Platform work and labour legislation in India: Women's engagement and the role of gender

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━━━━━━ ABSTRACT ━━━━━━

Focusing on India's digital platform economy, this study examines the gendered experiences of workers. Given the data challenge, we present a novel methodology to study the working conditions and key issues faced by platform workers in the beauty and personal services segments. Our data comprises 328 workers (both male and female) associated with two popular platforms in India. We find that most workers face issues such as algorithmic control, insufficient technical support, feedback mechanism, safety protocols, and cost concerns. The paper also draws attention to existing provisions applicable to female workers and recent legislative developments related to platform work in India. Through detailed analysis of workers' reviews and experiences, this paper calls for a calibrated alignment of India's legal framework with the swiftly evolving technological landscapes globally. In this, it emphasizes gender inclusivity to ensure equitable labour market opportunities.

Keywords: digital platform; beauty & personal services; gender issues; platform work; worker issues India.

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1.   Introduction

The definitions of 'work' have undergone several changes over time. Earlier while 'work' and 'employment' were often used interchangeably, now the two are considered distinct concepts. From the point of view of labour statistics, broadly speaking, work refers to «any activity performed by persons of any sex and age to produce goods or to provide services for use by others or for own use». In contrast, 'employment' refers to «any activity to produce goods or provide services for pay or profit» ([1]). Employment can refer to paid employment or self-employment (comprising employers, own account workers, unpaid family workers among others). Further, as per the United Nations (UN), work can further be classified as System of National Accounts (SNA) and Non-SNA work. The former refers to work within national income accounts, while the latter refers to all work carried out «outside the production boundary that can be delegated to others».

Rapid and continuous technological advancements have contributed to changes in the concept of work and the nature in which it is undertaken. There has been a proliferation of non-standard/flexible work arrangements, blurring the boundaries between workplace and personal space. The 'sharing' or 'gig' and 'platform' economy has led to popularity of digital platforms operating in two-sided markets (such as e-commerce platforms- like Amazon, Airbnb) and multi-sided markets (such as Facebook, YouTube) globally. It was noted that, during 2010-2020 digital labour platforms (that engage labour to execute specific 'tasks' on the demand of consumers/users) increased five times in number ([2]). This has meant increasing presence and popularity of platform work across both, developing and developed countries. Platform work is often characterized by "on-demand" work, fragmentation of work (jobs broken down into 'tasks'), piece-rate payment (depending on number of 'tasks' completed), and flexibility. While it creates opportunities for workers, particularly those who were previously unable to engage in regular, fixed-hour jobs (among others), it leads to a new set of challenges for regulatory and policy-making bodies.

([1]) ILO, *Work and employment are not synonyms,* 2019.
([2]) ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook*, 2021.

India, now the most populous country globally with a large working-age population, has nearly 8% of all platforms globally ([3]). However, several aspects of the labour market consequences, including a gendered analysis, remain under-studied. Therefore, this paper studies the role of gender in digital platform work in India, while also examining the regulatory landscape within which the platform economy operates. In the absence of official statistics pertaining to the platform economy in India, some survey-based studies ([4]) provide insights about the working conditions and precarity of platform workers in India. However, their relatively small sample sizes and focus on the Covid-19 pandemic, limit the generalizability of the overall findings. Some recent reports ([5]) also analyse the conditions of work in the platform economy. However, the gender perspective lacked much attention. Through a novel approach to study experiences of workers in the platform economy, we collect and study public reviews left by workers on the 'partner apps' (applications) of two popular platform companies (Urban Company, and Yes Madam) in India. The platform companies are selected because of their focus on the beauty and personal services sector, which is relatively feminised. Our contribution to existing literature lies in introducing this novel methodology and presenting a gendered analysis of the experiences of platform workers in specific sectors in India.

The paper is organized in five sections. The first section analyses the existing legal framework and the evolving labour regulations with respect to platform work in India, through a gendered lens. The second section discusses female labour force participation in India and the opportunities provided by the platform economy. Section three presents our case study on Urban Company (UC) and Yes Madam (YM) workers' experiences. It also explains the data source used and the methodology adopted. Section four presents the key findings based on our analysis, and presents a discussion from a gender and regulatory perspective. Finally, section five concludes the paper, emphasizing the role that the legal regime can play, to ensure a level playing field for women platform workers, who form a smaller but more vulnerable share of the entire platform workforce.

([3]) ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook*, 2021.

([4]) S. Parvez, R. Ranjan, *The platform economy and the precarisation of food delivery work in the Covid-19 pandemic: Evidence from India, Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation,* 2021, 15, 1, 11; F. Kuriakose, D. K. Iyer, *A Case for Worker-Centric Platform Economy in India, SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2021; Digital Future Society, *Beauty platform workers and their customers in India,* 2021.

([5]) NCAER, *Socio-economic Impact Assessment of Food Delivery Platform Workers*, 2023, National Council for Applied Economic Research (NCAER); NITI Aayog, *India's Booming and Gig economy: Perspectives and recommendations on the future of work*, 2022; PAIGAM and University of Pennsylvania, *Prisoners on wheels? Report on Working and Living Conditions of App-based workers in India*, 2024.

2.   Regulatory developments

Informality is a key feature of the Indian labour force, with over 90% of the total workforce being in the informal sector (⁶). Given this fact, 'new' work like platform work adds to the challenge of ensuring labour welfare, while promoting the ease of doing business in a labour surplus economy. A 2022 report by a government of India's policy think-tank (NITI Aayog) estimated that nearly 7.7 million workers (1.5% of total workforce) in India were engaged in the gig economy in 2020-21. The report estimates that this is likely to expand to 23.5 million by 2029-30. An industry report predicts that the gig economy could account for 90 million jobs across all sectors, contributing 1.25% to India's GDP in the long run (⁷). Despite the lack of sufficient statistics, these estimates establish the need for having a legal framework in place to govern India's rising platform landscape.

Labour laws in India fall in the Concurrent list, i.e both the union and state can legislate laws regulating labour. The labour laws deal with various aspects of work and include resolution of industrial disputes, working conditions, social security, wages, among others. At present, there is no country-level (union) legislation governing the platform economy, which took-off in India mostly since 2010. Despite this, it was only in 2020 that the Code on Social Security (CoSS) was introduced, giving the first official definition of gig and platform work/worker in the Indian context. It defines platform work as, «a work arrangement outside of a traditional employer- employee relationship in which organisations or individuals use an online platform to access other organisations or individuals to solve specific problems or to provide specific services or any such other activities which may be notified by the Central Government, in exchange for payment». A platform worker is defined as «a person engaged in or undertaking platform work». Further, it provided for the setting-up a Social Security Fund for gig and platform workers with contributions from platform companies of roughly 1-2% of the annual turnover, to extend social security coverage like accident insurance, health and maternity benefits, old age protection, and such.

