

Issue Brief

# **TOWARDS A GENDER EQUAL FUTURE OF WORK FOR WOMEN**

A Preliminary Case Study of Women in the Gig  
Economy in India During COVID-19



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RESEARCH**

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## Executive Summary

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The gig economy is expanding quickly as platforms that bring together workers and the purchasers of their services continue to emerge globally. India is not an exception to this global trend. India has seen a growing number of women coming into forms of gig work such as on-demand household and beauty services. Little research to date, however, has focused on gendered experiences of gig work in India or other Southern contexts. At the outset, the expectation is that gig jobs will empower women by allowing them to work remotely, leverage digital platforms and balance care work responsibilities with income earning opportunities. Gender data gaps, however, make it difficult to assess whether the gig economy holds up to its potential to enhance women's labor force participation. The lack of knowledge on gig work from a gender lens is particularly problematic in a post-COVID 19 context where gig workers are facing increasing precarity due to their non-standard employment status.

This policy paper represents an effort to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on women gig workers in India and makes the case for a stronger gender lens in discussions surrounding the future of work in the digital economy. Whether or not gig work is "good" for women, it is increasing in popularity and therefore it is essential that policy-makers and other stakeholders understand the implications of this work. The analysis presented in this report is based on a rapid assessment of academic and grey literature on women gig workers, a review of platform and government responses to COVID-19 in India, and a small survey of workers, union leaders and gender experts. This paper concludes with policy recommendations to chart a course towards a more gender-equal future of work in the digital economy.

## Introduction

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### **Digitalisation and its promise to empower women**

Over the last two decades, women's participation in the labour force in India has been declining and this trend has concerned researchers and policymakers. Women's labour force participation in India currently stands at 21%<sup>1</sup> and is one of the lowest in the South Asian region<sup>2</sup>. Where women do engage in economic activity, it is primarily through precarious jobs in the agricultural, manufacturing and service sectors that provide low wages, indecent working conditions and limited access to social protections<sup>3</sup>. The digital restructuring of the global economy and the emergence of gig work in particular have been said to hold the potential to bring more women onto the labor market<sup>4</sup>. Although there is no agreed definition, the gig economy refers to labor activities that are mediated by digital platforms and typically offers contract-based on-demand jobs<sup>5</sup>. App- and web-based forms of gig work have witnessed a surge in India across the last decade with the rise of companies such as Flipkart, Zomato, Swiggy and Urban Company. According to the Oxford Internet Institute's "Online Labour Index," India leads the global gig economy with a 24 percent share of the online labour market and a total of 1.4 million gig workers<sup>6</sup>.

India has seen a proliferation not only in the overall size of the gig economy, but also in digital platforms that provide traditionally women-dominated employment sectors. Between 2011-16, for instance, over 270 platforms cropped up in home-based service work such as cleaning, cooking and beauty<sup>7</sup>. Women are also increasingly being drawn into non-traditional jobs in the transport and food delivery sectors<sup>8</sup>. A survey conducted by TeamLease Services in 2019, showed that there were 67,900 women in platform-based jobs in India, up from 40,000 the previous year<sup>9</sup>. In a context where sociocultural norms limit women's mobility outside the household and place the primary responsibility for unpaid care work onto women, policymakers have viewed digitally-mediated platforms as a potential solution to women's declining levels of labor force participation in India. Numerous government and private-sector led initiatives have been launched, such as the Digital India Mission, to bridge the digital divide, strengthen women's access to internet services and draw more women into technology-mediated forms of work<sup>10</sup>. While there is positive evidence that the gig economy is creating more jobs for women in India, it is unclear whether these jobs are decent and empowering. Emerging evidence suggests that gig work may be reinforcing gendered inequalities that prevail in traditional labor markets, as discussed in the section below.

### **The reality of gig work for women in the Global South**

The research base on women in the gig economy in Southern country contexts is limited. Existing studies point to four gender-related challenges: (i) economic insecurity and no social protection; (ii) lack of agency and voice; (iii) gender-based discrimination and systemic barriers to progression; and (iv) weak labor protections against workplace harassment.

