Risky Business: Techno-Masculinist Conceptions of Flexibility in India's Platform Economy

Aashika Ravi*

Abstract: Location-based digital platforms promise flexibility, autonomy, and supplemental income, but neo-liberal hustle culture shifts risks onto workers, exposing women to heightened sexist and sexual violence. By promoting freedom and entrepreneurship, these platforms perpetuate techno-masculinist notions of flexibility, ignoring women's needs. Through narrative analysis of 10 female platform workers in India's ridesharing and food delivery sectors, this study reveals how masculine ideas of flexibility and risk exacerbate the precarity of already precarious work.

Keywords: Digital labour platforms, gig economy, gender, techno-masculinity, flexibility

Risky Business: les conceptions techno-masculinistes de la flexibilité et du risque dans l'économie de plateforme en Inde

Résumé: Les plateformes numériques basées sur la localisation promettent flexibilité, autonomie et revenus complémentaires, mais la culture néolibérale d'hyperproductivité transfère les risques aux travailleur·es, exposant les femmes à des violences sexistes et sexuelles accrues. En promouvant la liberté et l'esprit d'entreprise, ces plateformes véhiculent des notions techno-masculines de flexibilité, ignorant les besoins des travailleuses. À travers l'analyse narrative de 10 travailleuses de plateformes dans les secteurs du covoiturage et de la livraison de nourriture en Inde, cette étude montre comment les conceptions masculines de flexibilité et de risque aggravent la précarité de ce type de travail.

Mots-clés: Plateformes numériques de travail, gig economy, genre, techno-masculinité, flexibilité

Riskantes Geschäft: Techno-maskulinistische Vorstellungen von Flexibilität und Risiko in Indiens Plattformökonomie

Zusammenfassung: Standortbezogene digitale Plattformen versprechen Flexibilität, Autonomie und Zusatzeinkommen, während die neoliberale Erwerbskultur Risiken auf Arbeitnehmer abwälzt und Frauen einem höheren Risiko sexistischer Gewalt aussetzt. Mit der Förderung von Freiheit und Unternehmertum verbreiten sie techno-maskulinistische Vorstellungen von Flexibilität und ignorieren die Bedürfnisse von Frauen. Diese Studie analysiert die Erfahrungen von 10 Frauen in Indiens Ridesharing- und Lieferdiensten, um zu zeigen, wie diese männlichen Vorstellungen von Flexibilität und Risiko ihre prekäre Arbeitssituation weiter verschärfen.

Schlüsselwörter: Digitale Arbeitsplattformen, Gig Economy, Gender, Techno-Männlichkeit, Flexibilität

* Université d'Angers, F-49100 Angers, aashika97@hotmail.com.

1   Introduction

Increased flexibilisation and the proliferation of digital labour platforms such as Uber in the ride-hailing sector and Delivroo in the food delivery sector have transformed the world of work, reorganising workers' lives in every aspect, including where, when, and how they work. The effects of these platforms on the transformation of work now concern a large population of workers around the world – as much as 4.4 to 12.5 per cent of the global workforce is in the platform economy (Datta et al., 2023). The EU alone had 28.3 million digital platform workers in 2022 with this number expected to reach 43 million by 2025 (European Commission, 2021).

In India especially, the platform economy is booming. Studies estimate 3.03 million (Fairwork, 2020) to 7.7 million gig workers (NITI Aayog, 2022) in the country[1], with projections to reach 23.5 million by 2030. Between 2010 and 2018, transport aggregators Ola and Uber alone are reported to have unlocked 2.2 million livelihood opportunities in the country (Pradhan, 2019).

Working conditions of those providing services on these platforms are widely considered to be precarious, characterised by irregular working hours, task-based pay, digitally mediated work, reduced collective representation, the legal classification of "self-employed" in most countries, and limited access to social protection (Stanford, 2017; ILO, 2021a). This is the case for both location-based or "geographically sticky" platforms (Graham & Woodcock, 2018) that allocate work to individuals in a specific geographical area using the internet, and micro-working or web-based platforms where work is outsourced via an open call to a geographically dispersed population. Although we are primarily interested in location-based digital labour platforms, over the course of this study, Taskmo, a hybrid platform[2], was also studied.