Following this, in a landmark development, the state of Rajasthan passed the Platform Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act in 2023. This is the first legislation in India, specific to platform workers in sectors like, ride-sharing, food and grocery delivery, logistics, e-Marketplace, wholesale/retail trade, travel and hospitality, professional services (in which our study on beauty and wellness workers is based), healthcare, and content and media services. The law provides for a public database of workers engaged in platform work, identifiable through generation of unique IDs of registered workers. This will ensure the availability of official and reliable statistics. To

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(⁶) S.K Mehrotra, *Informal employment trends in the Indian economy persistent informality, but growing positive development*, ILO *Working Papers*, 2019.

(⁷) Michael & Susan Dell Foundation and Boston Consulting Group (BCG), *Unlocking the potential of the gig economy in India*, 2021.

provide social security to platform workers, this law provides for the constitution of a Welfare Board (1/3rd women members). The act also lays down penalties for contravention of rules by platform companies and a grievance redressal mechanism for various issues like account blocking/deactivation, and payment issues. Besides the representation of women in the Welfare Board, there are no other special provisions for women aimed at addressing gender-specific issues in the platform economy. After Rajasthan, other states like Karnataka, Telangana, Delhi, Chhattisgarh are introducing draft bills to regulate platform work within their jurisdictions (geographic boundaries). However, a national legislation, which will provide a comprehensive framework addressing issues of coverage, data portability and social security benefit transfer to migrant workers across state lines, is crucial but still awaited.

Gender provisions in law

Given the legislative vacuum regarding platform work, this section provides a brief assessment of key existing labour laws through the lens of gender. We also discuss here, the limitations in applicability of the existing gender-specific provisions of law directly to female platform workers.

With respect to working conditions of female labour in India, just after independence (in 1947), The Factories Act (1948) provided for separate toilets/washrooms for women, assurance of women's occupational safety by the employer, and setting-up creches in factories (with at least 30 women workers). This law prohibited employment of women in 'risky'/dangerous jobs and limited permissible working hours to between 6 am-7 pm (no night shifts). Women building and construction workers (12% of the total), who are engaged in dangerous but low-paying work like brick kiln, quarry, and such, are also provided access to basic amenities under The Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act (1996). The informal sector workers are also now covered under the Occupational Safety, Health, and Working Conditions Code (2020), which provides women workers with the right to work night-shifts, and also obligates employers to ensure their safety, transportation needs, and creche facilities. However, there are no legal provisions for ensuring decent workplace conditions for female platform workers in the Rajasthan Act or the state-level draft bills. They are left to navigate unsafe or unsuitable working conditions, with minimal recourse to address issues- health, safety, or childcare needs - that are prioritized in a traditional employment setting or now recognized even in the informal sector.

With respect to wages, The Minimum Wages Act (1948) laid benchmark minimum wages for different work to be fixed on daily, hourly, as well as monthly basis. As labour of vulnerable including distressed women could be easily exploited by employers looking for cheap labour, this law obligated employers to pay at least the minimum wages to them. Similarly, the Equal Remuneration Act (1976) provided for «equal pay for equal work for both men and women», while also prohibiting gender-

based discrimination in remuneration. The Code on Wages (2019) also emphasizes the principle for equal remuneration for same/similar work for men and women, extending the cover to all employees (i.e., contractual, casual and temporary workers). Female platform workers, however, are excluded from the protections of these laws. Not only do they lack standardized wage structures, leading to inconsistent and sometimes below-minimum earnings, but also may be impacted by gendered pay and other disparities.

Motherhood is often associated with labour market penalties for female workers. Presence of a young child in the household has been found to have a distinctly negative impact on mother's employment in India (8). Therefore, recognizing the importance of maternity benefits for continuity of women's work, the Employees' State Insurance Act (1948), the Central Civil Services Rules (1972) and the Maternity Benefit Act (1961) provide maternity benefits for "employees". The more vulnerable contractual female workers in the unorganized sector are covered by a conditional cash transfer scheme, Janani Suraksha Yojana (JSY) (2005), providing antenatal and institutional care. However, the female platform workers who are classified as 'entrepreneurs'/independent work partners are excluded from these legal protections. This lack of support leads to potential income interruptions and career breaks, further intensifying the difficulties faced by working mothers in the platform economy.

Workplace safety is a critical concern for working women. In this regard, the Prohibition of Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (2013), which followed the Supreme court ruling in Vishaka v. State of Rajasthan (1993), held employers responsible for ensuring a safe workplace environment for female workers. However, these protections will not extend to female platform workers, as their services are often performed in private homes or other non-traditional settings rather than a formal "workplace". This classification excludes them from the legal safeguards available to women in traditional employment, leaving female platform workers vulnerable to safety risks.

With respect to women's representation, recent labour law reforms have highlighted the importance of inclusion and fair representation for female workers. Although the Constitution of India promotes equitable workers' rights (Article 39) and workers' participation in management (Article 43A), these principles are part of the Directive Principles of State Policy (DPSPs) and are, therefore, only recommendatory in nature. As a result, these constitutional objectives have not been fully realized, even in traditional workplaces. The Industrial Relations Code (2020) marks a step forward by

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(8) U. Rani, J. Unni, *Do Economic Reforms Influence Home-Based Work? Evidence from India*, *Feminist Economics*, 2009, 15, 3, 191; A. Sengupta, P. Das, *Gender Wage Discrimination across Social and Religious Groups in India*, *Economic and Political Weekly*, 2014, 49, 21, 71; P. Sorsa, J. Mares, M. Didier, C. Guimaraes, M. Rabate, G.Tang, A. Tuske, *Determinants of the Low Female Labour Force Participation in India*, *OECD Working Paper*, 2015, 1207; S. Sarkar, S. Sahoo, S. Klasen, *Employment Transitions of Women in India: a Panel Analysis*, *IZA Institute of Labor Economics Discussion Papers*, 2017, 115, C, 291.

mandating fair representation of women on grievance redressal committees, granting a stronger role for women in workplace dispute resolution. Gender-specific provisions like these and those in the Rajasthan Act, ensure that gender perspectives are included in decision-making processes. While these are positive steps, much more is needed from the Union and State governments to ensure that gender-specific issues – such as fair working conditions, equal wages, maternity benefits, and workplace safety – are addressed in all kinds of work, especially in platform work.

