



**FUTURE
OF WORK
IN THE GLOBAL
SOUTH**

LABOR PLATFORMS | ASIA

**Pathways to
improving women's
access to work and
wellbeing through
online work**

POLICY BRIEF | DECEMBER 2021

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1. Executive Summary

India has one of the lowest rates of female labor participation rates in the world. This is attributed primarily to the unavailability of suitable work and the burden of care work. Online platforms can create opportunities for women to access work while managing their care responsibilities. Governments and international development agencies often frame online labor markets and digital platforms as providing micro-entrepreneurial opportunities that can further women's economic empowerment. There is however little empirical evidence on the women's engagement on online platforms in India.

This policy brief is based on one of the first mixed-method empirical studies of women on online work platforms in India. Through a survey of 300+ women, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions, we evaluate the motivations, experiences and impacts of online work for women and their economic agency and wellbeing. Our study showed that while there are many individual stories of increased earnings and a greater sense of wellbeing, these opportunities are only available to already well educated women, many of left their earlier jobs because of care commitments.

This policy brief outlines four measures to improve women's access and wellbeing on online platforms - the recognition of online work as a distinct category of work along with measures to recognise and redistribute care work; improved access and opportunity through demand and supply side measures; furthering rights and social protection of women on online platforms; and advancing an agenda for data rights and empowerment.

2. Introduction

In less than three years, more than one billion people from the Global South will enter the job market. However, structural unemployment in many countries, especially amongst the youth, is also anticipated to increase in the coming years.

While Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) have the potential to contribute to the attainment of sustainable development goals of equality and social inclusion, paradoxically as more people are connected and use the Internet more productively, digital inequality increases not only between those offline and online but also between those passively consuming the Internet and those who are more active, for purposes of entrepreneurialism and innovation or to enhance their well-being.

In this context, our study aims to gain a better understanding on the implications of digital labor for the Global South, particularly among marginalized groups in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The study reveals country and regional characteristics of digital workers as well as the main barriers to participate in digital labor markets. Adopting a gender perspective enabled a deeper investigation of factors that influence entry decisions into the digital labor market, the gender pay gap between male and female digital workers, and differences between females outside and inside the digital labor market.

For this purpose, we use nationally representative surveys from the After Access project, conducted in 2017/18 by three Global South think tanks: Research ICT Africa (RIA) in Africa, LIRNEasia in Asia and the Institute of Peruvian Studies (through the Regional Dialogue on Information Society-DIRSI) in Latin America.

We seek to find a causal effect between individual characteristics and the probability of participating in digital labor, broken down by digital labor categories. Two approaches are used to examine participation in the digital labor market and its effect on relevant labor market outcomes (income). In the first approach, we analyze the income differences between men and women within the digital labor market (gender pay gap in the gig economy). With the second approach we analyze the difference in income between women who participate in the digital economy and those who do not (the gig economy effect on women's pay).

3. Platform economy in the Global South

India's platform economy is growing at an annual growth rate of over 17 percent, and is expected to generate over 56 percent of all new employment.¹ It is therefore crucial to ensure that such work is safe, protects labor rights and promotes labor wellbeing. India has one of the lowest female labor force participation rates in the world. This is attributed to the unavailability of suitable work, the burden of care work, and family expectations after women get married (Andres et al., 2017). It is in this context that online work may enable new opportunities for women, that can advance their access to work and economic self-sufficiency while allowing them to work flexible hours, from home. However, numerous studies have also highlighted the precarity of platform based work, and the negative impact it has on worker agency and rights.² The gender pay gap is also prevalent in platform work. Women cannot commit equal hours of work as men while balancing care work responsibilities, leading to women earning less than men.

Currently, there is little empirical evidence on the nature of women's engagement on online work platforms in India and its impacts. Between August - December 2020, we studied the participation of women in India on online labor platforms for micro-work and freelance work (Aneja et al., 2021). We conducted a survey of 365 women registered on online platforms, along with 22 in-depth semi-structured interviews and 2 focus group discussions. Through this, we sought to understand the motivations, experiences, and wellbeing of women on online work platforms in India.