First, although providing a veneer of formalisation, jobs in the gig economy leave a large proportion of women without secure incomes or decent working conditions. This is a prominent trend in low- and middle-income country contexts where women tend to be concentrated in low-paid services, such as on-demand domestic work<sup>11</sup>. Wage insecurity is compounded by lack of recourse to social safety nets. In India, as in many other countries, gig workers have an “independent contractor” status and are not eligible for employment benefits such as paid leave, minimum wage guarantees, maternity leave or health insurance. Furthermore, lack of traditional employment and a regular pay stream pushes them out of the formal credit market<sup>12</sup>. A large number of women in gig work therefore face economic precariousness. A survey conducted by the Observer Research Foundation in 2018 showed that 35 percent of the women interviewed were disinterested in joining the gig economy<sup>13</sup>.

Second, gig work gives little agency and choice to women and, in practice, they are compelled to tolerate uncertainties and risks attached to their work. Time-use survey research (which reports on how women use their time) shows that women in low-paid sectors do not have flexibility or control over their working hours. In their study of on-demand domestic workers in Kenya and South Africa, Hunt et al. (2019)<sup>14</sup> found that women’s choices around working hours were influenced more by their financial precarity than by their work preferences. Women they interviewed said that they had to work multiple gigs to fulfill their economic needs and this added to their burden of domestic care work. Women in the gig economy also lack voice and have limited bargaining power with their employers and with state actors. In India, women in both formal and informal sectors have low levels of participation in labor unions. Chakravarty<sup>15</sup> explains this is because mainstream trade unions tend to prioritise the interests of permanent male workers. The isolated, home-based nature of gig work further places limits on women’s ability to form group solidarities and participate in collective action<sup>16</sup>.

Third, although gig work facilitates women’s entry into the labor market and also into non-traditional occupations, the extent of positive outcomes can be constrained by discriminatory gender norms and systemic barriers. Studies point to a high level of gender-related occupational segregation on platforms, with more women concentrated in “feminine” professions. In the context of the UK, for instance, 86.5% of workers

on Hassle (which provides cleaning services) are women, while on food delivery platform Deliveroo and private transport platform Uber, 94% and 95%, respectively, are men<sup>17</sup>. There is also evidence around gender pay gaps for ostensibly carrying out the same work on platforms<sup>18</sup>. A survey conducted by the staffing consultancy TeamLease showed evidence of a 8-10% gap in gender earnings between men and women working for platforms in India.<sup>19</sup> There is also research suggesting that gendered forms of discrimination are embedded into performance monitoring systems used by platforms. A study by Hunt and Machingura (2016) into on-demand domestic work in India, Kenya, Mexico and South Africa found that customer ratings tend to favour men over women and that discrimination against workers which is endemic in “traditional” domestic work is reproduced in the on-demand economy.

Finally, platforms offer minimum protection to women against workplace harassment and tend to offload risks and responsibilities onto workers themselves. A study by Kasliwal (2019) showed that platforms in India do not have adequate provisions for grievance redressal and in the case of a dispute between customers and workers, platforms expect the dispute to be resolved independently by both parties<sup>20</sup>. This leaves workers from low-income backgrounds in a position where they cannot afford to raise disputes. There are also legislative limitations to protections afforded to women. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act 2013 in India does not apply to women working on gig platforms since they do not have formal status as employees<sup>21</sup>.

In summary, evidence suggests that gig work is not unequivocally empowering for women. The altered nature of employer-employee relationships on gig platforms, the socio-economic and gendered position of workers and reconfigured work spaces can lock women in the gig economy into subordination, dependence, and economic precarity. The following sections of this report consider ways in which COVID-19 might intensify existing gendered vulnerabilities in the gig economy.

## **COVID-19 and its effects on women gig workers**

The COVID-19 crisis has put gig workers on the frontlines in sectors such as taxi driving and food delivery, without income security, employment benefits or appropriate health protections. According to the World Economic Forum, gig workers are more negatively impacted than other labor groups due to their non-standard employment status and the lack of statutory protections afforded to them in most nations<sup>22</sup>. On average, worker earnings in the Asian region have dropped to one-third of their pre-pandemic levels<sup>23</sup>. Gojek moto-taxi drivers in Indonesia, for instance, have reported a 70 percent loss of income<sup>24</sup>. Other categories of

workers, such as platform-based domestic workers and beauticians have altogether lost their livelihoods<sup>25</sup>. In India, news reports reveal that gig workers cannot claim protections such as health insurance, minimum wage guarantees or sick pay. Since the majority of gig workers operate hand-to-mouth, workers in contexts such as India face the serious prospect of descending into poverty along with their families<sup>26</sup>. Government relief packages have also failed to adequately extend social protections to gig workers<sup>27</sup>.

