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## ABSTRACT

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Since 2015, with the rapid development of the platform economy, food delivery services have become an indispensable part of daily life, creating a significant demand for employment opportunities. However, female food delivery riders account for only 10% of all riders, placing them at the margins. This paper aims to address this gender segregation phenomenon by analyzing the gender adaptation strategies of female riders in the male-dominated food delivery industry based on gender performativity theory. Through methods such as face-to-face in-depth interviews, online communication, and observation of typical labor processes, we collected and analyzed specific labor experiences of female food delivery riders. Our findings reveal that female riders employ strategies such as degendered dress codes, continuous challenges to physical limitations, and minimizing menstrual periods to adapt to the male-dominated labor environment, thereby securing employment opportunities. Additionally, they must balance the contradiction between family responsibilities and work demands, continuously seeking a balance between professional freedom and maternal duties. Although laws and policies have gradually strengthened protections for female riders' rights, such as labor security, flexible employment support, and platform rule optimization, further innovation and implementation

are still needed in practice. The labor experiences of female riders reflect the deep structure of gender inequality in the platform economy. Future efforts should aim to improve relevant policies further and enhance societal support for female workers to promote gender equality and fair development in the labor market.

**Keywords:** gender segregation; gender performance; female food delivery riders; labor laws; labor process.

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## **Gender Segregation in the Labor Process: A Study on Female Food Delivery Riders**

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### **1. Introduction**

Since 2015, China’s platform economy has developed rapidly. The various life services led by the platform economy have covered all aspects of people’s lives. Among them, food delivery services, as the leader of the platform economy, appear more frequently in the daily lives of ordinary people. Therefore, while meeting consumers’ diversified needs, the platform economy represented by food delivery services also creates a large number of potential job opportunities. As “deliverers” and “intermediaries” in food delivery services, food delivery riders naturally become an indispensable part of this process.

According to data from the Chinese Internet Information Center, in 2021, the number of Chinese food delivery users reached 544 million, accounting for 52.7% of the national internet population. Correspondingly, the number of delivery riders was 7 million, and in 2023, the number of food delivery riders had reached 10 million. Merely from the perspective of the number of riders involved in food delivery services, this is indeed a vast and trendy field of labor research. However, focusing on the gender distribution of food delivery riders reveals significant gender differences. According to data from Meituan, the largest food delivery platform in China, the proportion of male riders far exceeds that of female riders, who only account for 10% of all riders, meaning that among every ten deliveries, one is made by a female rider. Thus, food delivery riders are dominated by males, presenting unique challenges and difficulties for female food delivery riders.

In light of the special status of female riders, this paper presents their adaptation process in the labor market on one hand and analyzes how they construct their personal roles through gender performance to adapt to the male-dominated labor market of riders on the other hand. It also discusses internal and external challenges faced by female riders and their strategies for response, as well as existing labor regulations that protect female riders and their areas for improvement.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Gender performativity theory was first proposed by Judith Butler, who argued that gender is not a natural or fixed identity but can be continuously strengthened and constructed through a series of behaviors, habits, and social interactions in everyday life<sup>(1)</sup>. Namely, gender is both an individual expression and a result of mutual interaction between individuals and society. Since gender is not always consistent with an individual's identity nor a consistent social requirement, individuals can certainly change their original gender identity through social interactions. By performing and reiterating specific behaviors recognized by social culture in daily life, achieving societal expectations and constraints for a certain gender, they can reshape their gender identity<sup>(2)</sup>.

Through analyzing the labor process of female food delivery riders using gender performativity theory, it was found that most female riders perform "male" behavior patterns. This gender performance mode is not purely to highlight their own gender awareness but rather an adaptive strategy for dealing with a male-dominated work environment and platform algorithms<sup>(3)</sup>. For instance, most female riders prefer wearing loose uniforms without grooming makeup or hair to reduce their feminine elements during labor processes to avoid unfriendly gazes and unfair treatment. However, outside their workplace in private living situations, female riders still primarily bear family care responsibilities as mothers, daughters, or daughters-in-law fulfilling typical societal expectations for women. Therefore, female riders constantly switch between "male" roles in their careers and "female" roles in their personal lives<sup>(4)</sup>.

