



Gendered Labour in the Gig Economy: A Sociological Study of Women Platform Workers in Tier-2 Indian Cities

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Abstract

The expansion of platform-mediated gig work in India has been widely celebrated for offering flexible income-earning opportunities, yet its gendered dimensions remain underexamined, particularly outside metropolitan centres. This study investigates the working conditions, motivations, and constraints experienced by women platform workers — including beauty-service, tutoring, delivery, and home-based freelance workers — in Tier-2 cities of Madhya Pradesh. Drawing on a survey of 300 women gig workers, the study examines income adequacy, work-family conflict, safety concerns, and perceived autonomy. Findings indicate that while platform work is valued for its schedule flexibility and low entry barriers, it is also characterised by income volatility, weak social security coverage, and persistent safety concerns, particularly among delivery and field-based workers. Regression analysis shows that platform type, marital status, and household caregiving responsibilities significantly predict both income adequacy and work-family conflict. The paper argues that platform work reproduces, rather than resolves, existing gendered divisions of labour by allowing women to combine paid work with unpaid domestic responsibilities, while simultaneously exposing them to new forms of precarity absent in traditional informal employment. Implications for labour policy and platform regulation are discussed.

Keywords: gig economy, platform work, gender, women workers, Tier-2 cities, precarity

1. Introduction

The gig economy — comprising task-based, platform-mediated work arrangements — has grown rapidly in India over the past decade, encompassing ride-hailing, food and grocery delivery, home services, tutoring, and freelance digital work (Surie & Sharma, 2019). While much scholarly and policy attention has focused on urban male-dominated segments such as ride-hailing and delivery, a growing number of women are entering platform work through beauty and wellness services, home-based tutoring, and freelance digital platforms, particularly in smaller, Tier-2 cities where formal-sector employment opportunities for women remain limited (Chen & Raveendran, 2012; ILO, 2021).

This study examines the lived experience of women gig workers in Tier-2 cities of Madhya Pradesh, asking whether platform work represents a genuine expansion of women's economic autonomy or a reconfiguration of existing gendered labour constraints in digital form. It focuses specifically on income adequacy, work-family conflict, and safety as key dimensions of job quality that have been highlighted as particularly salient for women workers in the informal and gig economy literature.

2. Literature Review

Feminist labour sociology has long emphasised that women's labour force participation is structured by the 'double burden' of paid and unpaid domestic work, which shapes both the types of



employment women can access and the conditions under which they work (Hochschild, 1989; Kabeer, 2012). In the Indian context, Chen and Raveendran (2012) document how women's informal employment is disproportionately concentrated in home-based and flexible work arrangements precisely because these accommodate ongoing caregiving responsibilities, often at the cost of lower and less stable earnings.

The platform economy has been theorised by some scholars as offering a technologically mediated extension of this flexibility-for-income trade-off (Hunt & Machingura, 2016), while others emphasise that algorithmic management and platform-set pricing introduce new mechanisms of control and precarity that are distinct from, and in some respects more constraining than, traditional informal work (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016; Wood et al., 2019). Surie and Sharma (2019), examining India's platform economy specifically, note that while platforms are marketed on the basis of worker autonomy, algorithmic rating systems and platform-determined task allocation substantially constrain workers' actual control over their schedules and earnings.

Research specifically addressing women's participation in platform work remains limited, particularly outside major metropolitan centres. The International Labour Organization (2021) highlights persistent safety concerns as a distinctive barrier for women in field-based gig roles such as delivery, alongside a gender pay gap in platform-mediated task allocation. This study extends this literature by empirically examining these dynamics among women platform workers in Tier-2 Indian cities, a context that remains substantially under-researched relative to metropolitan gig economies.

3. Objectives of the Study

1. To examine the income adequacy and work conditions experienced by women platform workers in Tier-2 cities.
2. To assess the extent and predictors of work-family conflict among women gig workers.
3. To identify safety concerns associated with different categories of platform work.

3.1 Hypotheses

H1: Income adequacy varies significantly by platform work category.

H2: Household caregiving responsibility is positively associated with work-family conflict among women platform workers.

H3: Field-based platform workers (e.g., delivery) report significantly higher safety concerns than home-based or client-visit platform workers.

4. Research Methodology

Research Design: A cross-sectional survey design was employed to capture working conditions and perceptions among women gig workers.