Evidence from news reports shows a clear negative economic impact on gig workers. There is limited availability of gender-related data on the gig economy and the effects of COVID-19 on women gig workers specifically is unclear. A cross-country report published by the Fairwork Foundation<sup>28</sup> suggests that a substantial number of women gig workers are currently unable to work due to their concentration in care-related forms of platform work such as domestic work and household beauty services which have been suspended<sup>29</sup>. The report also suggests that women are unable to report to work due to a rise in their domestic care responsibilities and the unavailability of childcare facilities.

In the Indian context, labor market research shows that more women have started dropping out of the formal labor force than men following the lockdown<sup>30</sup>. One of the contributing factors to this post-lockdown dip is women's greater responsibility for domestic care work due to the health needs of family members and the closure of schools<sup>31</sup>. Home-working models and the continued closure of schools may result in more women entering non-standard forms of employment such as gig work in a post-pandemic context.

It is in this context that it becomes particularly important to bridge data gaps on the experiences of women in the gig economy. The evidence so far suggests that women gig workers will potentially face more income insecurity than men due to their concentration in care-related jobs that are in less demand in the aftermath of the pandemic. While in principle gig work provides the opportunity to balance paid and unpaid work, in practice studies show that women still undertake the majority of household work<sup>32</sup>. Therefore, rising burdens of care work will be an impediment to women's full and equal participation in the gig economy post COVID-19<sup>33</sup>.

## Findings

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### Platform Responses to COVID-19 in India

Platforms vary in their efforts to support workers and in their level of responsiveness to demands raised by labor unions. In high-income regions, such as the United States and Europe, companies have taken measures such as introducing sick pay for platform workers who become infected or need to self-isolate<sup>34</sup>. In low- and middle-income country contexts, however, where the gig economy is nascent, workers are not being supported economically to the same extent.<sup>35</sup> Few companies in India are providing income support to their workers and where they are, it appears to be one-off and only to a select proportion of workers. Swiggy and Zomato in India have publicly announced crowd-funding efforts to raise money for their workers. Some commentators argue that crowd-funding is effectively a low-touch intervention as it puts the responsibility onto customers rather than on the platform<sup>36</sup>. Other established platforms such as Urban Company, Flipkart, Amazon and Uber have announced that they will increase pay for part-time and temporary workers<sup>37</sup>. Ground level reports from India, however, suggest that workers are not receiving these funds<sup>38</sup>.

The Fairwork Foundation argues that there are gaps between rhetoric and reality and a skew in stakeholder focus. Through a systematic review of 120 platform responses across 23 countries, they find that platforms have generally left the provision of income-related support to governments. As lockdown measures are lifted and demand for services is rising, platforms are showing more proactivity around efforts to protect the health and safety of their workers and clients. A number of platform companies in India have made public announcements about keeping workers safe through the provision of protective gear and through changes in their health insurance policies. Ride-hailing platforms, such as Ola and Uber, have declared that they will provide masks and hand sanitisers to their drivers and make it compulsory for drivers to wear masks, along with providing support around sanitising their cars<sup>39</sup>. As with relief support announcements, however, ground-level discussions with workers and union leaders reveal that the onus of contact-free delivery and maintaining social distancing falls onto workers themselves and that protective gear is not made available to them in adequate supply<sup>40</sup><sup>41</sup>. Some commentators have argued that health and safety measures being taken by platforms are intended more to allay customers' fears about contracting the disease rather than to secure the well-being of their workers<sup>42</sup>. Platforms so far have taken a gender-neutral approach and there is no evidence of targeted measures for women.

