atypical or fissured workplace with blurred organisational boundaries (Rani & Furrer, 2021). Gig work, a by-product of the exponential growth of Information Technology and Communication (ITC), is a fast-growing economy in India. According to NITI Aayog (2022), 77 lakh workers, comprising 2.6% of the non-farm workforce or 1.5% of the total workforce, are engaged in platform-based gig work.

The popularity of low-income service delivery gig work gained in India is multifaceted. As gig work is a web-/platform-based or physical service delivery task, it is often hailed for its flexibility and autonomy by offering flexibility in choosing work hours and work amount. Workers have autonomy in the sense that they have ownership over the work resources and how they manage their work. The digital platforms act as the intermediaries in this work relationship. The platforms facilitate these features by maintaining the position that those hired to perform their last-mile service delivery activities are called delivery agents or delivery partners, but not workers. This status of independent contractors instead of employees means that platforms take minimal responsibility over who gets hired, how they arrange the capital required for the work and how they perform the work. The absence of selection bias and ease of arrangement of capital required for the job have made gig work a popular choice of occupation for Indians, especially for its young male population (NCAER, 2023).

Although the core features and workers' experience of service delivery gig work are largely consistent across India (Fairwork, 2022, 2023), this study locates it in Kerala's urban sphere. Kerala is an Indian state located on the southwestern coast of India. It is relatively a high-income state with a state average per capita income of 1.4 times that of the country's average (Government of Kerala,

2025). Its human development performance is compatible with that of the European countries with its large historic to present-day investment in health and education. According to the 2011 Census of India, Kerala's population of 3.3 crores comprises 48% males and 52% females. The state records a high literacy rate of approximately 90%, with minimal gender disparity – 96.02% for men and 91.98% for women. Kerala also records a remarkable sex ratio of 1,084 females per 1,000 males, significantly above the national average of 943, but its long unaddressed concerns are the surprisingly low female labour force participation and gender wage disparity. Female labour force participation is 33.4% compared to 59.1% for men, and the casual labour wage is only about half the wages earned by men in Kerala (Government of Kerala, 2025). Examining the determinants of female labour force participation in platform delivery gig work within the unique socio-economic context of Kerala will be an important addition to the growing body of literature on gig work from the Global South. With this background, this study focuses on examining the involvement of women in the gig economy, especially in platform-based delivery jobs, and aims to explore the specific challenges and barriers they encounter with the following specific objectives:

1. To identify the socio-economic factors that influence women's entry into delivery gig work in urban Kerala
2. To examine the role of intrinsic (e.g. autonomy and flexibility) and extrinsic (e.g. financial incentives) motivations in deciding women's participation in delivery gig work
3. To assess the extent to which platform delivery gig work enhances women's economic agency and empowerment.

Gig Work: Definition, Characteristics and Female Labour Participation – Literature Review

The gig economy has been conceptualised as a form of ‘crowd capitalism’, where individuals function as both capital owners and self-employed workers (Sundararajan, 2018). One of its main attractions is the promise of autonomy, marketed by platform management as the ability to have a flexible work schedule, location independence and control over workload (Ravenelle, 2019). The narrative of ‘being your own boss’ particularly appeals to those seeking improved work-life balance (Rani et al., 2022).

However, numerous scholars challenge the autonomy promised by gig platforms, citing algorithmic surveillance, time pressure and precarious working conditions as significant barriers to worker independence (Altenried, 2019; Anwar & Graham, 2021; De Ruyter et al., 2018; Wood et al., 2019). Despite the perception of flexibility, studies indicate that gig work is often highly controlled through rating systems, automated performance evaluations and unpredictable pay structures, ultimately limiting worker agency and stability.

Research on female participation in the gig economy highlights several structural barriers that limit women’s access to platform-mediated work. Athreya (2021) identifies three primary constraints: 1) the gender digital gap, 2) exposure to sexual harassment and 3) the burden of unpaid care work. Bailur (2020) further emphasises how the digital divide restricts women’s ability to acquire the necessary tools and skills to engage in gig work, effectively excluding them from these employment opportunities.

Instead, some scholars argue that the gig economy can serve as a form of agency building for women, particularly for those with no prior experience in paid employment. Unni (2023) considers the sharing economy – a subset of gig work that enables small-scale entrepreneurship through platform mediation – as a potential avenue for women’s empowerment. Similarly, Centeno Maya et al.