3. Engagement of women in the platform economy

Women account for nearly 48% of India's population, but contribute only 18% to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of the country (⁹). In fact, the low participation of women in the labour force has been a persistent concern for the country. As per the ILO, compared to 70.1% of men India has only 19.2% of women in its large labour force- implying an employability gender gap of 50.9%. Further, despite an improvement in its ranking in the Global Gender Gap report (2023) from 135 (2022) to 127 (2023), only 36.7% gender parity has been registered in terms of economic participation and opportunity.

In India, women not only face challenges due to socio-cultural factors, but also there are laws which restrict women's employment. These legislations stem from a paternalistic approach to women safety- laws exclude women from taking up any role which deviates from the traditional gender expectation or riskier industrial jobs in a factory or night-work. For instance, women are prohibited from working in morally inappropriate work such as in the liquor industry. Night work restrictions for women exist in several states, limiting their job opportunities in sectors that require around-the-clock operations. Employers in many states must meet quotas, mandating a certain proportion of female workers and supervisory staff on night shifts, which can increase employers' cost burden and also create practical challenges (like, calling-off the shift for not meeting the quotas when female staff members are on leave). Although some states, such as Bihar, Gujarat, and Chhattisgarh, allow women to work at night, employers are required to ensure the safety and dignity of female employees through measures like shelters, restrooms, and night crèches. Legal developments, such as the Vasantha R vs Union of India case, where the Madras High Court (state of Tamil Nadu) allowed women to work night shifts with conditions, offer progressive models, but implementation remains inconsistent. Legislative reforms should prioritize both safety and equality, promoting workplace inclusivity to provide more freedom/choice and autonomy at work to women.

The digital platform economy operates in a legislative vacuum today, and presents both opportunities and challenges for women in India. On one hand, it offers flexible work arrangements (for location-based work) that can accommodate women's

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(⁹) IIPS - ICF, *National Family Health Survey (NFHS-5), 2019-21: India: Volume I*, 2022.

caregiving responsibilities and even allow for work from home (in case of remote gig work). For example, women with young children can 'choose' to engage in economically productive work through digital platforms when the child/children are in school or undertake paid remote work alongside any care responsibilities. This flexibility to choose their work timings and working hours has the potential to increase female labour force participation rates, particularly among those who face constraints in traditional employment settings.

Despite the autonomy over work-related decisions in the platform economy, women's participation is seen to be low. Female labour participation in the platform economy in India, firstly, faces a challenge owing to the existing digital gender divide. As per the latest available round of India's National Family Health Survey (NFHS)-5 (2019-21), merely 33% of women in India had ever used the internet compared to 57% men. While statistics on access to a mobile phone are slightly better, 54% of Indian women only could access a phone (not a smartphone necessarily). Smartphone access is important to avail a range of digital services that can enable women to also find economic opportunities in the platform economy and beyond. Therefore, limited access to smartphones, access and connectivity to the internet, digital as well as financial literacy, and cultural barriers contribute to the digital gender divide. Gender wage gap in the platform economy is also found to exist in the platform economy [10]. Moreover, similar to the traditional labour market, occupational segregation is also observed in India's platform economy. India is not unique in this respect, as globally, gender-based exclusion/segregation and gaps in platform work are commonly observed [11]. Platforms engaging labour for providing home-based cleaning services (e.g., Helping in the UK), personal grooming (e.g., Urban Company in India) and care services are largely dominated by women. On the other hand, platforms offering digital ride-hailing services, food delivery, repair and maintenance services have an overwhelming presence of men. Women in India's platform economy are mostly concentrated in sectors like domestic work and beauty work, while a small fraction also engage in online ride-hailing and food delivery sectors [12]. A 2024 report, based on a survey of nearly 10,000 app-based workers engaged in ride-hailing and delivery services, found that women comprised a mere 6% of all workers [13]. Factors like lack of safety, sanitation facilities, toilets, and hostile work environment were identified as being responsible for such low female participation in these areas.

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[10] E. Gomez-Herrera, F. Mueller-Langer, *Is there a gender wage gap in online labour markets? Evidence from over 250,000 projects and 2.5 million wage bill proposals*, Joint Research Centre (JRC) Working Papers on Digital Economy, 2019.

[11] J.B. Schor, *Does the sharing economy increase inequality within the eighty percent?: Findings from a qualitative study of platform providers*, Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society, 2017, 10, 2, 263; M. Fuster Morell, *The gender of the platform economy*, Internet Policy Review, 2022, 11, 1.

[12] A. Ghosh, R. Ramachandran, M. Zaidi, *Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India: An Exploratory Study*, SSRN [Online], 2021.

[13] PAIGAM-University of Pennsylvania, *Prisoners on wheels? Report on Working and Living Conditions of App-based workers in India*, PAIGAM-University of Pennsylvania, Report, 2024.

With respect to gender wage differentials, a 2019 report by Team Lease (a staffing firm) found a significant gender pay gap between platform workers, with women workers earnings 8-10% lower than men (14). This is similar to the level of gender wage gap (7%) on certain ride-hailing platforms found in the U.S, attributable to differential preferences for speed, work timings and location, and years of experience (15). This indicates that the constitutional provision of 'equal pay for equal or similar work' principle (in relation to gender) fails to also hold in the platform economy. Certain gender-related 'choices' at work, inherently tend to limit earnings in the platform economy. For instance, female drivers associated with a ride-hailing platform might "choose" to avoid accepting rides at late night hours or to isolated locations out of safety concerns, even if they promise higher earnings. The choice to not accept the ride would be out of necessity and concern for their safety (related to gender), rather than a casual choice to not want to travel far or work more. Moreover, multiple cancellations or refusals (say, due to unsafe ride destinations) could lead to penalization by algorithms used by the ride-hailing applications, thus severely restricting the earnings of the female driver. While safety concerns could also deter male drivers from accepting particular rides, female drivers are relatively more likely to be more conscious and hesitant to accept them in most cases. This presents a key regulatory challenge to ensure the establishment of mechanisms for balancing occupational safety, and income equality for female workers in the platform economy. Legislations covering platform work must necessarily be cognizant of gender-specific dimensions. Platform companies can set-up toilets, restrooms, creches, request workers' feedback after a gig, and coordinate with local law enforcement agencies (in case of emergencies), to ensure women's safety.