The first section of this brief outlines our research findings. Based on this, the second section of this brief, identifies four key pathways toward improving women's access to, and wellbeing on, online work platforms.

¹ See IT for Change (2020) "Statement issued by an Alliance of Labor Unions and Civil Society." Retrieved from <https://itforchange.net/labour-law-platform-workers-rights-data-digital-economy>

² See for example: Graham, M., Hjorth, I., Lehtonvirta, V. (2017).

4. Research Overview

Online work platforms allow women to work flexible hours, at an intensity and time of their convenience, contributing to an increase in income and greater economic self-sufficiency. Most of the women we consulted valued online work as an opportunity to continue to be engaged in the workforce, earn an income, and to develop and hone their skills. Most freelancers that we spoke with reported earning between USD 130- 250 a month and about half said their income varied greatly. Earnings varied more on micro-work platforms, from 30 to 250 USD a month. Most women said they were happy with their earnings, but that it was primarily for their personal expenses or those of their children - their husbands continued to be primary bread earner for the family.

Across both freelance and micro work platforms, women noted that it was becoming harder to find work; finding the first gig is particularly hard and reintermediation is a common practice. Some said they have learnt new skills, but noted that there were limited opportunities for career progression. Some even said that that if family life permitted, and appropriate jobs were available, they would like to return to their earlier jobs - these jobs were better recognised as being 'careers' and also gave women access to broader networks and community.

Most women we interviewed had left formal sector jobs after getting married or having children. Online work presented an opportunity to work part-time, earn a little extra income for their personal spending needs, or for their children, while still prioritising their household responsibilities. In this way, online work may also support the reproduction of gender roles.

Most women on online platforms have university degrees, and some even have post graduate degrees. We did not find a major difference in educational qualifications between micro-work and freelance platforms, despite the difference in task complexity across these types of work. This finding provides a corrective to narratives around micro-work creating opportunities for low-skilled workers - most women currently on these platforms have university degrees, and given the limited availability of online work opportunities, in practice these opportunities are only available for a small sub-section of people.

Nearly half the women we spoke with had jobs earlier - some were full time, others are part time, and many worked as teachers, bank tellers, public relations, and in the IT sector. This again helps nuance some of the narratives emerging around platform work in the global south - many emerging studies, like some done by the author, have argued that in the global south platform work is not resulting in as shift from formal to informal employment like we seen in industrialised economies. On the contrary, because most people are working in the informal sector, it represents a kind of standardisation of informality (Aneja et al., 2019). However, the experience of women from our study forced a reconsideration, or at least greater nuance, to that narrative - in the case of Indian women on online work platforms, it seems that many are shifting from formal work to platform work because of family responsibilities.

Our study revealed many positive stories of greater economic self-sufficiency and empowerment at an individual level. But it also raised questions about the structural impacts of online work for women's participation in the labor force - in a business as usual scenario, online work may do little to challenge or dismantle existing gender roles or improve women's participation in the labor force. For any meaningful structural change, we propose the following policy pathways for India.

5. Policy recommendations

1. Recognition and redistribution

The question of the classification of platform work has received considerable policy attention across the globe. India's draft code on social security introduces the idea of platform work but does not distinguish between platform work, gig work and unorganised work (Ministry of Labor and Employment of India, 2020). Platforms do not simply connect the demand and supply of labor, but directly shape peoples access to work, earnings, and the terms and conditions of their work, and thus in many cases, resemble a formal employment relationship. It is essential that we create a separate category of platform work and identify and implement the associated rights.

Online work for women continues an earlier trend of home and care work that is invisible and unrecognised. The recognition of not just platform work, but different types of platform work that includes online work, is thus necessary. As Sabina Dewan argues, 'unless policy makers take explicit measures to make women's home-base digital work visible, not only will women's economic contributions continue to be discounted, but women will also remain beyond the purview of labor protections and welfare benefits' (Dewan and Jamme, 2021). A first step toward doing this is to promote data sharing arrangements between platforms and governments to make women's work on online platforms more visible.

