

ENGAGEMENT OF WOMEN IN 'GIG ECONOMY': A CHIMERA OF EMPOWERMENT

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Abstract:

The paper succinctly tries to understand the myriad ways in which gig economy has given women an opportunity to be a part of labour force. The Paper begins by explaining the shift in nature of work in the backdrop of Fourth industrial revolution and advent of virtual workspaces. Thereafter, it limits its understanding to impact of gig economy on women empowerment, owing to the flexible nature of work and ensuing challenges. The concluding section highlights certain policy recommendations that can ensure that the opportunities provided to women by gig economy do not go in vain.

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Introduction:

The world of work is undergoing unprecedented change which would have been difficult to anticipate at the start of the century. The advent of globalization and concomitant technological progress has begotten new business models which are based on dynamic job creation, flexible contracts and virtual workspaces. These changes have resulted in opportunities and challenges, both. Opportunities are before the hitherto unemployed workforce, who were excluded from the traditional workspaces due various reasons. However, the associated challenge with the rise of virtual workspaces based on fluid contract is the lack of social security benefits to this precariously placed workforce. (Rolfe, 2017)

This paper tries to unravel the ways in which women have seen a growing engagement in this new work model, also known as ‘gig economy’. The paper is divided into three sections. The First Section will try to explain the nuances of ‘gig economy’. The second section shall explore the ways in which women have engaged with gig economy and the ensuing opportunities and challenges. The final section shall suggest some policy measures that would make ‘gig economy’ more stable.

IS GIG THE NEXT BIG THING?

There are various reasons for the vast proliferation of ‘gig economy’. Primarily, the neoliberal capitalist system has forced the shifting of industries to new markets with the coming up of Post-Fordism economy. This has radically changed the relationship between capital and labour. The advancement in technology has necessitated a shift in job profiles as a whole raft of jobs are secured and performed online by means of cheap mobile devices and widely available internet. Both new jobs are emerging and old jobs are being done in new formats as online becomes a pivotal factor in professional lives of people.¹

This ‘Gig Economy’ is constituted of new kind of work, which scholars call as ‘microwork’, ‘click-work’ or ‘micro-tasking’. It has dismantled the older principles of workplace and has led to fragmentation of work. With the help of internet, online small work tasks are assigned to those who are willing to work through a process known as ‘crowdsourcing’. These workers bid to work for these pieces of work and the traditional contract between employee and employer ceases to exist in such a scenario. The resulting contract is only based on the duration of work, lasting only till the time the work is completed. This microwork is at the lowest rung of skill hierarchy, for instance Uber driver, Urban company professionals and household helps in mobile applications.² This gig economy is emblematic of precarity and the contracts are very short lived, existing only till the work is completed, Pay is very low and the competition among workers to bid for jobs is

¹ In India specific enabling causes for rise of ‘gig economy’ can be enumerated as follows: constant supply of low skilled workers due to rural urban migration, low barrier of entry into platforms, proliferation of mobile phones and cheap internet and free flow of funds with the help of venture capitalists.

² One prominent example is “book_my_bai” mobile app.

very high, access to work is also not regular or uniform leading to insecurity of workers. (Webster, 2016)

The precarious working situation of workers in gig economy has been highlighted in a research done on music industry workers in United Kingdom. According to this research on music industry in UK titled 'Can music make you sick: Working Conditions in UK Music Industry' carried out by y Sally-Anne Gross and Dr. George Musgrave, there was a crippling high level of anxiety and depression among musicians of UK. The research attributed their psychological distress to the unsustainable structure of employment in the 'gig economy'. According to Gross and Musgrave, in the digital virtual workspace, "what may be thought as liberation, is experienced as detachment; flexibility as fragility; geographical mobility as placelessness or rootlessness; and the freedom of freelancing as anxiety." This type of work more than suffering from precarity of finances also suffers from precarity of certainty and stability. (Sally-Anne Gross, 2019)

