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2024

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,
IRVINE

"It's Always Been Women's Work": Tracing Gender, Technology, and Work in India Through
an Account of AI-Mediated Beauty Work

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Sociology

by

Isha Bhallamudi

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Rachel Goldberg, Co-Chair
Professor Swethaa Ballakrishnen, Co-Chair
Professor Francesca Polletta
Professor Tom Boellstorff
Professor Paul Dourish

2024

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to

my mother, Radhika

and to all the women whose brilliance, channeled into the people around them, makes the world go round.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

every step of this journey, helping me transform from a student to a scholar in my own right. They have helped me resolve the tiniest worries and the biggest roadblocks with equal care, grace, and attention. I have never seen two professors who are so deeply and fiercely invested in their students' wellbeing and success; it is incredible that I have learnt work-life balance and a community-oriented approach to academia from my advisors first. Rachel's deeply caring yet fiercely strategic way of getting her students to where they want to be, her rock-solid commitment to her students' goals, and her confidence in me have changed my life. Swethaa's gentle but incisive way of helping me build stronger critical and theoretical muscles, their way of looking out for me and anticipating my intellectual needs before I did, and their top-notch writing tips, are going to stay with me forever. I am also indebted to my amazing committee members. Every conversation with Francesca Polletta, spanning theory, methods, and empirics, has been packed with wonderful ideas, and she has always helped me approach my research problems with a fresh perspective. Discussions with Tom Boellstorff about anthropological methods, the history of technology, and approaches to theory-making were incredibly insightful and stayed with me long afterwards. I kept returning to Paul Dourish's papers and have learnt so much from his approach to informatics and social science; and have enjoyed his sense of humor and straightforwardness.

My work is deeply inspired by platform researchers in India and the USA, whom I count as part of my academic community. I have learnt a lot from Noopur Raval and am so grateful for her mentorship, generosity, and time. Chatting about gig work with Veena Dubal has been incredibly generative and I am so grateful for her warmth, encouragement, and support. Julia Ticona and Lindsey Cameron have been wonderful to me, and I have learnt so much from their example and from their superlative scholarship.

I am so grateful to the department of Sociology at UC Irvine. Though I experience many disciplinary tensions as a deeply interdisciplinary researcher, I have been lucky to land up in a department that is deeply supportive of its students trying out new ideas, projects, spaces, and ways of being. Since my first year here, I have been struck by how students went out of their way to share their teaching, job and grant materials; freely read and give feedback on drafts; and commiserate on failures and successes with other students - even those they didn't know. I learned to be the same way and remember every student who has helped me out over these 6 years. A giant thank you to my cohort-mates and friends – Zoe Miller-Vedam, Cherry Ji, MacKenzie Christensen, Marilyn Garcia, Peng Huang, and Weijun Yuan - for inspiring me in different ways. I'll forever be grateful to Kristin Turney and Carter Butts; I have learnt so much from them and really admire their approach to teaching and research. Finally, and crucially, this PhD would have simply not been possible without Maryann Zovak-Wieder and Alysha Casado, our incredible department managers, who are some of the most skilled, kind, and efficient people I've seen in academia. I want to say you're both magic, but I know how much hard work and commitment goes behind making it all look so easy.

International students face additional barriers in the USA that require constant cognitive and administrative labor and management, work that never quite gets finished. One of these barriers is the potential inability to actually go back to our field sites for extended periods to carry out PhD fieldwork (as our funding and visa status is tied to university employment such as teaching and research assistantships, most of which are in-person). For this reason, I am incredibly

Seminars, conferences, and workshops offer spaces and audiences that can help us in analyzing, articulating, and improving on the key themes of our project. I have greatly benefited from a few such spaces. Thank you to Usha Raman for hosting my talk at the Dept of Communication at the University of Hyderabad - this was the first place where I put together my thesis findings and I am so grateful to you and the intellectually stimulating and supportive department audience for receiving and encouraging my research. Thank you also to the organizers of the ASA pre-conference Platform Economies Workshop, which provided an incredibly inspiring community and environment, and helped me refine my findings and thinking around this project.