(2022), in a comparative study of male and female food delivery workers in Mexico City, highlight how caregiving responsibilities restrict women's ability to work during peak hours and weekends, limiting their earning potential in comparison with men. These findings suggest that although gig work offers new employment opportunities for women, systemic gendered constraints continue to shape their labour market participation.

Theoretical Framework

This study adapts multiple theoretical perspectives to understand the determinants as well as the experience of female labour participation in delivery gig work. The proposed framework employs Kabeer's (1999) seminal work on empowerment in understanding whether participating in delivery gig work is agency-enhancing or not for women in India. The study combines this framework with self-determination theory (SDT) to study the motivation behind wanting to work in delivery gig work for the limited number of women who are currently employed in this line of work.

Empowerment, Economic Agency and Gig Work

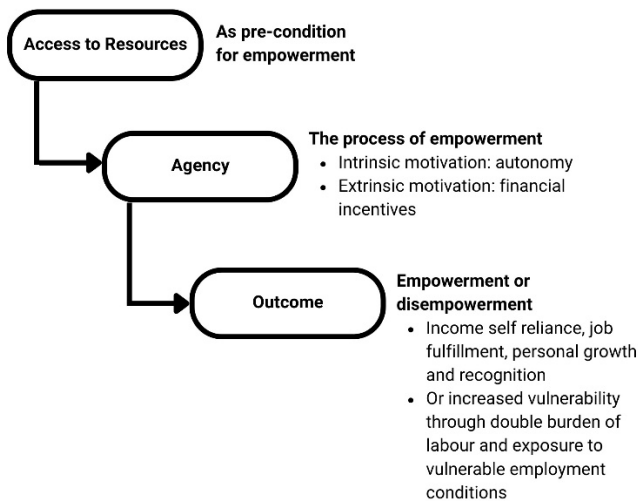
Kabeer defines empowerment as a process where resources (pre-conditions), agency (processes) and achievements (outcomes) act as the process by which those denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such ability (Kabeer, 1999). Kabeer (2005) asserts that empowerment extends beyond mere access to resources; it also involves the agency to effectively use those resources and attain desired outcomes. Here, empowerment is not perceived as a static achievement but as a process through which an individual attains autonomy.

Self-Determination Theory: Motivations as the Driving Force

SDT over the years has emerged as a critical theory in motivation research (Khoja et al., 2024). It has been used extensively in studies focusing on employee motivation. SDT examines how basic psychological needs such as autonomy, competency and relatedness act as intrinsic motivational forces in determining employee job satisfaction, motivation and job performance (Jabagi et al., 2021; Ryan & Deci., 2000). Autonomy as a motivating force is of particular importance for women’s economic empowerment. The ability to handle economic instruments and make decisions regarding their work choices are agency-building for women in domestic and economic spheres.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1: Motivation and Empowerment Framework



Source: Developed by the author

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework developed by incorporating SDT and empowerment framework. In the linear yet interconnected model of empowerment, access to resources acts as the pre-condition for empowerment. Access to crucial resources such as smartphones, two-wheeler vehicles and education and training to manage the demands of the work acts as pre-conditions to enter gig work. Agency refers to the capacity to make choices and act upon them. In SDT, motivation to work can be either intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivations are psychological. The feeling of autonomy, job satisfaction, etc., can act as the intrinsic motivation to choose work. Extrinsic motivations are external motivations such as financial pressure, which motivate workers to choose work. In the framework, agency, facilitated by these motivations, acts as the mediating link between access and outcome. The final component in the framework is the outcome, representing the result of the interaction between access and agency. The result can be either positive – an increase in income, self-reliance, sense of fulfilment and personal growth or disempowerment due to the double burden of work and exposure to vulnerable employment conditions.

Data and Methods

Owing to the limited number and difficulty in reaching out to female delivery gig workers, this study is designed as a case study comprising quantitative and qualitative approaches. The study involves a semi-structured interview of 43 female delivery gig workers. The sample is collected from two cities in Kerala: Thiruvananthapuram and Kochi.

The study used a semi-structured questionnaire with both open-ended and close-ended questions. Additionally, in-depth interviews with four participants were conducted to complement the information collected. Qualitative data provided deeper insights into how women experience autonomy in a precarious work environment like gig work.