4. Case Study: platform work in the beauty and personal services industry

The beauty and wellness industry in India is estimated to be growing at a CAGR of 18.6% (KPMG). Unsurprisingly, many digital platforms have found a business opportunity in this sector. These platform companies deliver beauty, grooming, and personal well-being services directly to the consumer's home by providing a two-sided marketplace. This market has the user/service requester on one side and a professional service provider on the other side. These platforms have gained further popularity following the Covid-19 pandemic, which made people wary of sharing public spaces and motivated consumers to increase usage of digital products and platforms, thus influencing their preferences and behaviors. This feminized sector presents a good case for undertaking a gendered study of platform work in India.
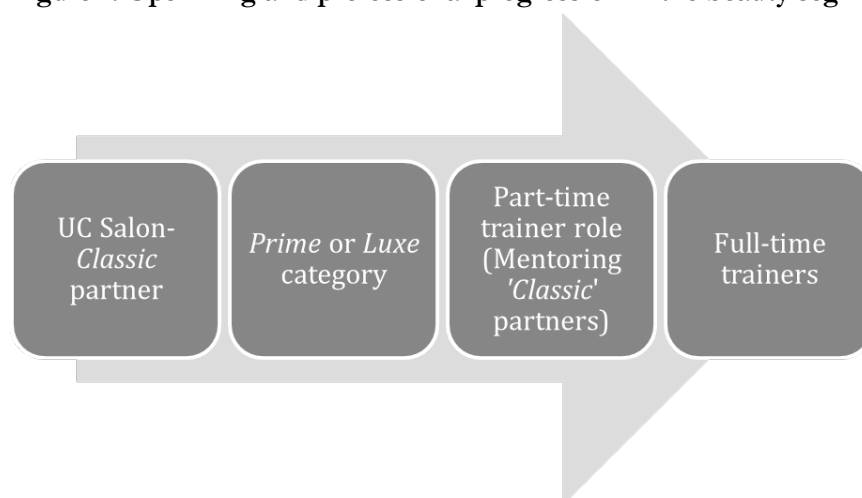
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(14) Team Lease Services, *Employment Outlook Report, Report,* 2019.
(15) C. Cook, R. Diamond, J.V. Hall, J.A. List, P. Oyer, *The Gender Earnings Gap in the Gig Economy: Evidence from over a Million Rideshare Drivers, The Review of Economic Studies*, 2020, 88, 5.

This paper studies two popular digital platform companies, namely Urban Company (UC) and Yes Madam (YM), operating in the beauty and wellness segment in India. While UC was established in 2014 in India (as Urban Clap), YM was launched two years later in 2016. The former has a reputation for providing home-based professional services like- beauty and grooming (for both, men and women clients), repair and maintenance, cleaning and pest control, painting, and wall décor. Urban Company claims to have over 45000 trained professionals on the platform and a presence in 61 cities in India and in four countries. According to the company officials, nearly 35% of their "partner fleet" comprises women (UC, 2024). While women are mostly engaged in the beauty and spa segment (one of UC's most important segments), men mostly work as plumbers, electricians, painters, and carpenters. On the other hand, Yes Madam only focuses on 'salon at home' services through its network of stylists, therapists, masseuse, and all beauty services. It claims to have over 3000 professionals associated with the platform which is operational in over 50 Indian cities.

In recent years, several workers have found employment opportunities through the two platforms. In the beauty segment, workers are provided basic training to enter the "Classic" category. After that, they can be elevated to "Prime" and then "Luxe" categories over time, based on customer ratings and consistent performance (figure 1). Moving up the role, based on good performance, implies better visibility, more bookings via the app, and subsequently higher/additional earnings for the workers. There is also a 3-days (previously 5-days) refresher training course for partners whose ratings fall below a specified threshold. In 2019, recognizing UC as a "key strategic partner" of the Skill India mission, the government's National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with it, for mobilizing, training, and certifying service professionals in the industry across India.

Figure 1: Upskilling and professional progression in the beauty segment at UC

UC Salon-*Classic* partner → *Prime* or *Luxe* category → Part-time trainer role (Mentoring *'Classic'* partners) → Full-time trainers
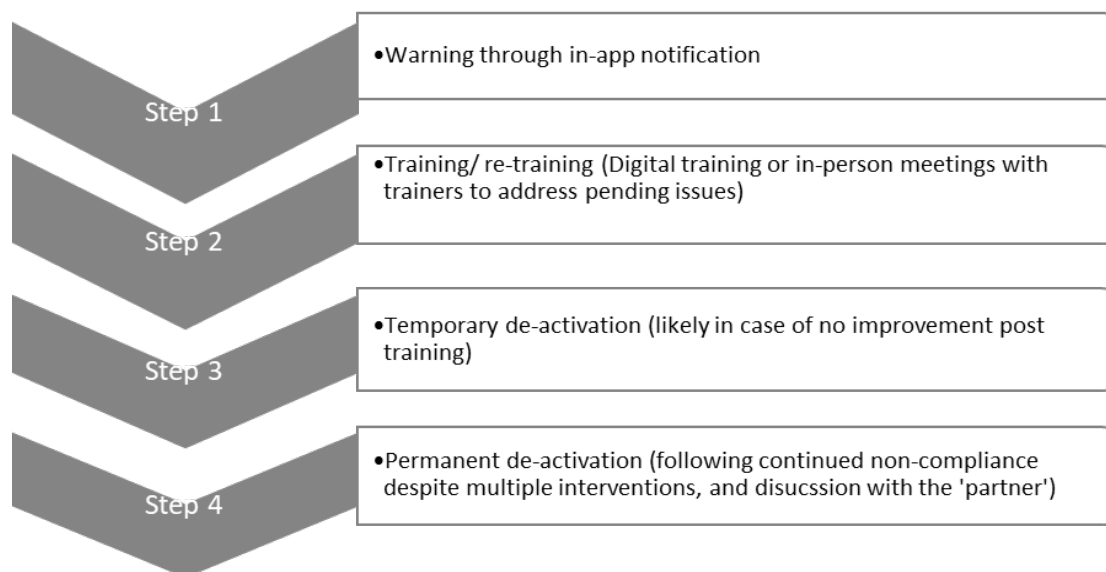
Source: Urban Company's website