Fieldwork and doctoral writing are strange worlds in themselves that one has to learn to navigate through trial-and-error, tips, and strategies of various kinds. I am lucky to have had the most kick-ass, strong, kind, inspirational, funny, and razor-sharp friends who have traveled these worlds with me and given me invaluable advice and support on the way. Lakshita and Shilpa both inspired me to make radically different methodological choices, to prioritize my interlocutors while de-centering myself in the field, and at the same time to follow my heart. I learnt so much watching the way in which they approached their fieldwork and grappled with field dilemmas, and am always inspired by their bravery and the depth of their care for others. My writing groups with Shilpa, Liza, Harini, Lakshita, Estefani, and See Pok provided all kinds of moral, intellectual, writing, logistical, institutional, and life support, and a space to work out and resolve many tensions you can't easily articulate during the research and writing process. Finally, a vacation-cum-writing retreat in Mysore with Liza, Shilpa, and Namita was generative in ways I couldn't even have imagined - this is where I started writing the core chapters of my thesis and applied for my dream postdoc, which I would later be selected for, and accept. Their company, as always, was nothing less than magic.

My chosen family of friends has been an inextricable part of my PhD journey and offered me so much unconditional support and love. I don't think I would have completed this PhD with my health and happiness intact if not for them. Harini has been my partner in crime since we were kids, and I am so thankful that we got to share our PhD journeys. I can't imagine the last six years without her, and can't think of anyone better to analyze the minute details of life in

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FIELDS OF STUDY

Gender, Technology, Work, Inequality, Development, Culture, Family, Wellbeing, India

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

"It's Always Been Women's Work": Tracing Gender, Technology, and Work in India Through
an Account of AI-Mediated Beauty Work

by

Isha Bhallamudi

Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of California, Irvine, 2024

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This dissertation examines the gender dynamics of platform work in India through a mixed-methods and interdisciplinary study of women gig workers, platform managers, and union organizers in the beauty sector of the platform economy in Mumbai. It employs a historical approach to platform work, charting the genealogy of women's work in Mumbai (1750-present) to show how women's productive and reproductive labor have been co-opted by capital and technology in each work era, and arguing that platformization constitutes a distinct work paradigm with gendered implications. The main empirical chapters consider the access, experience, and organization of work in beauty platforms through the experiences of women gig workers. First, I show that access to platform work is not a singular point of entry for women, but a dynamic and shifting *process* that resembles an *algorithmic maze* with no clear end point. Then, examining women's experiences of gig work, I show how digital platforms *maintain* the gender, class, caste, and religious social dynamics that underlie beauty work, even as they *transform* the work experience by gamifying risk, feminizing work, incentivizing competition, alienating workers, and eroding community ties. This is the new structure of work, and workers are able to survive in it by creating informal tactics and strategies that rely greatly on mutual aid,

word-of-mouth, storytelling, and community support. Finally, I show how the organizational

hierarchy of beauty platforms is shaped by top-level beliefs about platforms bringing a paradigm

shift for labor, which explains the way platforms construct and structure gig work. I also identify

differences in female and male managers' managerial styles with gig workers and analyze why

female managers tend to be more punitive to female gig workers. I apply social reproduction

theory to make sense of these findings as a whole and chart a path for the future.

Chapter 1: Introduction

It is a Tuesday afternoon in February 2023. I am standing at a snack stall in front of the Andheri West train station with Meera, who is a gig worker and beautician, and a mother of two. We have just spent a frustrating few hours at a local beauty platform office where Meera used to work and where she suddenly got laid off, trying to get her job back through re-application. As we wait for our *chaat* plates before taking a train home, Meera is talking about how difficult it has become to get and keep work. "Ghar me baithke kantaal aa raha hai [I am getting bored sitting at home]", she says, using a particularly *bambaiyya* expression to note the boredom and irritation associated with staying home. Like many of the women gig workers I have spoken to, Meera's reasons for wanting to work are not just borne out of economic compulsion, but also driven by a strong desire for a career and a space of her own. Even though marriage, childbearing, and childrearing have created persistent interruptions in her work life, she has kept up the effort to create this 'space of her own' over the years through numerous upskilling classes and go-with-the-flow work experiences. Now, she is thinking about what to do when work is so scarce. "Maybe beauty salons are better than platforms, but I just cannot join one with 2 kids", she tells me. Her mornings are taken up with domestic and childcare obligations, making a traditional 9-5 job impossible, which is why she prefers flexible platform-mediated gig work. She asks me to look for freelance salon jobs online and see if there is anything she can apply for. As we dig into our *sev puris*, she sketches out her idea of starting beautician classes, but the rent for a room large enough is prohibitive – she has hunted around, and it costs Rs. 10,000-15,000 (~$120-180) for a room that will fit 20-25 women in Dharavi (where she lives) alone. While she circulates through different local beauty platforms every day in search of viable work, she has also been upskilling