Socio-Economic Characteristics of the Sample

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of the sample

Variable	Gig Work is Primary (n, %)	Gig Work is Not Primary (n, %)	p-value
Age (years)			0.000
15–20	0 (0.0)	2 (100.0)	
21–25	4 (18.2)	18 (81.8)	
26–30	0 (0.0)	5 (100.0)	
31–35	0 (0.0)	3 (100.0)	
36–40	5 (83.3)	1 (16.7)	
41–45	3 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	
46–50	2 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	
Religion			0.170
Hindu	9 (45.0)	11 (55.0)	
Muslim	2 (14.3)	12 (85.7)	
Christian	3 (33.3)	6 (66.7)	
Caste			0.970
General	2 (28.6)	5 (71.4)	
OBC	9 (33.3)	18 (66.7)	
SC/ST	3 (33.3)	6 (66.7)	
Education			0.034
High School	3 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	
Higher Secondary	2 (33.3)	4 (66.7)	
Graduate/Pursuing Graduation	9 (26.5)	25 (73.5)	
Household Annual Income (INR)			0.386
< 1,00,000	3 (37.5)	5 (62.5)	
1,00,000–2,00,000	5 (50.0)	5 (50.0)	
2,00,000–3,00,000	2 (40.0)	3 (60.0)	
3,00,000–4,00,000	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	
> 4,00,000	4 (20.0)	16 (80.0)	
Marital Status			0.001
Married	10 (62.5)	6 (37.5)	
Unmarried	4 (14.8)	23 (85.2)	
Breadwinner of the Family			0.035
Yes	6 (60.0)	4 (40.0)	
No	8 (24.2)	25 (75.8)	
Years Doing Gig Work			0.031
Less than six months	2 (14.3)	12 (85.7)	

Variable	Gig Work is Primary (n, %)	Gig Work is Not Primary (n, %)	p-value
Six–twelve months	3 (21.4)	11 (78.6)	
1–2 years	8 (57.1)	6 (42.9)	
2–3 years	1 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	
Employed Prior to Gig Work			0.159
Yes	5 (22.7)	17 (77.3)	
No	9 (42.9)	12 (57.1)	
Daily Wage from Gig Work (INR)			0.023
200–400	0 (0.0)	12 (100.0)	
400–600	3 (50.0)	3 (50.0)	
600–800	2 (66.7)	1 (33.3)	
800–1000	7 (53.8)	6 (46.2)	
1000 above	2 (22.2)	7 (77.8)	

Source: Calculated from primary data

Table 1 provides descriptive statistics comparing the socio-demographic details of workers who chose gig work as their primary occupation and those who consider it as a supplementary income source. Those workers who are currently enrolled in academic institutions are also categorised under the second category. Age emerged as a significant variable ($p = 0.000$), with those aged 36 and above significantly more likely to identify gig work as their primary occupation. Although the sample is dominated by younger women below the age of 30 (58%), the majority of them chose gig work as a supplementary source of income. Education level also showed a significant association ($p = 0.034$). All the women with only high school education considered gig work as their primary occupation, in contrast to just 26.5% of those with graduate-level education or above. Marital status ($p = 0.001$) and breadwinner status ($p = 0.035$) also demonstrated strong associations when choosing gig work as a primary or secondary source of employment. Married women and women who are breadwinners of their families choose gig work as their primary source of employment in the

sample. It highlights how gig work is an important source of income for those with household responsibilities and economic necessities to take care of. Years spent in gig work ($p = 0.031$) also emerged as significant, where those with longer experience (1–3 years) were more likely to treat gig work as primary employment.

The daily wage earned from gig work was another statistically significant factor ($p = 0.023$), where respondents earning moderate to high wages (₹600–₹1000/day) were more likely to classify gig work as their main occupation, whereas none of the lowest earners (₹200–₹400/day) did so. Interestingly, variables such as religion, caste, household income status and prior employment status showed no significant association with occupational status. This suggests that the decision to engage in gig work full time is shaped more by individual responsibilities, economic necessity and actual returns from gig work, rather than broader social identity markers or prior work history.