Work through the two platforms requires workers to travel to and work in the service requester's residence. This complicates ensuring 'workplace' safety, especially for female workers performing 'gigs' at different houses. Besides this, due to the nature of the work, this industry was hard hit by the Covid-19 pandemic. It was in 2021 then, that workers (more than 50 women) started protesting outside Urban Company's office demanding better (lower commission charges) and safer conditions of work from the platform. The auto-debit of the credit availed by some UC workers was also objected to. As per this system, partners with the platform were mandatorily required to maintain credit in their accounts to be able to accept bookings. The commission charged by the company (earlier 30%, reduced to 25% in response to the protests) was auto-deducted from this credit after acceptance of a gig. This negatively impacted the workers' earnings and financial stability. In addition, the subscription plans (which required upfront payments), increased fines for cancellations, delivery of products to partners by the company without their consent (cost deductions required partner's consent) were other major aspects protested by workers. The company's first response to this protest was to sue some of the women workers, for protesting its new policies and rules. This was the first such legal action by a platform company in India against its gig workers. The company alleged that the protesters had been "dissident to the point that they are forcing other women to join a WhatsApp group to conspire against the company despite their attempts to sort it out amicably". However, measures like this threaten collective action in the platform economy and also dissuade workers from protesting against specific company policies.

The competitive business environment leads to services-based platform companies having stringent quality checks. Figure 2 shows various steps taken by UC for maintaining good performance of its workers. In this regard, there was another protest in June 2023 by a group of workers in the 'beauty and spa' vertical of UC against their accounts being blocked (temporarily and permanently) on the partner app, failing maintenance of "high standards" (minimum of 4.7 of 5 stars, from 4.5 stars previously), as reflected by low ratings and booking cancellations by users. The implicit threat of falling below the standard required to receive work through the platform compels (rather than "motivates") workers to work more and fear cancelling or refusing to undertake posted jobs. Following these worker protests, UC released a "12-point programme" aimed at improving partner earnings. It included a downward revision of commission rates from 8.5%-30% (for high value orders) to 8.5%-25%, penalties (from Rs. 3000 to Rs. 1500), product prices (by 10-15%), and transferring cancellation fees to partners, and removal of auto-debit of availed credit.

Figure 2: Maintaining the standards of service delivery

Step 1
• Warning through in-app notification

Step 2
• Training/ re-training (Digital training or in-person meetings with trainers to address pending issues)

Step 3
• Temporary de-activation (likely in case of no improvement post training)

Step 4
• Permanent de-activation (following continued non-compliance despite multiple interventions, and disucssion with the 'partner')

Source: UC Partner Welfare Policy

Data & methodology

Multiple efforts to get anonymized data from the platform companies were unsuccessful. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, public data on platform workers in India is unavailable at present. Given this data challenge, our paper attempts to utilize publicly available information for examining the conditions of work in the beauty and personal services segments within India's platform economy. Our approach is to empirically and qualitatively analyze reviews left by workers on the "partner" apps of two of the major platforms, namely, Urban Company and Yes Madam in India. For this, we have coded the data extracted from these reviews into broad categories to undertake in-depth analysis. While a quantitative study (through text-recognition softwares) for examining specific aspects is also feasible, our focus was on broader issues faced by the workers. Through this paper, we hope to motivate further research in this area.

Our data comprises 334 workers (both, male and female) who were working or had worked with either of the two platforms. This data was collected from May 2023 to January 2024, from google play store. Considering the dynamic nature of policies of platform companies (like changes introduced following workers' protests, plans to go public, market conditions, among others), this restriction ensures inclusion of recent reviews and thus enhances the relevance of our study. Nearly 70% of our sample belongs to Urban Company (UC), the remaining 30% comprising workers associated with Yes Madam (YM). Almost 96% of all UC workers who mentioned their occupation, and all (100%) of YM workers belonged to the beauty segment. Female workers comprised 46.2% of all workers, the remaining being male. Nearly 42% of the workers had been associated with the platform for over 3 years, indicating their dependence on the platform as a source of livelihood. We understand that not everyone is inclined towards expressing their satisfaction or dissatisfaction at work publicly by

leaving ratings and reviews about the platforms. It is likely that either those who are highly satisfied or highly dissatisfied with the work leave public reviews to express their opinions, share experiences, and attempt to be heard. Moreover, as many as 62% male and nearly 38% female workers in our sample have discussed the issues faced at work in some detail. This could lead to under-estimation of the issues faced by gender. We recognize these as some limitations of our study. Also, our study is restricted to reviews on the partner apps of both platforms where the individuals have revealed their public identities. This, to some extent, can help us ignore the fake reviews or spams or any malignant reviews targeting a particular company's reputation. Even so, we have anonymized the data for the purpose of this study.

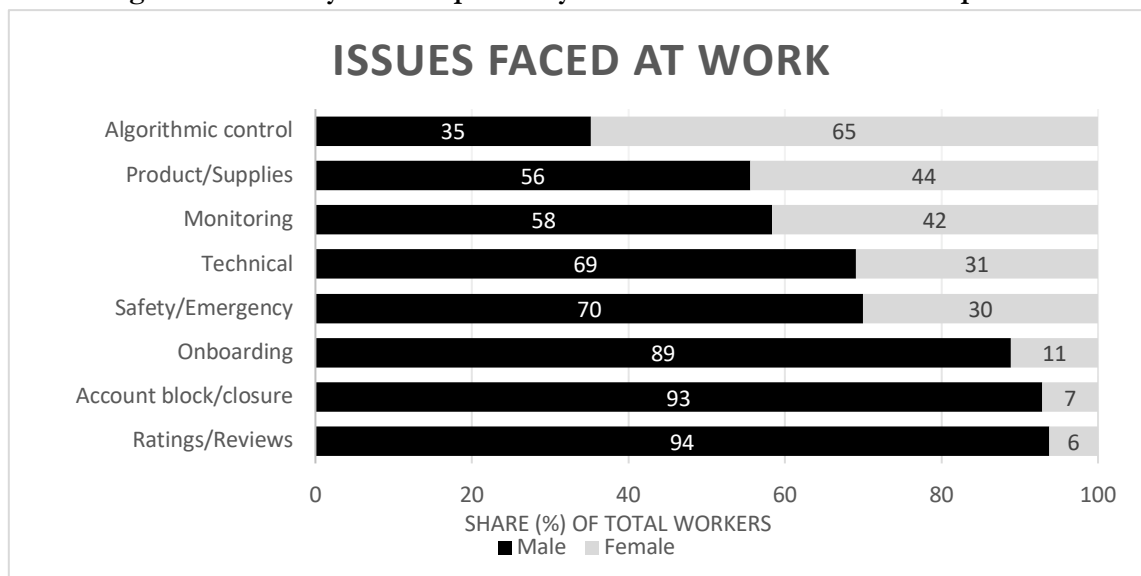## 5. Key findings and discussion

Using the data based on workers' reviews and feedback, we study the issues faced by workers associated with the two platforms. These are coded and categorised into eight broad categories, based on analysis of the experiences shared by workers. Further, we analyse the gender differentials with respect to these issues and discuss the scope for regulation in this section.