by taking nail art classes in Ghatkopar, practicing beauty tutorials from YouTube, and learning how to do hydra-facials, the latest in-demand beauty trend, from her friend. But finding a platform beauty job that lasts longer than a few months has been impossible.

Through dozens of such conversations, Meera and other gig workers showed me that platform-based gig work is appealing because it promises low-barrier employment to groups of workers who would otherwise have difficulty accessing work, alongside offering relatively higher wages as well as respectable and dignified work. In a country where well-paid and stable work is very difficult to find, and where workers have historically depended on multiple informal gigs and self-employment to survive, platform work is actually seen as the more stable, formal, and respectable option. This turns the idea of 'gig' on its head. While in the US, gig work is associated with unstable hustle work, in India, gig work seemingly lets people take a break from hustling. It formalizes and organizes hustling for freelancers in various sectors. This is certainly the case for women beauty workers.

It is pertinent to pause and define what gig work means. The simplest definition of gig work is that it is any form of temporary paid work. So, gig work is not just confined to platform-mediated work, but applies widely to various forms of temporary and contractual labor. With the advent of digital platforms, gig work is now commonly understood to be a contractual form of work where service providers are connected to consumers through a digital platform. Platforms especially like to use this definition, as it makes it sound like the gig workers are in control and the platforms are merely intermediaries or facilitators, however in reality it is the platforms, not workers, who set and control the conditions of work (Dubal 2017; Howson et al 2022; Vallas & Schor 2020; Woodcock & Graham 2020).

Having noted that gig work predates digital platforms, I would go a step further and argue that working-class women are the original gig workers in India. Alongside the heavy and unrelenting daily work of raising children, cleaning and maintaining the household, preparing and cooking meals, carrying out care work and emotional labor for family members, and maintaining the social network of the family, working-class women have also always had to create informal work opportunities (or gigs) to supplement the family's income, switching jobs seasonally as needed. This adds a dimension to gig work that is not experienced by most working-class men, who rarely share in the daily household burdens described above, and therefore only have to worry about one stream of work, without the considerable cognitive load of switching between all of these different, and differently demanding, streams of work in a given day. In addition, men's income generation activities are rendered impossible without the ceaseless social reproduction activities that women do on a daily basis - cooking their meals, managing their feelings, washing their clothes, and so on - which the majority of men in India do not share with women. I qualify these arguments with Sai Amulya Komarraju's (2022) work pointing out how marginalized caste men, and not just women, have also historically always carried out care work activities in India, and showing how their entry into platformized, feminized care work intersects with the embodiment of masculinity.

For the reasons outlined above, I argue that studying women gig workers' experiences in particular, provides us a rich lens into understanding into the world of informal employment in this digital age. One of the central foundations of this thesis is that women's work underpins and is foundational to all platform work. This can take 4 dimensions. 1) Women's reproductive labor within the home is essential labor without which gig work, and in fact any work, cannot be carried out by workers. 2) Women's economic and productive labor, in a country where women

who work are overwhelmingly employed in the informal sector, is now being harnessed by platforms into creating value for them. 3) Within the platform economy, gig work is systematically feminized, creating an economic structure where companies underpay and exploit the essential workers without whom platforms cannot run. 4) Finally, and of broader concern, platform companies have expanded the dimensions of feminized work by seeking to commodify and co-opt feminized pursuits and the non-work portions of workers' lives in new ways. Studying gig work through the lens of women workers' experiences, therefore, can provide a thorough and comprehensive account of the ways in which the platform economy feminizes work, and help us understand its implications for the future of work in India.