2   Theoretical Framework and Research Questions

The on-demand platform economy is characterised by a recurring discourse of freedom, flexibility, and entrepreneurship, spearheaded by platforms like Uber (Griffith, 2015). These ideas – particularly the former two – have been unpacked with relation to job insecurity, dependence (Lehdonvirta, 2018), and precarity (Anwar & Graham, 2020), often showing that they come at the price of low pay, irregular hours, and

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1   These figures vary considerably due to the methodology used to characterise this type of work. While the Fairwork India 2020 report based its estimates on the 11 most popular platforms in India, the NITI Aayog methodology involved identifying the immediate characteristics of platform workers (supply side) and then estimating the number of workers with these characteristics within the sectors and occupations that require on-demand work (demand side).

2   Hybrid platforms have been mentioned in other studies of the Indian platform economy (Ghosh et al., 2022) but they are not all necessarily platforms that pay per task. In this study, however, all the digital platforms studied pay per task.

exhaustion and are heavily shaped by algorithmic control and information asymmetries (Rosenblat & Stark, 2016) inherent to the functioning of these platforms.

Gendered perspectives that break down the implications of this discourse for women are woefully lacking, particularly from the Global South (Hunt et al., 2019), despite indications of a strong gender dimension.

Platform work has been posited by multiple studies as offering flexibility that helps women reconcile their care responsibilities with paid work (Hall & Krueger, 2018; Manyika et al., 2016; Harris & Krueger, 2015) because they assume that women seamlessly fit gig work into workdays which constitute paid and unpaid work and that they choose this work for its flexibility, which is not necessarily the case (Balakrishnan et al., 2016). Beyond the question of choice, the way that women engage with these platforms is largely informed by their care responsibilities. Tubaro et al. (2022), for instance, have examined women's patterns of micro-work, a type of work with inherently "flexible" working hours, showing that women logged in more frequently, and for shorter durations, because their leisure time was more fragmented. This does not just indicate how women organise their time – it has concrete impacts on how much they earn on these platforms (Adams-Prassl & Berg, 2017).

This leads us to our first research question: How is flexibility experienced by women in the location-based platform economy? Is this flexibility compatible with what they need?

Platforms want their workers to exhibit "risk-taking entrepreneurship", telling workers that what they truly desire is to be flexible and work on their own time to combine multiple gigs to make additional income as a side hustle. These discourses are deeply embedded in the "language of neoliberalism" (Anwar & Graham, 2020; Holborow, 2015), which "encourages people to see themselves as individualised and active subjects responsible for enhancing their own well-being" (Zwick, 2018). In this way, platform work exemplifies neoliberal changes in employment relations, where the emphasis on individual freedom shifts risk onto labour (Anwar & Graham, 2020). The transfer of risk is an integral function of platforms that mask it behind shiny ideas of freedom and flexibility, leading us to our second research question: How does this transfer of risk impact Indian women platform workers? What kind of risks does this translate to in their work environment?

Techno-Masculinity in the Platform Economy

While techno-masculinity today appears largely in reference to male bastions of technology such as software engineering, geek culture, video game design, or military surveillance (Bell, 2013; Latini, 2023; Masters, 2005; Poster, 2013), the idea contained within, that men design and control technology, and by extension, women, is not a new one.

The relationships between masculinity and technology have been studied in sociology since the 1980s (Edgell et al., 2015), especially from a labour sociology perspective. Feminist technology research like Cynthia Cockburn's *Machinery of*

Dominance (1985) has shown how technology reproduces gender relations under capitalism. It is now widely accepted that technology is not neutral and that the "gender question" must be posed at every turn. It is primarily men who make the key decisions that shape technologies (Balakrishnan et al., 2016), and thus, the ideas beholden by these technologies are never neutral from a gender perspective.

When it comes to the platform economy, gender-blindness has been put forward by researchers (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2017; Micha et al., 2022), but the heart of the question, i. e. the ideologies causing these, has not been fully investigated. The absence of women in AI has been recognised in the use of workforce management systems or algorithmic governance (Digital Future Society, 2022; Westhoff, 2023), but this explains only an instrumentalisation of technology for the continued domination of women, rather than structural issues of techno-masculinity.

We purport that the platform economy is inseparable from the neo-liberalist hustle culture that it has flourished in. It is not simply male domination of the technologies involved in platform mediation that causes this gender-blindness, but a certain idea of masculinity constructed by neo-liberalist discourses in the West which are defined in terms of success, freedom, and entrepreneurship, and propagated by digital platforms. For this reason, we use techno-masculinity as a frame of reference instead of simply viewing this technology as being dominated by men.