Our research on women engaged in online work shows that most women shift out of formal employment and engage on online platforms in order to balance paid work with reproductive labour. Our interviews with women online workers revealed that women with care work responsibilities usually fit paid work around their chores at home. The pandemic has further increased women's time poverty and their care burden. Access to childcare and other investments in care infrastructure are necessary if women are to participate equally in the platform economy. India's recently released code on Social Security includes maternity benefits and creche facilities for gig and platform workers. This is a welcome move, but because the code does not distinguish between gig work, platform work, and unorganised work, it is not clear whether women on online platforms will be able to avail of such services. Implementation is also a challenge, as indicated by the implementation and enforcement of the 2017 Maternity Benefits Act.

Employers have spoken of the difficulty of providing crech facilities because of the costs involved in investing in physical locations and cost of childcare services that are required to run these facilities.

2. Access and Opportunity

Online work can create new income generating opportunities for women. It is sometimes mistakenly thought that online work has low barriers to entry and therefore is accessible to a wide section of women across the country. However, the supply of workers on online platforms far outstrips the demand for online work resulting in significant competition and ‘superstar effects’ i.e. where the top tier of workers in terms of skills and experience manage to secure the bulk of available work. Improving access to online work will thus require investments in both the demand and supply side of online labor markets.

On the demand side, firms will need to be incentivised, though measures such as tax incentives, to increase their use of online labor markets. For instance, the software industry in India grew out of the introduction of Special Technology Parks within Special Economic Zones, which gave firms 100 percent tax exemption for the first five years and 50 percent for the five years that followed.³ National policies that restrict cross border data flows could also reduce workers competitiveness in global online platforms, if platforms and clients perceive data localisation policies as compromising data security. Additional demand for online work could be created through the digitalisation of police sector sets which require data entry and annotated type of work.

On the supply side, greater investments in digital infrastructure can enable a wider section of women to access online markets. Most of India’s internet users access rely on their mobile phone connections, but many online work platforms are not optimised for mobile use. Improving the penetration of fixed-line internet connections, for example, could bring down costs and improve connectivity. Similarly, setting up community hubs could help provide access in under-served areas. In Kenya, for example, the Ministry of ICT, Innovation and Youth Affairs has set up youth centres for free internet, alongside training and certification courses (Genesis Analytics Limited, 2019).

³ See the Special Economic Zones in India (2018). Ministry of Commerce & Industry, Department of Commerce. Retrieved from: <http://sezindia.nic.in/cms/introduction.php>

The growth of impact sourcing organisations and intermediary organisations that support access and provide skill training specifically for online work could also increase access for women, particularly those in peri-urban or rural areas.

National level digital skill certification programs could also help workers establish their credentials and help workers get higher value work. Online work could also be incentivised through tax benefits for online workers. For example, Bangladesh has a policy where all earnings from online work are currently tax free (Genesis Analytics Limited, 2019).

However, such investments will need to address gender based inequality in access to technology, education and skills. Within Asia-Pacific, India has the widest gender gap in internet use - only 15 percent of Indian women access the internet, compared with 25 percent of men. Even when women do have access to a mobile or internet device, social norms and discriminatory attitudes prevent women from accessing and using the internet. While mobile phones are viewed as a risk to women's reputation pre-marriage, post-marriage phone use is seen as an interruption to caregiving responsibilities (Barboni et al., 2018). Research shows that even programs that provide free or low cost technology don't always work because of social norms that restrict women's access to technology (Wamala, 2012). Improving women's access to technology will thus require targeted programs that navigate these socio-cultural challenges - a technical or product oriented solution alone will not be enough.

3. Rights and Social Protection

Platform work should be subject to legal tests of employment. Depending on the degree of control exerted by them, platforms should be mandated to make prorated contributions to social protection measures like health insurance, accident insurance and old age protection (Aneja and Zothan, 2019). Provision for levy and collection of cess for social security and welfare measures must be introduced, where contributions are collected from platform aggregators and customers.⁴ India's draft code empowers the central government to create welfare schemes for gig workers which are partly funded through contributions from digital labor platforms, but the draft lacks granularity around how these contributions will be calculated and implemented.