## **Government Responses to COVID-19 in India**

As with platform responses, federal response measures to protect gig workers vary across countries. Government response in India has taken a passive, hands-off approach where the focus is on creating a facilitative environment for gig businesses rather than on providing direct support to gig workers<sup>43</sup>. In March 2020, when the Union Government announced a relief package in response to concerns raised by organised labor unions, there was no mention of targeted measures for gig workers<sup>44</sup>. Although the government has not provided direct income support, platforms were exempted from prohibitory orders that apply to other businesses<sup>45</sup>. Some state governments such as Kerala and Bangalore have actively engaged gig workers in public sector efforts to supply essential grains to communities and aid in the transportation of health workers.

The Indian Government's low-touch strategy is different to the approach being taken in other countries, particularly in Northern contexts. The United States Senate, for instance, recently passed a stimulus bill creating an "Unemployment Assistance Program" and providing unemployment benefits specifically to gig workers. Canada similarly proposed legislation to establish the "Canada Emergency Response Benefit" to support self-employed workers and those otherwise ineligible for employment insurance.<sup>46</sup>

In summary, data released thus far suggests that platforms and government-led schemes in India are providing limited direct income support to workers<sup>47</sup>. Importantly, at the time of writing this report, there is no evidence that platforms in India are recording the experiences of women in the gig economy during the pandemic, or attempting to take a gender-responsive approach in crisis response measures.

## Interview Data

### Sample Characteristics

The analysis presented in this report is based on a total of 10 interviews with workers, union leaders and experts on women's empowerment through non-traditional livelihoods. Workers and union leaders were recruited across three industry sectors (ride-hailing, food-delivery and home beauty services) and from across three states in India (Hyderabad, Punjab and Telangana) in order to draw a range of experiences. Respondents<sup>48</sup> were recruited through a snowball sampling strategy and interviews were conducted telephonically. Interview questions<sup>49</sup> focused on understanding ground level realities, including whether workers were able to work during lockdown, gender-related challenges they faced with their employers and their clients and what they wanted their platforms/companies and the government to do to help them. These interviews were combined with expert interviews for higher level insights into developing gender-inclusive policies post COVID-19.

### Data Analytic Strategy

Data was recorded and transcribed keeping in mind the privacy and confidentiality of participants' identities and personally identifiable information. The data was coded inductively and codes were organised into thematic categories following Braun and Clarke's (2006)<sup>50</sup> method. Themes were defined as: *"something about the data that is important in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set"* (p. 82). Findings are presented below in the form of three consolidated themes.

## Impact of COVID-19 on women in the gig economy in India

### Women are facing a hierarchy of precarity

The data reveals that economic effects of the pandemic are sectorally-differentiated and operate along existing axes of social inequality<sup>51</sup>. Women workers in white-collar and higher skilled jobs appear to be less impacted than women in lower skills jobs. A manager we interviewed at an established platform for home-based beauty services said that she was in an economically secure position and was not seriously disadvantaged by the drop in business or the fall in increments that her company had announced for this year. On the other hand, a female worker we interviewed at a food delivery platform said to us that while she had continued to work during the pandemic, she had substantially lower earnings. As a delivery worker, she did not have the option of working from home and had to make a dangerous calculation between staying safe at home and risking financial ruin, or continuing to work with the risk of getting ill. She explained that although the platform had initially rolled out contact-free delivery policies, these restrictions were starting to ease, making it hard for her to practice social distancing and increasing her risk of becoming infected. A union leader we interviewed echoed these concerns and argued that the COVID-19 crisis has highlighted that the gig economy does not hold onto its promise of lifting women onto their own feet. At a time when gig workers are facing serious income insecurity, platforms in his view have neglected workers by failing to lower commissions or provide adequate personal protective equipment.

### Lack of access to social capital

In addition to economic precarity, women gig workers also reported social isolation and a lack of access to social capital, which is the informational resources gained from social networks and membership of professional organisations<sup>52</sup>. A freelance makeup artist we interviewed spoke of the psychological costs of being isolated in the current context. She highlighted gaps in her understanding of the changing regulatory landscape and said that her platform did not give her access to business training or commercial networks. Women gig workers we interviewed also appeared to have low levels of participation in labor unions, or even awareness of the existence of labor networks. This may be because women are less represented in unionised sectors, such as transport and food delivery and also because women may feel intimidated by male-dominated unions. A transport-sector union leader highlighted that while there are ongoing efforts to incorporate women's voices and concerns into the union, there continue to be issues related to women's representation.