This is reinforced by the fact that the masculinity in the "techno-masculinity" is directly in contrast with various experiences of racialised male workers in Western countries (Bernard, 2023) and in the Global South (Dinh & Tienari, 2021) who do not conform to these ideals and are in contrast, exploited and put in precarious situations by this type of work, impressing upon us the need to look at masculinities in plural, rather than using a universalist, one-dimensional understanding of male domination.

Finally, we situate this techno-masculinity vehicled by platforms in the cultural context of India, where it interacts with patriarchal and caste norms that dictate women's work.

The Western view of legal classification being among the principal causes of the exploitation of platform workers is not a universal experience, especially in India, where informal work is widespread. Around 80 per cent of the working population is in the informal sector (Basole, 2018). Informal work is extremely heterogeneous and comprises a wide range of employment relationships, often based on underlying social divisions of caste, community, gender, ethnicity, and religion. Women's presence in this type of work is disproportionate: up to 91 per cent are in the informal sector (Mishra & Iyer, 2021). The type of work that Indian women can engage in is highly restricted by intersections of caste, class, respectability (Radhakrishnan, 2009), and domestic responsibilities. This leads us to our final research question: How do Indian women experience techno-masculinist flexibility in conjunction with their care responsibilities? How do they negotiate the risk and precarity that come with a gig in the platform economy?

Our study thus aims to fill an important gap in literature around platform work – that of articulating these ideas, where they come from, how they are vehicled, and how they impact Indian women workers, who are at the intersection of precarity and rooted gender roles.

3   Methodology

This study is situated in sociological approaches to understanding women's experiences in India's digital platform economy, particularly in ridesharing. Traditional forms of occupational segregation seem to be reproduced in India's platform economy, relegating women to domestic work, beauty, and well-being services while men dominate in the growing sectors of taxi services and food delivery (Fairwork, 2023a; Ghosh et al., 2022). A report by the International Labour Organization (ILO) found that in 12 countries, only nine per cent of delivery riders and five per cent of ride-hailing drivers are women (ILO, 2023). As a result, studies on gendered experiences of the platform economy in India have mostly focused on the sectors of beauty services and domestic work (Bansal & Arora, 2023; Dhar & Thuppilikkat. 2022; Ghosh et al., 2022; Komarraju et al., 2022; Hiriyur, 2022), and by extension gender and caste intersections of care work. We try to thus reframe women's participation in this type of work by focusing on differing notions of flexibility in the most masculinised sectors of the platform economy.

10 semi-directive telephonic interviews of 20 to 30 minutes were conducted with women who previously or presently worked for a location-based platform in India in New Delhi and Bangalore, the two cities in India with the highest concentration of platform workers (Bansal & S.H., 2019).

Our sample consisted of two workers of the hybrid platform Taskmo mentioned earlier, one former Ola autorickshaw driver[3], one former food delivery worker, and six Uber drivers, as seen in Table 1 on the next page.

We chose Uber as the primary platform of study and included in our sample platform workers from other traditionally masculine sectors (food delivery, autorickshaws). The hybrid platform Taskmo was examined because it has been vocal in the past about the increase in women "taskers" during the pandemic (Sengupta, 2022). However, the interview process was heavily regulated from start to finish, reflecting the tendency of platforms to limit or control access to their workers to protect their image, a challenge that has already been identified in this type of research (Digital Future Society, 2021). The two interviews were scheduled without transparency in participant selection and the confidentiality of the interviews was not respected.

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3   Digital labour platforms in the ride-hailing sector Ola, Uber, and Rapido have onboarded auto rickshaws as part of their transport services. In 2016 alone, Ola had over 100 000 auto rickshaws registered on its platform across 24 Indian cities.

Table 1   Demographic Characteristics of Study Participants

Participant	Profession	Age	Marital status	No. of children
Vaishali	Worker on Taskmo	22	Single	None
Misha	Worker on Taskmo	24	Single	None
Yamini	Former Ola auto-rickshaw driver	43	Divorced	3
Sujata	Uber driver	30s	Married	3
Sheila	Uber driver	51	Widowed	2
Gauri	Uber driver	35	Married	1
Maya	Uber driver	32	Married	3
Radhika	Uber driver	43	Married	1
Vani	Former Uber driver	32	Separated	3
Yuvika	Former Zomato driver	39	Separated	1

To minimise the impact this could have on results, only the demographic profile of these participants and our independent observations of their working conditions were considered, along with the platform's motives for advancing these participants, which we look at later.