Due to widespread gender divisions in labor processes and workplaces, labor laws contain provisions specifically aimed at gender equality and anti-discrimination<sup>(5)</sup>. Specifically: Firstly, regarding gender equality and anti-discrimination regulations in the labor process of female riders, such as labor laws stipulating equal pay for equal work; female riders enjoy the same rights and opportunities as male riders in terms of

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(1) J. Butler, *Performative acts and gender constitution*, *The performance studies reader*, 2004, 154-166; B. Poggio, *Outline of a theory of gender practices*, *Gender Work and Organization*, 2006, 13, 3, 225; E. W. Dumbili, *Doing gender, doing alcohol: The paradox of gendered drinking practices among young Nigerians*, *Social Science & Medicine*, 2022, 311, 115349.

(2) J. Butler, *Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory*, *Feminist theory reader*, Routledge, 2020, 353-361.

(3) C. Fine, V. Sojo, & H. Lawford-Smith, *Why does workplace gender diversity matter? Justice, organizational benefits, and policy*, *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 2020, 14, 1, 36-72; N. Vyas, 'Gender inequality-now available on digital platform': an interplay between gender equality and the gig economy in the European Union, *European Labour Law Journal*, 2021, 12, 1, 37-51.

(4) N. Tabassum & B. S. Nayak, *Gender stereotypes and their impact on women's career progressions from a managerial perspective*, *IIM Kozhikode Society & Management Review*, 2021, 10, 2, 192-208.

(5) N. Kabeer, *Gender equality, inclusive growth, and labour markets*, *Women's Economic Empowerment*, Routledge, 2021, 13-48.

employment conditions, work content, salary rewards etc., without producing unfair treatment based on gender differences<sup>(6)</sup>. Secondly, regarding work arrangements and health provisions for female riders facing family care responsibilities; laws should support flexible employment or choose jobs flexibly to allow adjustments to working hours. Moreover, considering the common physical discomfort experienced by female riders during menstrual periods requires additional protective measures or subsidies<sup>(7)</sup>.

### 3. Case Design

#### 3.1 Data Collection

This study employs qualitative research methods to collect data through various means to obtain highly saturated research materials, digging deeply into the gender performance behavior of female riders during the labor process from different perspectives. Firstly, by publishing interview recruitment notices, in-depth face-to-face interviews are conducted with female riders to obtain detailed information on their work processes while accurately capturing their nonverbal expressions, such as key emotions and attitudes that are difficult to capture in pure textual expressions. Secondly, leveraging the convenience of social platforms, online chats are maintained with multiple riders at an appropriate frequency to quickly collect their immediate experiences during work. Finally, personal narratives of female riders on video platforms are observed to supplement their gender role expressions in daily life and work.

Based on the above data collection methods, face-to-face interviews were conducted with 16 female riders, instant online chats with 20 female riders, and video narrations from 10 female riders were observed. After preliminary analysis and content integration of the collected data, this study combines face-to-face deep interviews and online instant chat data to focus on the work experiences and attitudes of female riders, particularly around their expressions of gender and professional identity. This extracts their social behaviors related to gender performances, such as strategies for adapting to a male-dominated workplace and conflicts between gender roles when switching family roles. Additionally, combined with video narrations, it assesses the emotional color and impact intensity of key issues faced by female riders in specific work scenarios, further supplementing their subjective perception of gender segregation in the labor market.

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<sup>(6)</sup> T. Koburtay, J. Syed, & R. Haloub, *Implications of religion, culture, and legislation for gender equality at work: Qualitative insights from Jordan*, *Journal of Business Ethics*, 2020, 164, 3, 421-436; F. B. Klein, A. D. Hill, R. Hammond, & R. Stice-Lusvardi, *The gender equity gap: A multistudy investigation of within-job inequality in equity-based awards*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 2021, 106, 5, 734.