Results and Discussion

Access to Resources as a Pre-Condition for Empowerment

The pre-condition to empowerment is access to critical resources (Kabeer, 1999). Gig work by design requires workers to bring in the capital that is necessary for undertaking the job. Delivery gig work requires capital such as a smartphone for platform management, a two-wheeler vehicle for order delivery and a bank account for wage transfer.

Table 2: Ownership of necessary capital for work n (%)

Items owned	Owned before joining gig work n (%)	Bought/ arranged for joining gig work n (%)
Smartphone	36 (83.7)	07 (16.3)
Two-Wheeler	34 (79.1)	09 (20.9)
Bank Account	43 (100.0)	0 (0.0)

Source: Primary data

Table 2 provides details on the ownership of the necessary capital required for gig work. The result implies that the majority of workers had owned the necessary before joining gig work. The respondents who had to arrange smartphones for their jobs (16%) bought the phone either through borrowings or through their own money. The respondents who did not have two-wheelers (21%) arranged it through their male relatives by borrowing either their husband's, brother's or cousin's two-wheeler. This implies that although there have been attempts to invest money in a less expensive capital like a smartphone, the case is not the same for an expensive item like a two-wheeler.

A respondent shared, 'I just finished my diploma. I was sitting at home preparing for competitive exams. I had so much free time at hand. I have a scooter. So, one day I impulsively registered for Zomato' (Nimmi, 24 years old). This expression of 'impulsivity' highlights how access to essential resources such as a personal vehicle can make entry into gig work seem effortless. However, the case is not the same for the majority of women in India. According to the National Family Health Survey-5 data (2019–2021), only one-third of the women (33%) in India have ever used the Internet, whereas for men it is more than half (57%). Only 26% of Indian women own a smartphone compared to 49% of men. Although targeted policy efforts have increased bank account holdings for women, 32% of women's bank accounts are inactive, the highest in

the world. Women constituted only 6.3% of driving licenses issued, and they remain under-represented as drivers and two-wheeler owners (Shah, 2025).

Limited asset ownership, gendered digital divides and social norms that restrict women's mobility act as structural barriers that limit women's ability to participate in the labour market, even in a relatively accessible form of employment like delivery gig work.

Agency (the Process)

The themes that emerged from the semi-structured interview with respect to the process of empowerment are autonomy, workplace safety and flexibility. The themes offer a nuanced understanding of how gig work offers greater control over work processes while shifting the risk burden entirely onto the workers. The flexibility gig work is known for also presenting opportunities and challenges for balancing personal and professional demands.

Autonomy in Gig Work

Autonomy in work is often associated with the worker's authority over the work content and working conditions (Deci et al., 2017; Van den Broeck et al., 2010). In gig work, the absence of micromanagement and physical supervision offers a sense of autonomy to workers, which is of significance to women who had past experience with vulnerable occupational surveillance. Mariyam, a 47-year-old gig worker, illustrates this shift:

'I used to work as a house help and then as a sales girl in a textile shop. I had to endure constant surveillance from my employers in both jobs. I am more in control of my work now. I have flexibility. I don't mind algorithm managing my work.'

Another worker, Rajeswari, 49 years old, stated:

‘I am my own boss in this job. I can work when I want, I can’t imagine going back to a desk job after this.’

Testimonies of this nature illustrate how gig work fosters a sense of autonomy for many women. Although the nature of this autonomy will be critically examined in the later sessions, it is imperative to acknowledge how autonomy acts as a motivation for work, in the gig work context, aligning with the core component of intrinsic motivation in SDT.

Workplace Safety Challenges

Although gig work offers autonomy, it also places the burden of workplace safety on the individual worker. Female gig workers, in particular, face safety concerns, especially when navigating public spaces. Younger workers reported instances of harassment, underscoring the gendered risks of gig work:

‘Men stare a lot while I’m on the road. It makes me uncomfortable.’ — Ruksana, 22 years old.

‘I’ve been chased and catcalled at times. I don’t care much now—male egos get hurt when they see we’re better drivers.’ — Angel, 28 years old.

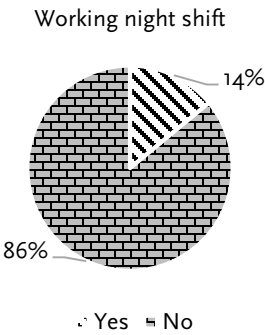
Despite a generally positive public attitude towards female gig workers in urban settings, these experiences highlight the need for enhanced safety measures. Delivery platforms have introduced policies to address these concerns, such as relaxing night-shift requirements for female workers to qualify for daily incentives. Delivery platforms have attempted to address safety concerns by providing relaxation in the night-time shift requirements for female workers to earn daily incentives. Incentive in the gig work context is the additional wage a worker is entitled to, over and above the piece rate wage per order, upon completion of the platform’s daily target.