Due to Taskmo's control over workers' narratives, we reached out to Shaikh Salauddin, the founder and president of the Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union (TGPWU) and the national secretary general of the Indian Federation of App-Based Transport Workers (IFAT), to access women drivers in the transport sector. We ultimately used snowball sampling because of the trust that women drivers in the union had in each other. In Bangalore, one of our initial interviewees, Yamini[4], introduced us to other participants who agreed to take part in the study based on her recommendation. In New Delhi, participant Sheila connected us with other drivers in the National Capital Region (NCR) whom she knew through a WhatsApp group

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4   All participants' names have been changed.

of over 300 women drivers. This group served both as a communication channel and a safety solution.

It is important to note the challenges in recruiting participants in this type of economy due to the individual, alienating nature of this type of work – there is no physical place of work where platform workers can be recruited, and they spend long hours on the road, making it difficult to reach out to them. Workers often work independently, in isolation, and in direct competition with each other (Johnston & Land-Kazlauskas, 2018).

Emerging unions can regroup workers to a certain extent, but unionisation in this type of work is still nascent in India (active since 2019), and may not capture certain groups of workers, including women who have historically low rates of unionisation and participation in unions (Dash, 2019). In addition, women drivers constitute a small percentage of workers in the male-dominated sectors we have studied. Our results are thus indicative, but not representative of the larger experiences of women in the platform economy.

4 "Hustle Culture" and the Platform Economy

The working conditions offered by platforms are mainly considered precarious due to their break from the Standard Employment Relationship (SER) which became the norm in Western societies in the 1950s. Defined as "a situation where the worker has one employer; works full-time, year-round on the employer's premises under his or her supervision; enjoys extensive statutory benefits and entitlements; and expects to be employed indefinitely" (Cranford & Vosko, n.d.), the SER reinforced the male breadwinner model, relegating women and racialised workers to non-standard forms of employment (Woodcock & Graham, 2020).

The SER has since largely declined, giving way to flexible employment relations that permit enterprises to increase or diminish their workforce, reassigning and redeploying employees with ease (Stone, 2006) as part of a larger neoliberal shift in employment relations (Thomas et al., 2020). Historical perspectives indicate that platform work originated in neoliberal economies (Edgell et al., 2015) and has intensified since the 1990s (Cano et al., 2021).

True to its neoliberal roots, the platform economy promotes idealised visions of individual economic success and autonomy (Hill, 2020), pushing workers to "hustle", which Cottom (2020) describes as "a type of job-adjacent work that looks like it is embedded in the formal economy but is governed by different state protections, which makes the work risky and those doing it vulnerable."

Platform capitalism is a vehicle for hustle culture, defined as "a toolkit for individuals to navigate rising inequality, develop a sense of empowerment in the face of structural oppression, and create moral boundaries around worthy and un-worthy individuals" (Hill, 2020, p. 1). Hustle culture by itself is intricately linked

with the idea that structural inequalities can be overcome through personal grit and entrepreneurship, framing them as inconveniences rather than fundamental organising principles of society.

This discourse is especially appealing to Indian women, who have been historically excluded from formal employment and as a result, have turned in large numbers to paid informal work in the service sector (Sen, 2008).

> *Ma'am I have done a diploma in Civil Engineering but our family is poor, 5 daughters, we didn't have a father so at that time the routes to success were very different, we had to work in unique ways. And even if we go and work for someone, we remain only their employee. If we do it on our own then even if we earn 10 rupees, we are the owners, so we have that satisfaction. With our family, we have to think about money.* (Yamini, participant)

When Yamini refers to the desire to break free from being a mere employee, it can be understood in context of the "frayed careers" (Sabelis & Schilling, 2013) that women have as opposed to men's mostly linear careers. This was the case for many of our participants, whose careers resembled a patchwork of multiple entries and exits into the job market, often in informal jobs in gas stations, tea shops, etc.

In the face of this, the neoliberal dream of hustling one's way to success, while difficult, is especially tempting.