<sup>(7)</sup> A. Hasan & I. Kamardeen, *Occupational health and safety barriers for gender diversity in the Australian construction industry*, *Journal of Construction Engineering and Management*, 2022, 148, 9.

### 3.2 Data Analysis

Then based on these multi-angled data, a comprehensive analysis of the group characteristics and typical examples of female riders is conducted. The former includes regional distribution and employment experiences, personal traits, and family backgrounds of female riders, also covering more specific information such as common personality traits within this group and motivations for choosing to become female riders. The latter selects a typical example from among many female riders to present their specific labor process and subjective work feelings within a gender-segregated labor market.

Based on the group characteristics and typical examples of female riders, further analysis is conducted on how they integrate into the workplace through gender performances in a male-dominated industry, how they compensate for physical differences caused by gender disparities, and how they address issues related to menstrual periods and bathroom breaks. Finally, it explores why female riders are trapped within platform algorithms, what rights challenges they face, and how existing laws and regulations support or respond to gender segregation issues in the labor market.

## 4. Portrayal of Female Food Delivery Riders

### 4.1 Multi-perspective Presentation of Female Food Delivery Rider Imagery

From a regional distribution perspective, the number and proportion of female food delivery riders in large cities are significantly higher than those in small towns. *YL, a rider from Hebei but working in Beijing, mentioned that in her hometown, almost no women engage in such work. However, when she arrived in Beijing, she found many female riders among them, some being her fellow villagers, others hailing from further south.* This observation is corroborated by other interviews conducted. In terms of career experiences, food delivery work is not their first job; most female riders have previously worked on factory assembly lines, provided domestic services, or as restaurant servers. *Before becoming a rider, LR was a housekeeping staff member at a chain hotel near Hangzhou's West Lake scenic area. During the local tourist off-season where fewer tourists meant reduced cleaning income, she chose to jianzhi (pinyin: jiānzǐ) deliver food during the mornings and evenings.*

In terms of personal traits, female food delivery riders typically exceed 30 years old and lack an undergraduate education. *A high school graduate like HP, aged 37, has been delivering food full-time for two years now. She is very familiar with the streets of Haidian District in Beijing and possesses access cards for multiple residential areas.* Not all female riders opt for full-time food delivery. As for family backgrounds, most female riders are married and have children. They include stay-at-home mothers who feel neglected by their husbands and

mother-in-laws due to household chores, divorced mothers raising their children alone, or mothers accompanying their middle school-aged children. *PL is a mother of two children. Two years ago, she accompanied her eldest daughter during high school, and this year began accompanying her younger son during junior high school. Between these educational commitments, she chose to the part-time job — deliver food to increase family income.*

There exists a strong preference for younger laborers in China's labor market. Generally speaking, both male and female workers over 35 find it difficult to secure satisfactory jobs. Consequently, workers around 40 years old are more likely to be marginalized in the labor market. Women without an undergraduate education who need to divide most of their energy between family care and work face double disadvantages due to age and gender. The flexible working hours, low educational requirements, and quick wage turnover of the food delivery industry undoubtedly become the top choice for these women workers. This enables them not only to balance family responsibilities but also to earn cash income through their capabilities. Among female food delivery workers, there are hardly any discussions about feminist theories; instead, they embody strong determination, hardworking commitment to work, and never abandoning family responsibilities. They boldly challenge the current status of the male-dominated food delivery labor market and strive to find their own foothold.

#### **4.2 Typical Case Presentation: “The Wind of Freedom”**

*KW is a mother who delivers food in Guangzhou, a provincial capital city from a rural area in Guangdong province. She has three children and her husband works in Shenzhen. Due to the distance between Guangzhou and Shenzhen, her husband often fails to attend to specific matters at home such as picking up their children from school or doing household chores. Initially, KW worked in a meat processing plant in Guangdong responsible for sorting and packing raw meats. At the age of 38, due to poor economic performance in her factory, she lost her job along with many colleagues. Soon afterward, KW realized that delivering food could not only meet her financial needs but also help balance her childcare responsibilities amidst the flexible working hours. However, she initially hesitated because she feared finding addresses too far away or delivery locations being too remote. But actually, for KW considering her age and family circumstances, becoming a food delivery rider was almost the best career option available.*