In the SDT framework, this incentive can be classified as external motivation to do the job. Workers set incentives as targets they need to complete. Usually, to earn incentive pay beyond the base piece-rate wages, full-day workers are required to work during two peak periods – lunch and dinner hours. For female employees, this expectation has been limited to only one shift, which is the lunch hours.

Flexibility and Night-Shift Preferences

The flexibility offered by gig work is identified as employee-driven flexibility (Hunt & Samman, 2019). Workers have the choice to tailor their schedules to personal needs, which is a significant advantage over traditional employment models. A major criticism of employee-driven flexibility in work is the intensification of work and overtime workload. The flexibility in gig work is a trade-off between earnings and work hours. Flexibility in work is often seen as a way to support women’s participation in the labour force, especially since unpaid care workload heavily falls on women’s shoulders. However, safety concerns limit the extent to which women can fully leverage this flexibility, particularly for night shifts.

Figure 2: Percentage of respondents who worked during the night shift



Source: Primary data

Although working the night shift is not mandatory, 14% of the sample chose to work the night shift (Figure 2). These are workers who are concentrated in the information technology (IT) hubs in Kochi and Trivandrum where nightlife is more active and safer.

‘I prefer working the night shift. I don’t have to ride scooters through the scorching sun and risk my health to fatigue and other issues.’ — Jasmine, 29 years old.

‘Night shift is convenient. I can manage my household chores in the morning and then start working in the evening.’ — Sheela, 38 years old.

If institutional factors are favourable, night shift work has the potential to aid female workers’ earning potential and maximum use of the flexibility gig work is known for. Unfortunately, this is not the case. Workplace safety remains a concern, which the gig platform also acknowledges with its relaxation of night shift work for women. Hence, the practical aspect of flexible work for women is conditional on the institutional settings and burden of housework they have to manage.

Achievement/Outcome – Empowerment in a Precarious Working Relation

The extent to which workers were able to meet their psychological and financial well-being through gig work is what can be considered as achievement or empowerment in this study. The intrinsic motivations which operate in gig work in the form of autonomy and flexibility were influential for women to join gig work. Although for younger women the flexibility was beneficial in balancing their academics or primary occupation along with gig work, for older women who have household responsibilities to manage, it allowed them to balance paid work with household work. Initiatives from the

platform side such as offering menstrual leave and relaxation in the night shift were also welcome steps in this direction.

Financial Independence as Empowerment

The extent of financial independence gig work facilitates is a crucial measure of empowerment in the household domain. The income from gig work is spent on debt clearance, savings and sustenance. For the younger cohort in the sample, delivery gig work has been their first step to financial autonomy.

‘I came to Kochi from Palakkad to pursue my dream of making it to the Kerala Women’s Cricket team. Because of gig work only I can sustain myself in this City.’ — Rachel, 26 years old.

‘I might not continue doing this job once my marriage is fixed. But I am immensely proud that I bought a gold chain for my mother from income earned through gig work.’ — Nimmy, 23 years old.

Work–Life Balance and Flexibility

The flexibility inherent in gig work has the potential to facilitate a balanced professional and personal life for women, but more often than not, flexibility results in a double burden of work and women accommodating their professional responsibilities within the margins of their household duties. Platform initiatives, such as menstrual leave and relaxed night-shift requirements for female workers, are devised to address the gendered needs. These measures are welcome steps in accommodating female labourers. However, accommodating gig work’s flexibility around the existing social norms and other institutional rigidities means that this supposed new form of employment’s empowerment potential in the market domain is subjected to how well it complies with the existing institutional norms.

Gendered Institutional Discrimination

Gendered institutional discrimination manifests in the structural barriers female gig workers face, particularly concerning safety and access to better earning opportunities. Although platforms have introduced measures such as relaxed night shift requirements to enhance safety, lack of access to one of the peak demand hours (dinner time) as far as food delivery work is concerned means that their piece-rate earning potential is compromised in comparison with male workers. The autonomous, flexible gig work presents a trade-off on safety vs earnings to women in this scenario. The absence of robust institutional support such as safer public spaces or comprehensive safety protocols is a challenge policymakers have to address if they look at delivery gig work to increase female labour participation.