> *Someone would say that if you have relations with me, then I'll give you a good job or something like that… they said quite a lot of things like that. In another place it was like I didn't get a salary despite having worked 15 days and they said… the salary is this much, then after I started going to work, I found out that they weren't going to pay me. I was quite worried about all these things. For women, this is the most important thing.* (Maya, participant)

Our participants seem to feel a sense that they could make it on their own in the hustle culture of the platform economy despite the long hours and precarious working conditions. This is not to position them as passive victims of predatory platforms, but rather to say that the discourse surrounding hustle culture may appeal to them particularly due to a lack of agency in other areas of life.

4.1   Risk and Responsibility in Hustle Culture

In their bid to transfer risk and responsibility entirely onto their workers, platforms reinforce existing inequalities for women, including threats to their physical safety.

ILO surveys have revealed that workers in the app-based taxi and delivery sectors, particularly women, face several occupational safety and health risks. About

83 per cent of workers engaged in the taxi sector and 89 per cent in the delivery sector reported having safety concerns about their work, such as road safety, theft, and physical assault (ILO, 2021b).

Platforms ignore how to retain the women and marginalised groups that they actively recruit, isolating women workers as a result. In Fairwork's interviews with women, many have reported feeling discriminated against and unwelcome on these platforms (Fairwork, 2023b).

> *Uber does not give any response to the fact that these are women, they are driving at night, so we should pay special attention to them. In Uber, it's not like there are 1000 women, there are around 10–12 ladies, right? If you cannot ensure the safety of 10–12 women, then what do we do? Uber keeps saying: "bring more ladies into the company", but if there is no safety in the company, then what is the point?* (Maya, participant)

4.2   The Risk of Sexual Violence

In the event of incidents, interview participants voiced that the platform helpline was unresponsive or unreachable, and workers were left to fend for themselves. In case of accidents, Uber does not intervene, nor do they compensate drivers for lost income, leading to harrowing ordeals for women drivers.

> *Two days ago, I was completing a journey from Noida to Ganeshnagar. He… [the customer]… had to pay a bill of Rs 471. He misbehaved with me for a while. When the destination arrived, I said, "Get off". He said no, you have to go all the way to Lakshminagar. I said "I will drop you according to your drop location". He then started misbehaving with me, saying "I have 36 women like you in my bed". I asked him to get out of the car and he refused. I thought that it would only take two minutes and that I'd just drop him instead of arguing with him. The moment I crossed the Lakshminagar bridge, he refused to pay me. He was really out of line with his bad behaviour. I'd been calling the police for 15 minutes and dealing with this man alone. He left without giving me the money. The police arrived 15 or 20 minutes later. If he'd hit me, if he'd tried to force me, what would I have done on my own? I called Uber and got no answer, they told me it was my responsibility, and that I should have taken the money from him. This man is ready to hit me, and I'm supposed to take money from him? He's ready to hit me, should I let him? He is mistreating me, should I listen to him?* (Maya, participant)

Women drivers feel powerless in such situations, not least because Uber does not get involved. The police were not quick to intervene either, which increased the

risk for the participants. Indeed, platforms enjoy the grey area of their lack of legal responsibilities.

> *Today we went to the police station… we have a friend, Priya madam. She drives at night. A drunkard had smashed a bottle on her neck. We didn't get any compensation from Uber. So, we went to the police station to file a complaint, and the police constable said he would come to the Uber office with us and we could complain to them. He said we could go to the Uber office next week and he would mediate.* (Sheila, participant)

While this anecdote may show a proactive police officer, what it really illustrates is the lack of protections and recourse that workers have in the face of the platform. The legal grey area occupied by platforms and a lack of established protocol mean slow reactivity of law enforcement, forcing women to create informal support networks such as Whatsapp groups in the face of sexual harassment and physical threats.

Platform workers do not have insurance in case of accidents, leaving them entirely responsible in the case of injury or personal harm. Women in particular are reluctant to raise disputes because of the lengthy procedures involved and the fear of a consequent drop in their ratings or a loss of income (Kasliwal, 2020).

> *He [the policeman] asked me if I'd like to file a complaint. I said if I file a complaint and he is caught, then okay…whichever police station you call me to, I'll come. If I file a complaint and you can catch him and punish him, then I'll come. But if you can't guarantee that he's caught, then there's no point in coming, I won't waste my time. In this time, I could just work.* (Maya, participant)

4.3   Sexism and Surveillance

> *When I was working as a driver, other drivers, male drivers would try to overtake me. Ego problems. "Oh, you have come to earn money?" They would touch you, things like that. I have faced the worst.* (Sujatha, participant)

Women workers are likely to experience overt and covert sexism in the form of patronising behaviour and intimidation from their peers (Fairwork, 2023b), and sexist remarks from customers, especially in highly masculine sectors such as food delivery and ridesharing. Women cab drivers in India have shared that customers often cancel on them shortly after they see a woman cab driver's name (Outlook Web Desk, 2023).