Rethinking Women's Work: Tracing Gender, Development, and Technology in India

India, home to 1.6 billion people or a sixth of the world's population, has been grappling with the implications of digital technology, artificial intelligence, and big data for over a decade now. The concept of a Digital India was greeted with tremendous excitement in the early 2000s, which oversaw the advent of the globalized economy and liberalized economies, the rise of multinational corporations, the beginnings of the internet and personal computing devices, and the demand for outsourced digital labor which took the form of call centers, software engineers, and an uptick in computer science degrees. These developments became part of a fervent national discourse about how best to harness the potential of digital technology to democratize, expand, and scale-up national infrastructure for social and economic development across various key spheres (education, finance, employment, national identification, and healthcare, and so on).

Perhaps as a result, contemporary development in India today is marked by the deployment of global, technological solutions to social problems; the alignment of development projects with the interests of global, multinational, commercial actors; the directionality of aid, product, and monetary flows in development programs; and disempowerment through consumer-oriented development (Datta 2015; Bernal and Grewal 2014). Development regimes, following colonial patterns and histories, have historically been aligned with the interests of politically powerful commercial and capital market actors, and the flow of technologies parallels the structural flows of goods and money in colonial relations. This paints an accurate picture of India's approach to development today, which figures citizens as workers for and consumers of technology designed and manufactured elsewhere – making it possible to perpetuate and maintain uneven economic relations of dependency.

India's visions of development also heavily draw on discourses of women's empowerment. This is reflected in increasing calls for gender mainstreaming in policy, national initiatives on gender and development, and the rampant NGOization of the gender and development sector (funded by global capital) since the turn of the century (Moghadam et al 2011; Bernal and Grewal 2014). Here, too, the work of "empowering women" has increasingly been offloaded from the state to state-like (NGO) and private entities. Gender and development initiatives in India have tended to cluster around microfinance and self-employment, building on the assumption that women's economic independence will lead to emancipation and overall empowerment (John 2013; Blumberg 1989; Bernal and Grewal 2015). The resultant neoliberal co-option of the gender and development agenda has created and celebrated the female entrepreneurial subject, with the aim of turning her into the (female) empowered subject through economic independence (Boeri 2018;

Radhakrishnan and Solari 2015). And yet, despite the high level of national and international capital that has been invested into the gender and development agenda of women's work, a paradox gaining increasing attention in recent years is that women's formal workforce participation, which was already very low, has been steadily declining in India, going from 30% in 1990 to 20% in 2019 (WHO 2020)[1]. Two puzzling features of this trend are that 1) women's high education levels have not translated into entry into the workforce as predicted, and 2) women's workforce rates are lower in urban areas than in rural areas (Deshpande & Singh 2021; Mehrotra & Parida 2017; Raveendran & Vanek 2020; Ghosh 2021).

The female entrepreneurial subject celebrated by development discourses will rarely be found in this small formal workforce of women. Instead, she joins the 90% of the Indian workforce that is employed in the informal and unorganized sectors (Srivastava & Sharma 2024). She is a ripe target for the emerging platform economy in India, which is estimated to create up to 90 million new jobs within the next decade (Augustinraj et al 2021). In an economic context marked by a severe informalization of work, the state lauds digital platforms for their ability to offer low-barrier work to large groups of people who have till now struggled to enter the market, allowing platforms to set the terms of engagement with workers without regulatory restrictions. These digital platforms disrupt traditional service sector industries (the largest contributor to India's GDP) by offering convenience, professionalism, and efficiency to upwardly mobile consumers. The women employed in digital platforms tend to be 1) moderately educated, 2) married, and 3) located in urban areas. In other words, they are part of the same demographic group that the paradox of declining women's work force participation is attributed to, and I argue that

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[1] For contrast, India's neighbors have reported a female labor force participation rate of between 30% and 60%, compared to India's 20%, in 2019 (WHO 2020).

examining the conditions under which they enter and experience platform work, can shed light on the factors causing women's low workforce participation rates in India.