Social norms such as the societal expectation that women are the primary custodians of household responsibilities limit women's ability to fully capitalise on gig work's flexibility. Older women, in particular, juggle domestic duties with gig work, which can constrain their earning potential and reinforce traditional gender roles. These dynamics highlight how gendered institutional discrimination shapes the gig economy, creating unequal opportunities for women compared to their male counterparts.

Precarious Work and Algorithmic Control

Despite its benefits, gig work is characterised by precarity, driven by algorithmic management and platform policies. Platforms employ strategies such as penalties, account suspensions and manipulated piece-rate pay systems to encourage overworking, which can undermine the autonomy workers value (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). Incentive pay systems and flexible hours, while seeming employee-friendly, function as labour control mechanisms that tie financial security to platform compliance (Wu et al., 2019). This creates a tension between autonomy and precarity, as workers must often sacrifice flexibility to secure subsistence wages,

particularly when gig work is their sole income source (Kalleberg, 2003).

Participants in this study, however, largely view gig work as a temporary arrangement to achieve short-term goals, such as debt repayment or financial support until marriage. Responses like ‘I’ll work until my debt is paid off’ or ‘I’ll continue until I get married’ reflect this transient perspective, which mitigates some concerns about precarity.

Conclusion

The study attempted to explore the factors that determine women’s participation in delivery gig work and the extent of autonomy and empowerment women in delivery gig work experienced in the two major urban centres in Kerala, India. Drawing on Kabeer’s empowerment framework and SDT, the research examined how access to resources, motivational drivers and the nature of gig work shape women’s labour force participation in an atypical low-income, semi-skilled employment relationship like delivery gig work in the global south.

The findings indicate that access to essential resources such as smartphones, two-wheelers and active bank accounts serves as a crucial precondition for women’s entry into delivery gig work. Although some respondents owned these assets, others relied on borrowing from male relatives, underlining how household dynamics and gendered access to resources continue to shape women’s economic agency.

A key insight from the study is that autonomy, a crucial component of intrinsic motivation in SDT, operates in the platform delivery gig work in the form of flexible work hours, work autonomy and the absence of constant physical supervision. It is a major driver of participation for both younger women balancing academic commitments and older women managing care responsibilities in their household. Despite the presence of algorithmic surveillance

and control, participants reported a strong sense of independence in gig work compared to traditional jobs. This perception of autonomy contributed significantly to intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction.

The study also reveals that gig work is not immune to the structural limitations women have to endure. Institutional constraints, including safety concerns, non-inclusive resting and recreational spaces and gendered social expectations, continue to restrict women from maximising the potential of flexibility and income earning promised by gig platforms. Although some women expressed satisfaction with the current incentive structures, others indicated that more supportive infrastructure in terms of safety and resting area would enable greater participation and income security.

To sum it up on the empowerment achieved, the study found that for most participants, gig work was not necessarily a long-term career path but a transient one, intended to achieve their short-term goals such as repaying debts, funding education or achieving temporary financial independence. Even among women for whom gig work was the sole income source, the relative autonomy and reduced surveillance were seen as improvements over previous precarious jobs in traditional sectors.

It is observed that for older women with household responsibilities, gig work is emerging as a primary occupation which can help them meet their financial needs. The sample, however, is dominated by younger women who consider gig work as a secondary source of income. The idea of autonomy dominates such a workforce when they can opt out of precarious working relations at their convenience. Future studies focusing on a larger sample of female gig workers who consider gig work as their sole earning option can provide a more critical view of the vulnerabilities underneath the promise of autonomy in platform delivery gig work.

To conclude, although gig work presents new avenues for women's labour force participation by offering them a sense of

autonomy, it does so within the limits of a broader structural and institutional context that is far from being gender inclusive. For gig work to facilitate inclusion and empowerment, policy efforts must focus on improving access to enabling resources, ensuring platform accountability and creating safer, more supportive environments for women workers. The findings underscore the need to approach gig work not as a universal solution to female underemployment but as one conditional on access, motivation and institutional support.

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