In India, Gig economy has been on an upward spiral in the last decade. Indian market has been inundated by the presence of various digital platforms catering to diverse sectors like housework, wellness, beauty, food delivery, household cleaning etc. This economic structure attracts female workers because of the 'flexibility; it offers. In India the perpetuation of 'gig economy' is seen as a cause of celebration for women workers as it will give them 'flexibility' to engage in the paid labour market while being able to take care of unpaid house work and care work also. The Female Labour Participation rate in India is abysmally low at 18% to 16.1%.³ This means less than one-third of women of working age are engaged in paid employment. Due to women shouldering the burden of unpaid household work singlehandedly their attrition rate from paid employment is prohibitively high.

Nevertheless, according to World Bank's 2012 World Development Report, bringing women in paid economic realm would not only be beneficial for women but it will enhance productivity and improve the inter-generational wealth and equity. For world bank, key poverty reduction strategies would be to promote women entrepreneurship and increase their market based opportunities. Thus, World Bank calls gender equality as 'smart economics'. It is for these reasons that women engagement in workforce through 'gig platform' is welcomed and celebrated. (World Development Report: Gender equality and development, 2012)

Thus Women have begun to engage with the gig economy and have encountered many opportunities and challenges in the same. The Second Section of the paper shall try to unravel the myriad ways of women's engagement in the gig economy.

³ The data has been sources from recent Employment- Unemployment Survey and Periodic Labour Force survey conducted by Government of India. The recent study by Reuters show that the FLPR has fallen down to 16% in September 2021, showing the impact of pandemic on an already stressed statistics.

WOMEN ‘MICROWORKERS’ IN GIG ECONOMY: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The cardinal element of ‘gig economy’ or ‘platform economy’ is its flexibility. Through this a worker can have flexible working hours and have autonomy to choose their work time. This feature improves the accessibility of jobs for those who are engaged in other activities. That is the most important reason why women get attracted to these platforms as it gives them a way to balance unpaid care work along with paid work. According to a recent study, 85% of women respondents believed that this feature allowed them to have good earning potential along with flexible work timing which helped them to have a work life balance.⁴

In the traditional workspace model there was a gender gap due to the fact that women work is always crippled by an unavailability of decent work. Along with that in traditional patriarchal societies, there are restrictions on women’s mobility, the household responsibilities are also unequally shared between men and women. As a result, the primary task of providing care falls upon women like providing care to sick and elderly, managing the house, cleaning, cooking, washing etc. unfortunately, these tasks are not considered as economic work, thus women are relegated to sphere of unpaid household work, pushing them more into the downward spiral of low self-worth, financial independence, decision making capacity and autonomy. (ILO, 2018)

Thus, with the help of ‘Gig Economy’ women are able to enter the labour force, albeit in a fractured sense and can earn autonomy and economic independence.

However, challenges to women in the ‘gig economy’ or ‘platform economy’ are not any less. Women’s engagement in the ‘gig economy’ due to its flexibility in itself is the biggest challenge as it reinforces gender stereotype that household work is the primary responsibility of women. It further enhances the ‘double burden of work’ on women. (Zaidi, 2017) Balancing paid work and unpaid household work, leaves them with no time for leisure and rest thereby crippling their physical and mental wellbeing. (Kalsiwal, 2020)

There are also many structural impediments which stop women from fully engaging in gig economy, even if on a disadvantageous footing. The ‘Platformisation’ of work has not led to any concrete engagement of women in labour force. Inequity in the ownership of digital resources like mobile phones and internet work as a major impediment, since most of these platforms can only be accessed through smartphones and internet. Even if women have access to digital resources they lack the requisite digital literacy to use these resources for optimum benefit. There is a possibility that algorithms made by coders can also come with inherent bias, thereby pushing women to peripheries and promote gendered work, thereby entrenching gender stereotypes. Thus, the challenge exacerbates two fold, first to ensure accessibility of these platforms to women and encourage them to undertake paid work, despite the fact that it will put double burden of work on them, and to ensure that these platforms do not succumb into gender stereotyping. (McCrate, 2016)

⁴ Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy Report 2020, PP 4-5.