⁴ See IT for Change (2020) "Statement issued by an Alliance of Labor Unions and Civil Society." Retrieved from <https://itforchange.net/labour-law-platform-workers-rights-data-digital-economy>

Further, the code fails to impose mandatory legal obligations on platform aggregators.

The draft code also does not articulate specific rights for platform workers. A basic set of fundamental rights must apply to all workers, irrespective of their employment relationship. These include the freedom of association, non-discrimination and equal remuneration. Transparent, fair, and negotiable contracts are also important for enabling worker agency and rights. Platforms should ensure that workers have the option to escalate grievances, and that these options are easily and freely accessible.

Workers must also be granted health and safety protections. For women, it is particularly important that they have protections against online harassment. There are currently few provisions to address complaints of sexual harassment on platforms. India's Occupational Safety and Health Code, 2020 does not make provisions for platform workers. The Prevention of Sexual Harassment at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition Redressal) Act, 2012 in India covers all workers in the formal and informal sector. The definition of workplace is not limited to the immediate place of work but includes all places visited by an employee during the course of her work. The Act clearly establishes mechanisms to make complaints. Platform companies must be made to comply with this law and provide women platform workers with mechanisms to record complaints and receive a reasonable response.

Platform workers must also have a right to collectivise and negotiate their rights and new forms of worker unions should be recognised and supported. Currently, platform workers unions remain unrecognised by platform companies making tripartite negotiations impossible. It is imperative that platform workers' demands for better working conditions are recognised by platform companies and the government.

Platforms must also adhere to international guidelines on business and human rights, such as the UN guiding principles for Business and Human Rights. Further, platform workers must have a right to explanation - to understand how the algorithmic management systems that control their work operate, and workers should be able to demand explanations for particular platform decisions. Platforms should also be mandated to provide notifications to workers on changes in platform algorithms that effect their earning potential or alter the rating system.

Articulating such rights and enabling women to access social protection through online work can also help further the recognition and legitimacy of this type of work. Women are also more vulnerable to external shocks, the effects of which can be softened through access to social protection mechanisms.

4. Data Rights and Empowerment

Data can impact worker privacy, their career mobility and job quality. Platforms collect a vast amount of data on workers, which is then used to determine their access and experiences of work. Existing data protection regulations are likely to be inadequate for protecting worker rights. For example, consent based frameworks are inadequate because of existing power asymmetries in the workplace. Existing legal frameworks are also not enough because they concern personal data, but don't include inferred and observed data, much of which are collected at the workplace. India's draft legislation for data protection contains certain provisions, and exceptions, pertaining to the collection of data by an employer, but platform workers are excluded from this due to the ambiguity around their employment relationship. Data protection legislations thus need to be updated to accommodate the rapid datafication of the workplace and extended to platform workers.

Workers must be able to access, port, and strategically use their data in way that further their livelihoods, rights, and agency. Data portability refers to the right to transfer personal data from one organisation to another, or to the data subject, allowing individuals to reuse the data for their own purposes. Mandating data rights and portability of personal and reputation data could improve women's bargaining powers and enable them to build a portfolio of work. It can help them establish this work as a type of career and enable the possibility of career progression. Data portability also reduces the lock-in power of platforms, and allows workers to choose between platforms that offer them the best working conditions and earnings; this can help reduce the power asymmetry between workers and platforms and allow workers to exercise greater agency about their work.

Greater research and investments are needed to support models that advance workers data rights. Multiple options are being experimented with - from personal digital lockers to data stewardship models. For example, Open Platform is a Swedish Initiative for data portability which creates a free online 'digital backpack' for workers to connect their data across different platforms (Open Platforms, 2021).

Community data-stewardship models can pool together workers data and enable workers to negotiate with platforms. The UK based Worker Info Exchange, for example, helps workers across platforms access data collected about them so that they can negotiate with their employees (Worker Info Exchange, 2021).

Being able to strategically use and share their data can advance women's economic agency, help them establish their experience and qualifications in a way that supports an online work 'career', and can be an important tool for collective bargaining and negotiation.

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ABOUT FOWIGS

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It aims at understanding the implications of technological change on jobs from a Global South perspective bringing data, knowledge, and policy frameworks to build evidence-based narratives on the future of work in developing countries.