*Later on, KW overcame her fear of long-distance deliveries because it meant she could explore new places she had never been before, discover another side of the city which brought an exciting sense of exploration. Additionally, riding an electric bike through various corners of the city, especially on wider roads or in well-treed scenic old districts where the wind blew past her ears made her feel “free” and “unrestrained”. This freedom is partly physical distance allowing relative movement and partly psychological release from household chores and parenting responsibilities – a temporary escape from daily constraints. Therefore, for KW, shifting from concerns about long-distance deliveries to preferring such orders was not only due to higher pay*



but also because it offered opportunities to explore broader urban spaces and enjoy fleeting freedom moments.

## 5. Gender Performance of Female Food Delivery

Riders To survive in a male-dominated world and integrate into the circle of male laborers, female riders must minimize their feminine traits. Consequently, they adopt specific strategies to perform gender roles that allow them to fit into and be accepted by their peers.

### 5.1 Degendered Appearance Integration

Characteristics such as refined makeup, beautiful long hair, and a curvaceous figure, which are distinctly feminine elements, rarely appear in female food delivery riders. Instead, these riders often try to downplay their femininity to blend into the male-dominated work environment. In some well-known chain stores, during peak order periods, it is not immediately noticeable which rider is a woman; however, during off-peak periods, when riders gather at the station site, they often fill the air with secondhand smoke and electronic gaming noises, sometimes even accompanied by crude remarks that make women uncomfortable. At such times, female riders avoid being present or lingering long.

Therefore, female riders typically adopt strategies of keeping a low profile and avoiding drawing attention. They wear loose and ill-fitting uniforms and large helmets that cover their faces and bodies as much as possible, except for a stray lock of hair peeking through the helmet's gaps. *XC is one such example. She cut her hair short to save time on grooming and skincare routines, and due to busy schedules, she neglects applying sunscreen and skincare products. The prolonged outdoor deliveries have darkened her skin tone. Wearing black long-sleeved shirts, branded vests with delivery platform logos, and helmets, she almost looks identical to men in public view. To expedite digital authentication through the system, she often wears these items as daily attire.*

### 5.2 Compensating for Physical Disparities

From a physiological perspective, there is an objective gap between the physical fitness of female food delivery riders and their male counterparts. Society often refers to food delivery workers using the term “delivery boys”, which more directly reflects gender expectations for physical strength. Since the content of food delivery services extends beyond just delivering meals but also includes home deliveries, such as urgent document deliveries or purchasing daily necessities like bulk water or flour, there are also orders involving heavy objects that carry higher fees. However, these fee standards are typically set according to male physical standards, which adversely affects female riders. For instance, when transporting milk or other beverages in buildings without

elevators, female riders need to push their physical limits to maintain efficiency comparable to their male counterparts.

### **5.3 Addressing Menstrual Issues and Bathroom Needs**

Female riders also face specific challenges related to bathroom breaks during menstruation periods. Unlike the differences between male and female bathroom habits, male riders tend to resolve urinary issues more easily than females do who require formal enclosed restroom facilities. However, due to the pursuit of timeliness after receiving orders and frequent changes in delivery locations, female riders usually lack sufficient time to find restroom facilities to address personal needs. Therefore, to minimize bathroom visits, they often reduce their fluid intake during delivery periods. Additionally, when facing menstrual discomfort or reduced physical capacity due to menstruation, some female riders choose to take a day off to recover. However, this leads to a decrease in their rating within the system affecting future order allocations.

*XV takes a day off during her menstrual period when her manager is relatively lenient.* Yet if she is a full-time rider, taking a day off can negatively impact her existing system rating. Thus, most female riders continue working despite feeling weak during menstruation because they must balance their health with maintaining their ranking within the system. This situation highlights the unique physiological and psychological pressure faced by female riders in the food delivery industry.