All female workers in the sample worked in the beauty and grooming sector, while men worked in sectors like beauty (76%), and other services (24%) in occupations like AC repair, electricians, plumbers, painters, and TV repair. Hence, there is a substantial presence of women workers in this segment of platform work, indicating the feminized nature of this work. To express their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the concerned platform company, 47% of the workers gave one-star (least possible) rating to the platform (either UC or YM) partner app and nearly 50% have given five-star (highest) rating. Interestingly, the one-star rating came mostly (nearly 61%) from male workers, while most (68%) of the five-star rating were given by women. It could imply low expectations at work or higher job satisfaction among female workers or a lesser tendency towards leaving public reviews. Studies have indicated that women tend to have higher levels of job satisfaction relative to men across countries [16] as well as occupations [17]. This could, perhaps to some extent, explain the observed gender differences in the ratings. Research in this area needs to be pursued to analyze work attitudes by gender in the platform economy.

[16] P. J. Sloane, H. Williams, *Job satisfaction, comparison earnings and gender*, *Labour*, 2000, 14, 3, 473; N. Kristensen, E. Johansson, *New evidence on cross-country differences in job satisfaction using anchoring vignettes*, *Labour Economics*, 2008, 15, 1, 96.

[17] K. Hull, *The paradox of the contented female lawyer*, *Law and Society Review*, 1999, 33, 3, 687; S. Dhawan, *Work climate and gender: Why are women scientists so satisfied at work?*, *Journal of Scientific and Industrial Research*, 2000, 59, 2, 121.

Figure 3: Some key issues reported by workers associated with either platform

ISSUES FACED AT WORK

Issue	Male	Female
Algorithmic control	35	65
Product/Supplies	56	44
Monitoring	58	42
Technical	69	31
Safety/Emergency	70	30
Onboarding	89	11
Account block/closure	93	7
Ratings/Reviews	94	6

SHARE (%) OF TOTAL WORKERS
■ Male ▢ Female

Source: Authors' calculations

The eight broad categories in which the issues have been classified are detailed below. These eight categories are not mutually exclusive and have overlaps. Notably, we also observe differences with respect to gender, as indicated in figure 3. Some of the reviews (in Hindi) are translated and shared to provide better insights into the issues.

(i) **Algorithmic control** - includes assignment of orders, frequency of orders, the total number of orders received, platform commissions, penalties for cancellation/denial of orders, fairness in pay. Some workers complained that despite subscription to the minimum guarantee plan and long wait/login time, they did not receive sufficient orders to make decent earnings. This led to their dissatisfaction from work. We find that nearly 33% of all workers mentioned algorithmic control of work as the main issue. Moreover, more females (65%) than males (35%) reported this as a key issue faced by them (figure 3). A female worker shared:

«Koi booking to aap log de nhi rhe ho 1 month ho gya working hu but ek booking tak nhi aayi mujhe». (You are not giving any bookings. It has been one month since I have been working, but I haven't received even one booking).

While algorithms themselves are not inherently harmful, their opacity can undermine fair work. For instance, a platform worker who declines jobs repeatedly may find themselves with fewer assignments in the future, trapping them in a vicious cycle of reduced earnings and ultimately leading to the exit from the platform. We argue for promoting transparency and accountability through state-mediated regulatory sandboxes and third-party algorithmic audits. These measures would aim to identify potential biases, safety risks, and legal violations.

(ii) **Technical issues** - relates to the mobile application (app) and platform's support to workers. This was the second most common issue faced by workers (both, male and female). Some workers complained about the functioning of the apps, as a YM worker wrote:

«Not giving OTP, shows invalid user mobile number».

Another worker shared the difficult consequences of technical issues saying:

«I am unable to join the session, join video call button was not enabled, I scheduled more than 5 times but the join video button was not enabled, I am trying from last 3 days, there is a bug in the application, I wasted my three days. There is no support».

In most cases, it included workers' frustration with non-response of platform companies to their reported problems. Many such reviews had a standardized and general response from platform companies asking the 'partner' to contact them via a given email address for support (which most workers claimed to be ineffective). This could be an effort by the platform company to communicate with the workers or to influence public perception/brand image.

(iii) **Reviews and ratings** - refers to customer feedback collected in the form of ratings and reviews by the platform. Nearly 10% of the workers report this as an issue for them. This is a form of algorithmic management of platform workers through a reputation system. It becomes important because it also ultimately affects the number of orders received, and therefore, earnings made by a worker associated with the platform. A large proportion of males (94%) reported this issue, rather than females. As figure 2 indicates, platforms often monitor and take actions against workers receiving consistently bad ratings/reviews from customers. Beyond the financial, this also has implications for workers' mental health and overall work satisfaction. As one review (January 2024) mentions:

«Dear [Urban Company Support], I hope this message finds you well. I am writing to express my deep concern and dissatisfaction regarding the mental pressure I have been experiencing as a partner with Urban Company. I have noticed a consistent increase in expectations and demands that are putting a significant strain on my mental well-being. The pressure to meet certain targets and fulfil stringent requirements has become».

This mechanism indicates a constant performance pressure on workers to work continuously, adhere to the (ratings) standards and terms set by the platform.

(iv) **Account blocking and closure of accounts** - is also reported as a key issue, by 8% of the workers (93% males). A worker mentioned:

«Won't work as a partner with UC in future. When the price is low and partner id is blocked, life is a waste. I gave UC 6 years but suddenly my id was blocked without giving any reason by the manager. I have seen 9 managers in 6 years of my association. This manager blocked my id and did not tell me the reason, did not give me 113 leads but new partners were getting 10 leads, while 1 lead daily to old partners».

Although comparatively fewer females have reported this issue, as discussed earlier, several protests by female workers in the beauty and grooming segment over the years have brought this issue to light multiple times. A female worker noted:

«Month me 75 lead ka target hai aur company pura bhi nhi kar pati uper se id bhi block karti hai bad experience» (Company is unable to fulfil the monthly target of 75 leads, instead it blocks my ID).