As I show in this thesis, platforms attract women because of their promise of flexible and respectable work. Yet, Indian women's inflexible obligations to take care of the family and the invisibilization of their domestic work, contributes to their economic marginalization by limiting their productivity in the economic sphere. Studying the gendered nature of platform work can help us understand how the contradictory tension between women's productive work and socially reproductive work is crucial to the production of digital infrastructure and services in urban India even as it comes at the cost of the women workers themselves. Using this analysis, I call for us to avoid essentializing or valorizing either of these roles and to instead, focus our gaze on the enabling environment around women which is ready to exploit both these capacities without caring for women; even as it opens up new paths and possibilities. Although much of the literature on gig work focuses on the ways in which flexible, app-mediated work comes with hidden costs (Graham et al 2017; Wood et al 2019), I show that it also opens up new pathways and benefits for women in India with respect to social and temporal mobility, personal and geographic mobility, and financial security, and allows them to juggle work obligations and domestic obligations without the traditional constraints of a full-time job. Further, while these apps surveil women as workers, the veneer of respectability they offer also allows women to escape or circumvent constant patriarchal surveillance by family and society.

Finally, women's work does not take place in a vacuum. It is mediated by the larger social structures that women move within - the family, the city, the workplace. Throughout this thesis, I

pay attention to the gendered social structures and relations that create and expand these new, emerging landscapes of women's work in specific ways. For instance, we know that urban spaces are disrupted and transformed when novel technological opportunities enter the landscape, and that digital infrastructures, interacting with pre-existing histories, material structures and social practices, enable people to re-inhabit cities in new ways (Williams and Dourish 2006). How we articulate a vision for a city is deeply tied to how we see ourselves as citizens, and historically, postcolonial cities in India have been shaped by the interests of elite groups, with the support of state and capital (Datta 2015). This is why it is important to challenge elitist ideas of who a city belongs to, and to recenter and redevelop the idea of the right to the city, which claims the right of all citizens and workers to participate in the production of their city (Lefebvre 1996).

How Digital Platforms Shape Beauty Work

Nearly all forms of work today have been transformed by digital platforms and AI technologies. Researchers across disciplines have called attention to how they have fundamentally changed the experience, structure, and management of work, and how they will shape the future of work (Joyce et al 2021; Frost 2019; Kenny & Zysman in Baltimore et al 2016). The industry of beauty work in India is no exception, and has also been affected by the entry of digital platforms, changing not just how large, established beauty salons operate but also totally transforming the informal, hyper-local landscape of beauty work. My thesis focuses specifically on women workers in this sector, for reasons I outline in Chapter 4. Here, I also analyze why beauty work, a seemingly "frivolous" type of work, is a crucial part of women's work landscape in India. Whether beauticians work as gig workers, salon employees, or freelancers, they cannot survive in the beauty industry today without using digital platforms for finding work, keeping in touch

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with customers, learning new skills and trends, and marketing their services. As platformization becomes a part of the conditions of everyday life, it is important to study how it shapes new forms and environments of work. So, how has the entry of platforms shaped the beauty work landscape in India?

First, large digital platforms for beauty work and home services seek to organize and reorder a previously unorganized, widely spread-out, informal beauty market, "formalizing" it and consolidating the dispersed market. This "disruption" of the traditional beauty industry ostensibly serves to create new market value for the platforms, and to improve the situation of both the customer and service provider. However, as I show in this thesis, the platformization of the beauty industry, though it appears beneficial in the short term, is actually creating conditions of greater informality and precarity over time for both the customers and the beauty workers, as well as the urban landscape overall. In an environment of great, deterministic excitement about AI technologies, this thesis project adds to the important and necessary work of mapping where algorithmic platforms succeed and where they fail, here in the context of women's work.

Second, the organization of beauty work through platforms and algorithms transforms the nature and implications of the work, while maintaining and even extending the social (gender, caste, class) and moral norms that underlie the relations between beauticians and customers. The algorithmization of beauty work takes away control and ownership of the work from beauticians and distributes it between platform managers and customers - while seeming to empower women beauty workers and offer them greater control and autonomy. The financial systems on which

beauty platforms are based, tether women to the work far after it becomes financially destructive for them to stay.