Sample: 300 women platform workers aged 18–50 were surveyed across three Tier-2 cities of Madhya Pradesh (Gwalior, Jabalpur, and Ujjain) using purposive sampling across four platform work categories: beauty/wellness services, home tutoring, delivery/field services, and freelance digital work.

Tools: A structured questionnaire included an Income Adequacy Scale, a 9-item Work-Family Conflict Scale (Cronbach's alpha = 0.83), and a 6-item Perceived Safety Concern Scale.

Data Analysis: One-way ANOVA, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression were conducted using SPSS (v.26). All data presented are hypothetical, constructed for methodological demonstration.

5. Data Analysis and Results

Table 1: Sample Distribution by Platform Work Category (N = 300)

Platform Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Mean Age (years)
Beauty/Wellness Services	84	28.0	29.4
Home Tutoring	78	26.0	33.1
Delivery/Field Services	66	22.0	26.8
Freelance Digital Work	72	24.0	27.9

Table 2: Mean Income Adequacy Score by Platform Category

Platform Category	N	Mean Income Adequacy Score (1–5)	SD
Beauty/Wellness Services	84	3.12	0.78
Home Tutoring	78	3.45	0.71
Delivery/Field Services	66	2.68	0.85
Freelance Digital Work	72	3.02	0.80

ANOVA: $F(3, 296) = 12.87, p < 0.001$

Table 3: Perceived Safety Concern by Platform Category

Platform Category	Low Concern (%)	Moderate Concern (%)	High Concern (%)
Beauty/Wellness Services	38.1	40.5	21.4
Home Tutoring	52.6	35.9	11.5
Delivery/Field Services	13.6	31.8	54.6
Freelance Digital Work	68.1	23.6	8.3

$\chi^2 (6, N=300) = 92.61, p < 0.001$

Table 4: Multiple Regression Predicting Work-Family Conflict

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	18.42	1.65	-	11.16	0.000
Household Caregiving Hours/Day	0.92	0.14	0.38	6.57	0.000*
Weekly Work Hours	0.31	0.09	0.19	3.44	0.001*

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Marital Status (Married=1)	2.14	0.68	0.17	3.15	0.002*

$R^2 = 0.27$, Adjusted $R^2 = 0.26$, $F(3, 296) = 36.02$, $p < 0.001$

Table 2 shows significant variation in income adequacy across platform categories, with delivery/field service workers reporting the lowest scores and home tutors the highest, supporting H1. Table 3 reveals a stark contrast in safety perceptions: over half of delivery/field workers report high safety concern, compared to under 12% of home tutors and 8% of freelance digital workers, strongly supporting H3. The regression results in Table 4 confirm that household caregiving hours, weekly work hours, and marital status are all significant positive predictors of work-family conflict, with caregiving burden emerging as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.38$), supporting H2.

6. Discussion

The findings support the argument, advanced by Rosenblat and Stark (2016) and Wood et al. (2019), that platform work introduces distinctive forms of precarity even as it is marketed on the basis of flexibility and autonomy. The pronounced safety concerns reported by delivery and field-based workers corroborate ILO (2021) findings regarding the gendered safety risks of field-based gig roles, and suggest that platform design and urban infrastructure in Tier-2 cities may be particularly inadequate for supporting women's safe participation in such work.

The strong positive association between caregiving burden and work-family conflict reinforces Hochschild's (1989) 'double burden' framework, indicating that platform work, despite its schedule flexibility, does not eliminate the structural tension between paid and unpaid labour for women. Rather, consistent with Chen and Raveendran (2012), platform work appears to function as an accommodation strategy that allows women to combine income generation with caregiving responsibilities, often at the cost of income adequacy, as reflected in the comparatively low income adequacy scores among workers with higher caregiving burdens.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that women's platform work in Tier-2 Indian cities is characterised by significant variation in income adequacy and safety across work categories, and that caregiving responsibilities remain a central constraint shaping women's experience of gig work. Rather than resolving gendered labour market constraints, platform work appears to reconfigure them in a digitally mediated form. Policy recommendations include platform-level safety protocols for field-based women workers, portable social security benefits for gig workers, and municipal infrastructure investments (safe transport, well-lit public spaces) to support women's safe participation in field-based platform roles.

8. Limitations and Scope for Future Research

The cross-sectional design and purposive sampling limit generalisability and causal inference. Future research employing longitudinal designs and qualitative in-depth interviews would provide richer insight into the lived experience and career trajectories of women gig workers over time.



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