It indicates the stress faced by workers on account of sometimes unexplained blocking of accounts and non-response from the platform's support system, which makes them feel helpless.

(v) **Safety at Work** - is a concern, particularly for female platform workers who have to deliver services at the customer/client's home, with which they are unfamiliar. The workers may also have to put up with unreasonable or inappropriate demands by customers and face other risks like harassment, assault and theft. To address this issue, to some extent, platform companies have a dedicated SOS helpline for female workers. Nearly 30% of the women report this as an issue while working.

(vi) **Monitoring** - refers to the mandatory requirement by platforms of clicking selfies at the 'workplace', indicating the start and end of the gig (on the app), and constant sharing of worker's location. However, some workers allege that using information on their location and history of completed gigs, platform companies can trace if they revisit the same customer offline and impose a penalty for any offline gigs undertaken by them [18]. Some workers raised concerns about their data privacy and constant monitoring by platforms. In this regard, one worker wondered:

«*Every time I use this (app), it wants me to turn off my notification, my battery saving, and want my location open every time, for what use?*»

Such digital surveillance dilutes the 'work autonomy' that platform work claims to provide to gig workers, and sometimes adds to their stress at work. Another worker's frustration with this feature can be understood through his words:

«*Just stop this photo session while work (working), really fed up of clicking photos of everything on work!! Please stop this. And one more thing blocking of profile, it is not need (needed)*».

This monitoring and punishment mechanism restricts the "independent" partner's (platform workers') choices and decisions at work.

(vii) **Product and supplies** - relates to the cost of kits (e.g., beauty products, appliances, repair tools, among others), required for work, purchased by the workers. For standardized personal services, platform companies often mandate workers to buy products and supplies required for work exclusively from them. However, many workers in our sample complained about the high costs of these products and tools compared to market prices. This, being an out-of-pocket expenditure for workers, has repeatedly emerged as an important concern for many. One female worker wrote:

«*Main urban company mein 4 sal se kam kar rahi hoon 1 sal Ho Gaya mujhe company ne block kare hue Call ka koi response nahin deti Very bad urban company Itni mahangi kit dekar block kar deti hai company. Rs. 52000 fs gaye mere*» (I have been working with UC for 4 years. It has been 1 year since my account was blocked. There has been no response to my call. Very bad UC. After selling such costly kits they block. My Rs. 52,000 are stuck).

Another worker (male AC repair mechanic), otherwise satisfied with his work complained about the high product prices, saying:

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[18] P. Desai, *Gig workers battle exploitation and privacy breaches by Urban Company*, Outlook Business, 2024.

«*UC ku mera salam. UC bahut accha hai. Very nice, very good but UC ke partner ke kit ke liye jet pump price bahut zyada hai. Normal shop se jet pump liye to 3 jet pump ate sir. Request sir please price low kare. Thank you so much sir. Love you UC*» (Hello UC. UC is very nice. Very nice, very good but the jet pump price for UC partners' kit is too high. If I buy from a normal shop then I will get 3 jet pumps for that price. Request to reduce the price…).

(viii) **Onboarding, Skilling, and Re-skilling** - some workers reportedly had problems with the onboarding process, which includes verification, training, skilling, re-skilling, interviews etc. Workers must pay the onboarding costs to schedule the skill training sessions. Only after successful completion of the skill training (re-training) and interview, a partner's ID is activated. Re-skilling is mandated following a low customer rating or negative feedback. A few workers faced non-response from the platforms despite having paid the fees for the skilling/re-skilling sessions. As one female beautician claimed:

«*Worst app ever, no slots available for online training even though (the) app is asking for training. Been trying from (for) 3 days and this app is blocking my profile on weekends, and making me lose my weekend hours. No support team, all helpless*».

Notably, while poor performing (low-rated) workers associated with UC complained about the company blocking their IDs, YM claims to refrain from this practice, focusing instead on training them. However, the dissatisfaction of workers with the onboarding process (no training despite making payment), re-training (difficulty in booking slots, no communication after making payment, and rude behaviour of trainers) were evident in the reviews.

Therefore, we find that more than half of the female workers cite algorithmic control as a major issue- mostly implying inadequate orders received through the partner applications (irrespective of their category or subscription plan). It is to be noted that platforms often offer 'optional' monthly subscription fee-based plans for workers, based on the type of their membership (guaranteed quota of jobs, gold, etcetera). Based on the subscription, workers are categorized into "Flexi," "Smart," and "Plus" categories in UC. Those who refuse to purchase the 'optional' subscriptions are placed in the "Flexi" category and restricted to work only three days a week– Friday to Sunday. This is claimed to help the platforms in regulating oversupply of workers, to meet the demand for services and in turn also to add another revenue stream to their operations. While theoretically these are "optional" subscriptions, workers (mainly females) report being coerced/compelled to buy them. As one female workers notes:

«*What's wrong in this company. Why (do) they force me to join in luxe.. they off my calendar. (I'm) not able to get job(s).. I was work (working) in Prime (female Spa) from 2022 in Bangalore, I already got so many repeat customers. I don't wanna (want to) join in Luxe. im (I would) like to work in Prime only.. From office I got so many call(s) and they really force(d) me to join Luxe.. First they said (congratulations, u (you) have good rating..u (you) please come and join.. after that they fully forced to join*».

This review shows the implicit restrictions on workers' choices and their compulsions to invest more (time and money) in the hope of receiving more orders/gigs to meet their target earnings. The second most common issue for female workers relates to the technical support and customer support extended to them by platforms. While UC previously had nodal managers to help its partners with booking coordination, now the handling of partners' issues is done through a call centre. One of the female workers wrote in January 2024: «*Lack of proper coordination (between) partner and managers. Managers not responding. Running a scam by rating system by replacing older partner by new for kit selling. Scam Company*».

In addition to an inefficient communication channel between the workers and the platform, the comment indicates the incentives for companies in getting new workers on board (higher sale of products or "kit") while ignoring existing workers. Workers often must bear other costs associated with work. These may include, onboarding fees, and training fees. Then there are fees for re-skilling/re-training (following low customer ratings), and commission charges (15%-20%), besides purchase of supplies for work. Besides these added costs, changes in rules of the platforms also often leave the workers confused and worried, in the face of inefficient communication mechanisms. More female workers, relative to males, mention this problem.