Information asymmetries present in the digital infrastructure of the platform skew power relations to the advantage of customers (Heeks, 2017). The provider in-

terface offers minimal information about clients and even the most basic information becomes available only after the provider has accepted the request and thus commits to taking on the gig (van Doorn, 2017). This is especially risky for women drivers, who are apprehensive about customers having access to their personal information.

> *If a man books a cab, we don't get his details, but he gets all of ours. Our information, like our name, our address, where we are – but we only get their phone number. If we also get their contact details, we'll have some security in the event of an incident.* (Yamini, participant)

This information asymmetry is based on an underlying philosophy that favours the customer, often to the detriment of the driver. As far as evaluation is concerned, both parties can rate the ride, but participants made it clear that their comments on the passengers are never taken into account. Women drivers often have to listen to sexist comments about their profession, but do not always stand up for themselves out of fear of being sanctioned by the platform. While high ratings mean more fares, higher tips, and the possibility of getting onto new tiers of Uber, low ratings can penalise drivers, leading to account review or deactivation in some cases.

> *We are driving the car. And we are taking them somewhere. So, they are a kind of God… whatever they say, we are on duty and so, until then we keep saying yes sir, yes sir, yes sir.* (Vani, participant)

Platforms' risk transfer mechanisms are gender-blind and deeply embedded in their systems, causing their digital infrastructure to reproduce – and often amplify – risks for women workers. This is a result of what we consider to be techno-masculinity inherent in the platform economy.

5 How Platforms Vehicle Techno-Masculinist Ideas of Flexibility

One of the most important characteristics of digital labour platforms today is their positioning of themselves as a path to more flexible working arrangements than the standard employment relationship, prioritising "hustle" over job security.

What we are seeing is a complete restructuring of the sectors in question, which the platform dictates through its modes of functioning, impacting women workers in ways that it has not anticipated, nor seeks to avoid. Platforms mobilise technology to shape or rather, dictate processes and systems that inherently speak to male ideas of freedom and flexibility, which are not necessarily shared by the women who participate in them, forcing them to fit around a system designed with men in mind.

Fairwork (2023b, p. 4) too finds that "platforms operate on the assumption that the worker is an independent, efficient, mobile, digitally engaged man without family responsibilities and other considerations." Platform processes reflect this assumption in their use of algorithmic governance to provide incentives that ultimately attempt to prime a certain pattern of predictable behaviour of workers, which does not consider women's needs.

5.1 Gendered Notions of Flexibility in the Platform Economy

Our interview with the Director of Operations at Taskmo highlights one of the many gendered ways in which platforms fail to address women's specific needs. When talking about the hybrid nature of tasks offered, he referred to housewives as being lazy for preferring remote work. Taskmo does not use an algorithm to allocate tasks but attributes them manually to "active" workers, or rather, their idea of one.

Our sample includes two women who work at Taskmo, who were selected by the platform for our interviews. It can be supposed that their selection over other workers was because they embody what the platform values in workers: they came to work every day (even though they worked on projects that did not require it), were young and motivated to work irrespective of the income and were more educated than our other participants. They were not averse to working on the weekends when the company required it (Misha, participant), a stark contrast to the Uber drivers in our sample, who worked on weekends because they needed the money.

Their aspirations are aligned with the hustle culture that we describe above. Both women had side gigs from which they gained at least 20 per cent of their total income, despite working over 50 hours a week at Taskmo. Their perception of platform work was that of a quick money-making endeavour, while waiting for their real projects to take off.

> *I think since the financial year is ending in March, from April or May the people will start onboarding us so until then I'll be doing temporary jobs here and I think my future job is to get into the IT domain and you know, work there, improve my skills, do some certifications and courses.* (Vaishali, participant, worker at Taskmo)

The two workers we interviewed at Taskmo corresponded to the profile of workers that the platforms sought and rewarded with more tasks, while women who sought remote work opportunities were penalised by the platform.

If we look closely at the wage-setting systems at platforms like Uber, we notice that the algorithmic attribution of tasks shows similar biases.