## **6. Theoretical Framework**

### **6.1 Female Riders Trapped in Platform Algorithms**

The delivery process of food services is subject to platform algorithm rules. The platforms use these rules to limit the time for meal delivery, strictly categorize food delivery riders by rank, and calculate their income in stages. They also employ measures such as order delays, customer complaints, and task allocation to refine the rewards and punishments for each order, continuously improving labor efficiency. However, these measures place food delivery riders at a disadvantage, severely harming their rights. Moreover, the platform algorithm system and rule-making are based on male standards, lacking options like “are you currently menstruating”, focusing solely on efficient delivery service.

Under the rules of the platform, all riders become workers driven by the system's orders and willingly engage in competition for orders and service delivery. For female food delivery riders, this algorithm design not only increases their work intensity and stress but also adversely affects their health. In a highly competitive and gender segregated labor environment controlled by the platform, female riders require more legal protections and humane support.

## **6.2 Disputes between Customers and the Platform**

### **6.2.1 Disputes between Customers and the Platform**

During the early stages of the food delivery industry, facing conflicts between riders and customers, platforms aimed to expand their rider team and were more protective of food delivery riders. However, with increased market competition, platforms gradually had enough riders, leading to a shift in power towards customers in resolving disputes. Riders often find themselves disadvantaged in these conflicts. For instance, once negative reviews or complaints arise, riders have very slim chances of defending themselves successfully; hence, they usually bear almost all consequences of unsuccessful deliveries.

Female riders face more potential customer conflicts than male riders, yet the platform's handling mechanism tends to favor the customer side, resulting in economic penalties that reduce their wages and increase psychological stress during service delivery. Consequently, the current customer-oriented mechanism seriously undermines female riders' legitimate rights protection.

### **6.2.2 Social Security Rights and Platform Disputes**

In the platform economy, riders typically face issues without minimum wage protection, overtime work, excessive labor, and lack of social security benefits, including those experienced by female riders. These problems stem from ambiguous formal labor relations. Most food delivery riders often sign contracts with third parties rather than directly with the platform, intentionally blurring their formal labor relationship with employers. Some employers even guide riders to register as individual business owners to escape traditional employer responsibilities. This networked, liberalized, and flexible economic model further weakens the direct labor relationship between riders and platforms, causing repeated changes in the executant subjects of female riders' legitimate rights among third parties, individual business owners, and platforms.

In this context of ambiguous labor relations, the absence of social insurance becomes a core issue affecting food delivery riders' personal rights, particularly female riders. Since riders often need to take orders from multiple platforms simultaneously, determining specific labor relations becomes complex. This not only affects their legal basis for seeking work-related injuries compensation but also places them at a disadvantage when facing labor disputes. For female food delivery riders, claiming their rights is challenging. Facing disputes with customers, if communication fails with the platform's customer service, most choose to stop pursuing their rights due to family and societal pressures depriving them of sufficient resources and energy. Additionally, many female riders without a college education do not possess professional knowledge or means to effectively claim their rights.

### 6.3 Legal Support and Policy Response

In recent years, national and local governments have started to recognize this issue and gradually introduced measures for protecting new employment forms. According to *the Labor Law*, employers must participate in social insurance after establishing a labor relationship with employees. However, many new employment forms do not involve formal labor relationships where companies are exempt from providing social insurance payments.

**Joint Departmental Legislation:** In July 2021, eight departments including the Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security issued a *Guidance on Maintaining the Labor Rights Protection of New Employment Form Workers*, requiring areas to lift restrictions on registered residents participating in basic pension and medical insurance plans for flexible workers. In July 2021, seven departments including the National Market Supervision Administration jointly issued “Opinions on Engaging Network Catering Platform Responsibilities to Protect Food Delivery Rider Rights”. They required online catering platforms not to use “the strictest algorithm” as an assessment requirement but instead adopt methods like “algorithm moderation” to reasonably determine order quantity, punctuality rate, online rate, etc. Additionally, it advised relaxing delivery time limits.