Besides the issues discussed above, we also note other important challenges faced particularly by female platform workers in the beauty and grooming segment. One pertains to work commute (on a per-gig basis) required for delivering the requested/booked service. There is a stark gender gap in asset (especially, vehicle) ownership in India. Household vehicle ownership among females in India increased from 25% (2005) to barely 26% (2016), compared to 41% (2005) and 44% (2016) for males [19]. Figure 3 is a depiction of a common way in which female workers of YM (left) and UC (right) platforms are seen commuting to and from work. This raises questions about ease of working, degree of independence at work and work-related (travel) costs.

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[19] D. Kellstedt - D. Washburn - S. Lee - I. Gwarzo - P. Ahenda - J. Maddock, *Household motor vehicle ownership and obesity among Indian females and males: 2015-16*, International Health, 2021, 13, 2, 143.

Figure 4: Commuting for work- a gendered challenge

The other challenge faced particularly by female platform workers, is with respect to flexibility of work timings. It is noteworthy that females are not assigned jobs after 7-7:30 pm on UC or YM. The platform companies claim that this restriction is aimed at preventing late night travel to enhance female workers' safety during "vulnerable hours". However, this restriction also deprives those women who prefer evening shifts on the platforms, perhaps owing to care-giving responsibilities, other jobs, and so on, of the opportunity to work. It also fuels debates about restricting working hours for females for ensuring their workplace safety as opposed to the increased role of the state and law enforcement agencies.

Also, workers (especially females) in the beauty segment (services which involve physical contact) frequently encounter social stigmatisation [20] akin to that faced by other care professionals. Such work can lead to stereotypes that render their work "unmarriageable", "dirty" and "morally corrupted" owing to the high degree of bodily intimacy involved with strangers and performing cleanliness [21].

It is important to note that while workers in our sample have elaborated their issues with the functioning of platforms, UC earned the highest score (out of 10) among major platforms in India- 8 in 2020, and 7 in 2022. The *Fairwork India Ratings* project measures the working conditions of platform workers engaged across 12 major platforms across India on five principles, namely, fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management, and fair representation. However, the 2023 ratings noted a sharp decline in UC's score (5/10). The company's declining performance on the "fair management" principle, given the lack of adequate engagement of "partners" to address their concerns has been the main reason. Smaller platform companies (like YM) have even lesser incentive to make improvements in the working conditions. Therefore, it becomes important to highlight the issues vocalized by platform workers on different

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[20] N. Raval, J. Pal, *Making a "Pro": 'Professionalism' after Platforms in Beauty-work*, Proc. ACM Human-Computer Interaction, 2019, 3 CSCW, 1.

[21] S. Nair, M. Healey, *A profession on the margins: status issues in Indian nursing, Centre for Women's Development Studies*, 2006.

media to understand the various challenges faced by them. This shall be instrumental in drawing the attention of service requesters (consumers), platform companies, and legislative bodies to take measures for improving the working conditions in India's platform economy.

6.   Conclusion

Regulation of labour in the platform economy is vital for ensuring decent conditions of work and equality for all, irrespective of gender and other characteristics. This appears to be largely missing in the Indian context, at present. The legal status of platform workers in India, is that of "independent partners" or "self-employed" workers. This allows platform companies to employ "on-demand" labour without being liable to provide "employee" benefits (since such workers are not "employees" of the platform) [22]. In Canada and other countries such workers may be termed as "dependent contractors" [23]. In Kavita v Uber India [District Consumer Disputes Redressal Commission] it was held that Uber India is liable for the driver's fault without going into the employment relationship. A writ petition by the Indian Federation of App based Transport workers (IFAT) is still pending before the Supreme Court of India, where the court may determine the legal status of platform workers in India. Platform work is often marked by opaque algorithms that dictate job assignment, pricing, performance standards, feedback and evaluation systems leading to precarious working conditions. However, studies have suggested that collective action tends to be low among self-employed workers [24], for whom easy exit following dissatisfaction is an option.

Given few studies on the role of gender in the platform economy, much remains to be studied in India. Our study highlights the gendered nature of workers' experiences on digital platforms in the beauty and personal services segments. The set of challenges unique to female workers relate to algorithmic allocation of work, asset ownership, financial resources, work-related commute, safety concerns, digital gender divide, among others. While platform work is said to be precarious in nature [25], vulnerable groups (including female workers), who can benefit more from the flexible work, financial liquidity, low skills' requirements, low entry and exit barriers, of the platform economy might face additional precarity. Regulatory gaps in labour protections create a

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[22] V. De Stefano, I. Durri, C. Stylogiannis, M. Wouters, *Platform work and the employment relationship*, ILO Working Papers, 2021.

[23] C. Young, *Are platform workers really their own boss?*, OECD Observer, 2020.

[24] J. Brock, *Getting Organised Low-paid self-employment and trade unions*, The Fabian Society, 2019.

[25] M. Kenney, J. Zysman, *The rise of the platform economy*, Issues in Science and Technology, 2016, 32, 3, 61; S. Parwez, R. Ranjan, *The platform economy and the precarisation of food delivery work in the Covid-19 pandemic: Evidence from India*, Work Organisation Labour & Globalisation, 2021, 15, 1, 11.

precarious work environment for female platform workers, from restricted working hours to the lack of adequate legal safeguards. This paper argues for gender-sensitive regulations and policies to address the issues of occupational safety, working conditions, regulatory sandboxes and algorithmic audits to ensure fairness in earnings wages. For instance, measures towards skills upgradation (given the gender skills gap), occupational safety (in absence of a fixed workplace or client's residence as a workplace), travel compensation, greater flexibility (work timings), creche facilities (on need basis) for women working in the platform economy, and ensuring data privacy can make platform work more 'equal' for female workers. The paper also argues that businesses, particularly platform companies, need to value and assess the feedback of its workers perhaps as much (if not more) than its customers' feedback. This is important to understand issues faced by platform workers to ensure their well-being, particularly as we await availability of reliable labour market statistics on India's platform economy. Additionally, sensitization of users/customers of the services is essential for awareness towards the challenges faced by workers (especially, female) on platforms.

Looking ahead, the paper calls for an adaptive legal framework that evolves in tandem with technological advancements, providing a robust framework for the protection of all stakeholders. By proactively addressing issues faced by female platform workers, policymakers can create an ecosystem where technology-driven work aligns with gender equity, fostering a safer, more inclusive future for India's digital workforce. This adaptive framework would not only support the growth of the gig economy but also ensure that female platform workers are afforded at least the same rights and protections as those in other comparable work arrangements. Alignment of regulatory measures with the changing contours of work in the digital era, can enable India to pave the way for a more inclusive, equitable, and empowered workforce, poised to thrive in the digital economy of the future.

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