5.2   Algorithmic Wage Discrimination Through Obscure Wage-Setting Systems

In order to maintain the supply of drivers during high-demand slots, such as mornings from 8 to 11 am and evenings after the workday at 5 pm, Uber's incentive policy offers higher pay to drivers during these peak hours. Participants expressed a sense of obligation to work these hours and planned their day around completing these tasks, not solely due to financial necessity.

Refusing too many rides can impact drivers adversely and could even get them suspended or blocked permanently. "Cancellation abuse" (H., 2024) is one of the documented reasons that drivers' accounts can be blocked on these platforms.

> *They penalised a trip of mine even though it wasn't my fault. The customer cancelled the duty[5] at the airport. And they blocked my ID. If we cancel 3 rides… or if the rider cancels, then they put us on hold for 15 minutes. For one month I've been going to the airport, and I don't get trips. They've banned me from the airport for a month now.* (Maya, participant)

In July 2022, Uber introduced an upfront payment that tells drivers how much they will earn in total for a ride (India.com, 2022) but hides the breakdown of the ride price, leading to a lack of transparency on the platform's commission.

Veena Dubal's (2023) findings on "algorithmic wage discrimination" suggest that Uber uses granular data on its drivers to produce unpredictable, variable, and personalised hourly remuneration. Experiments with drivers show that the same rides do not result in the same remuneration for all drivers – in one case, the algorithm offered higher fares to the driver who was more selective in order to incentivise him to work – and lower fares to the driver who was more likely to accept a ride for less remuneration (The Rideshare Guy, 2023).

> *It was difficult because, in the beginning, they used to give us four "Go homes". Wherever you go, you can use the "Go home" button four times. If I've come here by chance, and I'm 3–4 km away from my house, then I can put in my home address in the app. In the beginning, we used to get it four times. Everything has changed now. I think they give two "Go homes" now.* (Vani, participant)

Platforms dangle a carrot to entice workers who are highly dependent on this income into a position of forced flexibility which can especially affect women's ability to balance work and family responsibilities. Low incomes especially fragilise women

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5   The term "duty" was used by multiple drivers, all in and around New Delhi, to refer to the rides that they accepted, and the times they were on call. This could be looked at as a simple variation of Indian English that has found its way into Hindi, or on a deeper level, a projection of how participants look at this time in general.

who face a persistent wage gap. Studies have found that women delivery workers in India make around 10 per cent less than men (Kar, 2019; Kasliwal, 2020) due to women's inability to earn more by taking advantage of surge pricing, schemes, and incentives, etc.

Platform policies that influence "flexibility" can take an even more paternalistic turn. Fairwork (2023b) highlights the case of women workers at an Indian grocery delivery platform who were automatically logged out of the application at 6 pm due to safety issues. The platform took upon itself the moral responsibility of preventing women from accessing work instead of offering security measures for them, choosing instead to police their working hours, which penalises women attempting to "work on their own schedule", giving them unequal opportunities when compared to their male counterparts, and ultimately amplifying existing gender inequalities.

6   Where Hustle Culture Meets Traditional Gender Roles in India

For Indian women, these notions of flexibility intersect with a history of "rooted" social reproduction (Cowan, 2020), creating conflict between their need to work and their social role as caregivers.

Patriarchal, upper-class, and caste-based ideologies restrict women's mobility and associate their moral values with social reproductive responsibilities (Lal, 2011; Soni-Sinha, 2006). Women's education has a U-shaped relationship with labour force participation due to an income effect whereby women with more education marry into richer families that enable them to withdraw from the labour force (Das & Desai, 2003; Kingdon & Unni, 2001; Reddy, 1979). Other studies have shown that women have many domestic responsibilities – they look after children and the elderly in the family and tend to do other unpaid work – and so only accept work in times of distress; if the economy is doing well, they tend to withdraw from the workforce (Ghose, 2016; Mehrotra & Sinha, 2017).

Our participants at Uber in particular have low levels of education, and their socio-economic background does not allow them this choice to remain at home, instead pushing them into informal, precarious work while they continue to maintain their social roles. Some of our participants grappled with this conflict between neo-liberal, flexible production at Uber and "rooted" social reproduction, i.e. their role as caregivers, but accepted it as their lot in life.