## Concerns around personal safety

Our data suggest that the restructuring of human resource management policies, along with the closure of offices and hubs may have gendered implications for worker safety. A female worker we interviewed at a food delivery platform said that she was anxious as she no longer had a front manager to report to and did not know where to direct complaints related to risky working conditions or dangerous customers. Although her platform had set up an online complaint registration procedure, this was slow and unhelpful in an emergency situation. Concerns for the safety of women workers were echoed by union leaders. A representative for taxi drivers argued that in forms of gig work such as taxi driving where the worker is in close contact with the client, workers must have adequate protections against the threat of harassment and attack. To reduce risks facing women drivers specifically, he suggests that platforms incorporate information such as the nearest police station onto their apps and also pair women drivers with women clients as far as possible.

## Policy Recommendations

The digital economy holds potential to empower women economically by bringing them onto the labor force. Understanding the experiences of women in the gig economy and managing gendered opportunities and constraints should be a policy priority. This is particularly the case in a post-pandemic context where contract-based forms of work and flexible work arrangements will become more prevalent. We highlight five priority areas for policy makers, civil society actors and platforms seeking to advance gender-responsive policies and protect the rights and livelihoods of women gig workers post COVID-19: (i) upgrade labor laws and institute social protections for gig workers; (ii) extend protections against workplace harassment to gig workers; (iii) give women gig workers agency by supporting their collectivisation; (iv) understand the gendered implications of health-related data surveillance; and (v) track gender-related and intersectional data on gig workers.

### **(i) Upgrade labor laws and institute social protections for gig workers**

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the precariousness of gig workers and the devastating consequences of labor laws that do not protect the form of work they do. As self-employed, independent contractors, gig workers in India have received financial support neither from platforms nor from

government schemes<sup>53</sup>. Instead, to meet shortfalls in their incomes, gig workers have had to undergo higher risks by continuing to work during the pandemic<sup>54</sup>. Going forward, income and health-related social protections for gig workers need to be institutionalised to secure their rights and livelihoods. India took the first step towards recognising the need to extend social security benefits to gig workers in 2019 with the introduction of the draft Social Security Code. The Draft Code is currently under consideration by a Parliamentary Standing Committee on Labour<sup>55</sup>. While it is still unclear whether there is political will to have this draft code passed, the COVID-19 crisis has created a global push for change and brought more visibility to the needs of informal sector workers<sup>56</sup>. Civil society actors in Southeast Asia have successfully leveraged this global momentum to advocate for gig workers. In response to advocacy efforts, the Government of Singapore has offered to pay workers a minimum wage as fees for taking classes to upskill themselves<sup>57</sup>. Civil society actors, worker unions and advocates in the Indian context should similarly use this crisis to catalyse social protections for gig workers.

There is also a need for greater self-regulation among platforms themselves. Several platforms have been dictating conditions of work by making it mandatory for workers to download Aarogya Sethu<sup>58</sup> and by instituting other public health surveillance tools<sup>59</sup>. However, platforms continue to distance themselves from the tag of being “employers”, taking no responsibility to provide remuneration to drivers or delivery professionals for the loss of income they have suffered<sup>60</sup>. Research and advocacy efforts, such as the Fairwork Foundation’s system for ranking platforms, can play a role in structuring better systems for self-regulation<sup>61</sup>.

Platforms in other low and middle-income country contexts have stepped up to the challenge of supporting gig workers, providing a model for platforms in India. In Kenya, for instance, some gig platforms have pivoted to offering disinfection services over less-in-demand services such as repair work, to ensure their workers are still able to earn an income. FixChap, a Tanzanian gig platform, has diversified into fumigation services, anticipating that fumigation opportunities will evolve to long- or short-term contracts for their gig workers, even post COVID-19<sup>62</sup>. Platforms in India could similarly consider diversifying their operations so their workers can continue to earn their livelihoods.