The precarious situation of the women's work in platform economy further worsened during the pandemic. Pandemic led to a massive unemployment wave and it is no secret that during wave of unemployment, men get priority over women in jobs as they are seen as primary breadwinners and women as homemakers. In times of prosperity women are hired last but during time of crisis women are first to be fired. This phenomenon worsened during the pandemic.

Even if women have access to jobs there is a gender pay gap. Gender pay gap is a phenomenon that has been historically and till present time, posed a hindrance in the path of women's empowerment. As Joan Robinson, a prominent economist highlighted in 1933, "perfect discrimination is probably rare in buying labor but imperfect discrimination may often be found. For instance, there may be two types of workers (for example, men and women or men and boys) whose efficiencies are equal but whose conditions of [labor] supply are different. It may be necessary to pay the same wage within each group, but the wages of the two groups (say of men and of women) may differ." In a non-perfect labour market, firms are not price takers and therefore they have to offer high wages to retain workers. Mostly these high wages are delinked from the performance or efficiency of the worker and depend on their ability to switch jobs. So workers which are difficult to retain i.e. men, are offered high wages even if they are no more productive than other workers. This imperfect competition leads to gender wage gap. This phenomenon according to Joan Robinson⁵ is known as 'Monopsony'. According to her since women are less likely to leave their employer, they are given less wages. This challenge is also exhibited in the 'gig economy' where it is noticeable that women desperately depend on these jobs due to its flexibility and economic incentives. (Caldwell, 2018)

Having listed these challenges, it now becomes clear that women role in gig economy may not be fully beneficial for them, the next section therefore questions the idea that the current pattern of women's engagement as micro-workers in 'gig economy' can bring about their empowerment and suggests some policy measures that can be made in order to make 'gig platform' more equitable and gender just.

WAY FORWARD

Even if we believe that 'gig economy' has resulted in precarious jobs, nevertheless it is no denying the fact that it has provided women an opportunity to enter the labour force. Thus to dismantle the basic premise of 'gig economy' for its fragmented and fluid nature on the grounds that it does not give any job security to women will be like throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

It is advisable therefore to plug in the loopholes to ensure that in a job starved country like India, any opportunity of work to woman becomes more resilient and stable. Some of the changes that can be done have been elucidated in following paragraphs.

Firstly, it is very essential to create a real time database of 'gig economy' workers. This will help the government in understanding the dynamics of the issue, it will help the government in bringing

⁵ Joan Robinson was a British economist. She was a central figure in Post Keynesian economics. She is credited with formulating the concept of monopsony to explain the wage differentials between men and women having same productivity.

schemes that are better targeted towards these groups. The new Code on Social Security can be improved further in the light of better data. Data can be collected through NSSO survey.

After a collection of robust database on the extent of 'gig economy' workers. It is pertinent to formulate schemes for their benefits. These would include an in-house dispute redressal mechanism, that will help in addressing their grievance in a real time basis by the platform providers. Safety and security of gig workers is also essential owing to the fact that they are mostly engaged in work in houses and other such 'private' spaces. The extension of Sexual Harassment at Workplace Act to gig workers can only be brought about after a reliable data is collected on their extent and the kind of work that they do.

With the extension of Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act to gig workers, government will be able to hold platform providers accountable in case of any mishap, women will also know where to contact in case of any misadventure. The Platform providers will also become more cautious in their dealing with their workers and try to devise methods (like an SOS button) to ensure their safety and security.

Finally, there is an urgent need to regulate these platforms. It is desirable for the government to create a 'platform of platforms' that can help in regulating the mushrooming of gig platforms and ensure that they maintain high standards of efficiency and reasonableness.

Thus, it is no denying that fact that 'gig economy' has led to an increase in women's participation in labour force but it cannot be seen as a panacea. The need is to ensure regularization of gig economy, ensure better social security set up for informal workers and women and in the long run improve the skill set of informal women workers and bring them into the domain of formal work.

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