> If we want to do our housework, then we have to make time for it as well. At that time… even if we can't, we still somehow have to… however tired one is, one has to do the housework. If we are tired and don't do it, then it'll become more in the morning. Then in the morning if it becomes more, we won't be able to go to work. (Vani, participant)

We understand the resignation towards this tension as a reflection of how deeply hustle culture is ingrained in platform work, and how it interacts with women's social responsibilities, increasing work-family conflict and leading to exhaustingly long hours of paid and unpaid work.

Some of our participants, such as Vani and Yamini, were divorced, and hence played a double role: that of the family breadwinner as well as that of the caregiver. Women in India often enter domestic work, cab driving, and food delivery in the absence of a primary male earning member in the family (Ghosh et al., 2022). In countries like India and Bangladesh, Fairwork has found that platform work is the natural choice for women in non-traditional family structures due to cultural stigma around divorce and single motherhood (Fairwork, 2023a). For Yamini, this double role was a precarious balancing act; she felt that she was responsible for the family's reputation or honour as well as for making ends meet.

> *I return home at 8:30 or 9 pm. In the morning, I leave at 8:30–9 or 10 am. I lock the house and leave. Even though the neighbours are good, because of my daughters' age… I have to bring up and educate my daughters. I've made it this far on my own, but if there's the slightest problem…* (Yamini, participant)

While platform work could be seen as providing women in non-traditional arrangements with stable employment, techno-masculinist ideas of flexibility and risk clash with the multiple social roles that they play, rendering them economically and socially precarious.

7 Conclusion

As the platform economy continues to expand, it is extremely important to understand that this gender blindness is not a symptom, but inherent to the way that platforms function. Digital labour platforms, as other jobs and organisational structures, are not gender-blind or gender-neutral; they simply rest on the assumption that the average worker is a male, although in reality, workers are very much "gendered" and "bodied" (Acker, 1990).

How can we go about dismantling these biases? Perhaps by naming the unnamed and gendering that which appears degendered.

This article is a first step towards revealing how "gender-neutral" processes in fact reproduce existing inequalities between women and men in the world of work, but other promising ones have begun.

BluSmart, an electric ride-sharing platform based in Gurgaon is using Fairwork Guidelines to consult women drivers to understand and eventually factor in their

needs in terms of working hours and safety (Fairwork, 2023b). They acknowledge women drivers' unique position in terms of their care responsibilities and career aspirations (BluSmart India, 2023), claiming to provide flexibility and support to navigate these.

On a policy level, the state of Rajasthan for instance, has passed the Rajasthan Platform-Based Gig Workers (Registration and Welfare) Act 2023 to establish a welfare fund for platform workers financed by a tax levied on every transaction on a given platform (Bhatia, 2023). The fund will be used to finance programmes to ensure the welfare of platform workers. A government-run database will keep track of employment status and length of engagement with a platform. This could be a first step towards documenting women in the platform workforce. In addition, the law provides for the establishment of a welfare council where representatives of the platform workers' unions will participate in decision-making on how the money is to be spent, one-third of whom are required to be women.

However, in terms of policies around women's specific needs, the challenges are more complex. Platforms do not provide their data on workers, citing concerns of privacy and anonymity. This is especially concerning in a country like India, where challenges in measuring the scope and size of informal work abound. In withholding this data, not only do platforms slow down regulatory action, but also evade the responsibility of taking into consideration the demands of different segments of workers.

No Indian platforms are currently willing to negotiate with worker-led movements (Fairwork, 2020), leaving workers trapped between a platform that does not acknowledge their legitimacy, and a government that lacks the information and resources to move the needle in a significant way. This is especially detrimental to women's needs since much of the mobilisation in platform work has taken place in the male-dominated rideshare and food delivery sectors. Women thus do not necessarily profit from the strides taking place in collective bargaining in the platform sector and their specific concerns are less likely to find a voice.

Perhaps we can look at other, more egalitarian organisational structures as part of the answer. The Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), India's first self-employed women's union, has launched a platform co-operative for beauty services in multiple cities in India wherein the design of the application was responsive to women's needs, incorporating a panic button, restoring information symmetry by obscuring individual worker profiles from clients, and installing a GPS feature to allow real-time tracking. Platform commissions are fixed at 15 per cent to facilitate transparency in income (Scholz, 2018). Mobilisation in this sector may find forms that centre women workers' concerns and address their historic exclusion from union spaces, funding spaces where they advocate for themselves and where organisational structures can look at their specific needs as the norm and not the outlier.

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