## **(ii) Extend protections against workplace harassment to gig workers**

Regulation must encompass platform accountability not only in respect to fair wages and access to social protections, but also in respect to protection from workplace harassment. With the restructuring of workplaces following the COVID-19 pandemic, platforms need to have effective and accessible mechanisms

for women workers to lodge complaints and address disputes. Platforms where women workers come into close contact with clients, such as on-demand domestic work and ride-hailing platforms, are not currently required to disclose details about the contractual terms through which they match clients and workers, or guarantee fair working conditions in client households<sup>63</sup>. Feminist scholars argue that lack of platform accountability effectively reproduces the feminisation of degraded care work and adds to the precarity of an already vulnerable constituency<sup>64</sup>.

Our data suggest that companies are taking limited measures to protect women workers. Zomato, for instance, has mandated that women delivery personnel end their shifts before 6 pm, that they operate only in areas identified as safe zones and carry pepper spray while delivering. While such measures are a necessary protection for women working in urban areas, they are not necessarily ideal or empowering. In a post-pandemic context, companies should additionally leverage technology to provide more support to women workers through virtual helplines and online communities. Companies should also take measures such as embedding a SOS button into workers' app interface<sup>65</sup>. Such measures will go further in shifting gendered structures of vulnerability.

With the restructuring of workforce policies and movement away from face-to-face support, organisational change management needs to be combined with legislative change. In India, the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act of 2013 must be extended to grant protections such as paid leaves of absence to women in the gig economy.

### **(iii) Give women gig workers agency by supporting their collectivisation**

Women in the gig economy have low levels of participation in labor unions<sup>66</sup>. Women tend to be concentrated in care-related sectors which provide few opportunities for interaction and network-building<sup>67</sup>. Self-employed women in contexts of the Global South, however, have a long history of collectivising to push for change and this offers a model for women workers in the gig economy. Organisations such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), for instance, have galvanised women to demand for better rights from their employers and from the State. In the context of the COVID-19 crisis, SEWA has been involved with mobilising support for migrants and women working in the informal sector through social protection advocacy campaigns. SEWA has led COVID-19 awareness campaigns for their members and organised a re-skilling programme for women who have lost their jobs due to the pandemic<sup>68</sup>. Global networks such as WIEGO also provide platforms to amplify the voices of women working in the informal economy<sup>69</sup>.

There is scope for women gig workers to join and collaborate with organisations such as SEWA and WIEGO to negotiate for decent work and secure livelihoods. As noted earlier, the COVID-19 crisis has brought greater visibility to the needs of informal sector workers. The International Labor Organisation has highlighted the need for governments to support unionisation of workers in the informal economy and to actively create spaces to give voice to women workers who have historically lacked visibility<sup>70</sup>. It is important that women gig workers use this opportunity to unionise and to strengthen networks of solidarity.

#### **(iv) Understand the gendered implications of health-related data surveillance**

Debates around the culture of surveillance and monitoring in the gig economy were ongoing prior to the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>71</sup>. In a post-pandemic context, gig workers are faced with new forms of health-related surveillance<sup>72</sup>. Platforms in India, ostensibly following guidelines from the World Health Organisation, are making it compulsory for workers to download the government-initiated contact tracing app Arrogya Setu and to make live temperature readings available for customers to see<sup>73</sup>. Such tracking of biometric and health-related data may challenge boundaries of worker privacy and open new avenues for discrimination. Gig workers in India have already raised concerns that this data can be used against them in a retaliatory and exploitative manner, making their salaries and their job security contingent on their health scores<sup>74</sup>. While there is concern surrounding the data ethics of emerging forms of public health surveillance, gendered implications of health-related surveillance are missing from current policy discourse<sup>75</sup>.

This is problematic given evidence that surveillance technology can be used as a discriminatory tool against women. Past research with female garment workers, for instance, shows that managers used video data to harass women under the guise of “disciplining” them<sup>76</sup>. Existing forms of health tracking in workplaces, such as fertility monitoring, have also been shown to impact hiring and promotion-related decisions<sup>77</sup>. In light of such evidence, gender-sensitive health data (e.g. fertility, mental health, substance use etc) needs to be protected from employers. The Personal Data Protection (PDP) Bill 2019, which sets rules for how personal data should be processed and stored by employers in India, has been stuck at the Lok Sabha. While the PDP has been criticised for a lack of protection for low-wage workers, it could be an important legislative tool to protect the data and privacy of gig workers. Legal experts argue that the bill should include a clause which puts an expiration date on health-related surveillance of workers, particularly data which is gender-sensitive.