**Legal Intervention by Supreme Procuratorate:** On April 27th, 2022, the Supreme Procuratorate initiated a case regarding prominent issues concerning food delivery riders and other flexible employment forms within the development of the platform economy and established a special case group to address these issues. Under its guidance, several regions including Liaoning, Jiangsu, Tianjin, Guangdong, Zhejiang, Shanghai, Beijing carried out specialized handling work. The case group integrated different supervisory perspectives such as public safety, labor relations, algorithm management to coordinate related departmental forces for promoting social justice and ensuring people’s well-being starting from food delivery rider rights protection.

**Local Legal Regulation:** Since May 1st 2023, Hangzhou City in Zhejiang Province implemented the *Hangzhou Online Catering Food Delivery Supervision Management Measures* (hereinafter referred to as “the Measures”). It specifies various rights such as contract signing, training opportunities, insurance coverage, pay compensations, queries about major matters awareness right against fatigue algorithm regulation appeal fund in one third of its content which drew public attention.

**New Human Resources and Social Security Rules:** In February 2024, The Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security published three new regulations: *Guidelines for New Employment Form Workers’ Rights Protection on Working Time and Wages*, *Publicity Guidelines for New Employment Form Workers’ Labor Rules*, and *Service Guide for New Employment Form Workers’ Rights Protection*. These guidelines provide specific guidance on payment for new employment form workers on working hours and rest days which include incorporating them into minimum wage protection scheme and higher salary for statutory holidays scheme sparking heated discussions. *Guidelines for New Employment*

*Form Workers' Rights Protection on Working Time and Wages* clearly states that new employment form workers not fully establishing formal labor relationships but managed by enterprises will apply the hourly minimum wage standard set by local regulations where they actually work.

These efforts have alleviated some issues but still face numerous challenges in actual implementation. Ensure that these policy measures can be effectively enforced and truly improve the working conditions of food delivery riders remains a key direction that needs attention and continuous promotion now and in the future.

## **7. Female Delivery Riders in the Platform Economy: Freedom and Challenges**

In the platform economy, female delivery riders adapt to the gender segmentation of the labor process through gender performance. Most female delivery riders transition from traditional service industries such as food and beverage servers and household helpers to the emerging sector of the platform economy. The relaxed requirements on age and education for delivery riders serve as the basic prerequisite for female riders to choose this profession, while the flexibility in working hours is the direct motivation for them to take up this job. However, the industry is still male-dominated, and female delivery riders have to bear the same work intensity and pressure as men. In order to excel in this job that allows them to balance family responsibilities, female delivery riders often adopt a series of gender performance strategies to adapt to the male-dominated delivery rider work environment, such as adopting gender-neutral attire, continuously challenging physical limits, and minimizing the impact of menstruation.

Meanwhile, female delivery riders strive to balance personal freedom and maternal responsibilities during their work. By adapting to the male-dominated platform economy through the aforementioned gender performance strategies, female delivery riders secure relatively flexible working hours and independent income sources for themselves. On the one hand, the flexible working hours provide greater feasibility for balancing family and work, which means bringing economic support to the family while invisibly increasing the burden of “maternal responsibilities” on female riders. On the other hand, the brief freedom gained by female riders through their work is also relative, as it is the best choice made among limited options – female delivery riders seek a balance between systematic gender pressure and personal freedom.

In response to the challenges that female riders may encounter in the labor process, the Chinese central and local governments have increasingly paid attention to this issue in recent years and are establishing relevant protection systems for women's rights and interests. Especially for female riders, a legal support system has been established, ranging from fundamental protection under national labor laws to joint guidance issued by ministries and commissions, as well as innovative implementation of

local policies, providing a legal framework for the protection of women's rights and interests. The specific content of this framework includes ensuring female riders' participation in social insurance, regulating platforms to reasonably adjust working hours and labor intensity, and improving a fairer evaluation system. Although these legal frameworks provide very effective and systematic support for the protection of female riders' rights and interests, specific support measures still need to be further implemented at the practical level to ensure effective alleviation of the practical difficulties faced by female riders.

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