#### **(v) Track gender-related and intersectional data on gig workers**

The gig economy requires more policy attention at local and national levels to sustain progress on decent work and gender justice. There is currently a lack of data on women in the gig economy in India, and this is reflective of wider gender gaps in data on gig workers globally. Appropriate interventions for women's empowerment in the gig economy following COVID-19 will depend on the availability of robust and intersectional sources of data. There is a need to understand, not just how women in the gig economy are faring, but also how gender differences intersect with other systems of structural inequality – such as class, caste, geographic location, age, disability and migratory status, among others – to shape experiences of gig work<sup>78</sup>. Our data suggest that gig work is not automatically empowering for women and that there are differences across forms of gig work. Women in lower-paid forms of gig work, such as on-demand domestic work and food delivery, are less empowered than online freelancers as they have variable earnings and less control over their working conditions.

In India, the NSSO employment-unemployment surveys have traditionally been a valuable source of data for identifying trends in employment patterns of women. However, these surveys have typically excluded women gig workers and these datasets must be restored. The lack of data on women in the gig economy is particularly problematic in context of the COVID-19 crisis where workers are facing income loss and need relief support. Globally, gig workers have mobilised to collect data themselves to ease the process of relief provision. Workers in creative industries across Southeast Asia, for instance, have launched the campaign “I lost my gig” that aims to publicly gather data about income loss and lists resources for financial support<sup>79</sup>.

Policy-makers and platforms in India need to recognise the need for more data on gig workers. Importantly, there must be recognition of the differential risks and challenges facing women gig workers. Data pertaining to the following areas will be important for governments and organisations to provide effective relief measures: earnings per sector and opportunity cost of paid work, women's unpaid care workloads, perceptions of gender discrimination and segregation on platforms, instances of gender-related violence and harassment and access to financial services<sup>80</sup>.

## Appendix A

**Table 1: Composition of interview respondents**

<b>Workers (N = 3)</b>	<b>Union Leaders (N = 2)</b>	<b>Gender &amp; Non-traditional Livelihoods Experts (N = 5)</b>
Delivery worker at Swiggy	Representative for the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers	Director of The Emerging Markets Foundation India
Central beauty team at Urban Company	Representative for the Working People's Charter	Head of Policy and Advocacy for the Azad Foundation
Freelance makeup artist (uses multiple platforms)		Director of Gender at Work
		Researcher at the Indian Institute of Technology Bangalore
		Researcher at the Centre for Internet and Society

## Appendix B

### Questions for affected workers and for union leaders

- How much do you know about COVID-19 and where are you getting your information from?
- What are your responsibilities during COVID-19?
- What are the COVID-19 challenges for women working in the community/hospital? Are they different to men's challenges?
- Do women workers have the capacity to do their work? What do they expect from the government and at an organisational level?
- Are they safe physically and in terms of access to PPE?
- How are they balancing housework and community work?
- What salary do they get? Is it fixed? Is it different across states? Does the PM Care Fund apply to them?
- Is there any surveillance or monitoring? Can this be a source of harassment for women?

### Questions for gender and livelihoods experts

- How do you think COVID-19 impacts women on the labor market? Which sectors are hit the worst?
- What are you/your organization doing to reach out to girls during COVID-19?
- What are the 2-3 ways in which practitioners can put girls at the center of their COVID-19 response?
- What are some of the consequences of practitioners failing to center girls in their COVID-19 response?
- What do you think are the short- medium- and long-term effects of COVID and the lockdown in India will be for adolescent girls and young women?

## Endnotes

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- <sup>1</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FE.ZS>
- <sup>2</sup> <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2019/10/22/where-are-indias-working-women-the-fall-and-fall-of-indias-female-labour-participation-rate/>
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- <sup>4</sup> [https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/add/Making%20the%20digital%20economy%20work%20for%20informal%20sector%20women%20in%20India\\_20thFeb.pdf](https://itforchange.net/sites/default/files/add/Making%20the%20digital%20economy%20work%20for%20informal%20sector%20women%20in%20India_20thFeb.pdf)
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