Third, the platformization of beauty work creates new modes of alienation. The structuring of gig work through algorithmic management centers the transactional quality of beauty work and systematically isolates women gig workers from their customers, community, and each other through the means of the app. The relational intimacy that was inherent to beauty work earlier - women might frequent the same beauty parlor for many years; beauticians would be able to rely on a trusted and steady roster of customers - has been eroded by platforms in the name of bringing more options and reducing costs or increasing wages. In accessing beauty work through the app, a customer may never be assigned the same beauty worker twice; similarly, gig workers are penalized for trying to form longer-term relationships with customers outside of the app.

In the current landscape, with Google, Open AI, Microsoft, Meta, and a host of others fiercely competing with each other to release the latest generative AI models, AI has become a buzzword that is taken seriously without interrogation or qualification. It is important that businesses wanting to use AI systems actually assess these systems for impact and think about their potential to lead to destructive social outcomes, rather than finding out the implications of these systems as an afterthought or by accident. This thesis takes the position of questioning the fetishization of AI and the uncritical approval enjoyed by AI technologies, and instead focuses on and takes seriously the implications of AI systems for human beings and its interactions with their social environments (Christin 2020; Gillespie 2010; Gillespie 2014). It inverts the

misogyny underlying women's work and gender inequalities by taking beauty work seriously while approaching AI-led disruption with skepticism.

Incorporating a Historical Perspective

While my project is very much located in the "now", I believe it is crucial to incorporate a historical approach to this research. I have proposed that working-class women's work in India has always been gig work – historically, caught between domestic work, care work and agricultural work, women have been working on a contract basis, carrying out affective labor and emotion work, facing lack of recognition, payment and respect, and taking on multiple "hustles" that have to be managed at once, to keep the family (and specifically male family members' labor) productive. Through this work, women have had to be answerable to male authority figures (within and outside the home) demanding and controlling the ways in which their work takes place, bear the costs of production, and have very little say in the way in which household resources are distributed. With the transition from housework and the agricultural economy, to the industrial economy, and now to the platform economy, how much has really changed?

Platform-mediated work certainly represents a new labor model and a novel form of work, simply by virtue of the fact that mobile phones, apps, and Wi-Fi did not exist in this form even a decade ago – but what exactly about this form of work is different? Finding and investigating historical continuities to app-mediated work can help us understand the future of work by turning to the past, without being led astray by the hyperbolic and deterministic discourses that always surround novel technologies. Therefore, part of the work I do in this dissertation project involves pinpointing precisely what about platform-mediated work is new, and what about it is not, and rooting this inquiry in a historical analysis of women's work and the emergence of platform

capitalism in Mumbai (as I detail in Chapter 3). Back in the "now", this endeavor was aided by the fact that nearly every single gig worker I spoke to over the course of this project, previously used to work in beauty salons (spanning from informal salons in neighborhoods to upscale beauty salons), meaning that I was able to gain a robust understanding of how platform beauty work compares to traditional beauty salons as well.

Research Questions

This project examines structural variation in women's experiences of beauty gig work across the individual, interactional, and institutional levels. Speaking to tensions in the literature, my research questions are broadly grouped around three themes.

Work Spaces and Gendered Subjectivities

How does the nature of gig work play into women's decisions to participate in the workforce rather than staying at home or engaging in other forms of work? How do gender norms at the home and the workplace shape women's experiences of gig work, and how do women navigate these norms?

Social Mobilities and Social Relations

How does platform work challenge and/or retrench the underlying class, caste, and gender relations between gig workers and their customers? How does it shape new social mobilities and cultural aspirations enacted by gig workers in the city?

Organizational Hierarchies and Algorithmic Management

Through what logics do platform organizations create and structure gig work? What are the social hierarchies that shape algorithmic management practices, and who is the "ideal gig worker" for the platform organization?

Scope of Inquiry

I delineate the scope of my enquiry in this section and provide some key definitions.

Platform work and platform workers

Platform-mediated gig work can be divided into *cloud-work* and *crowd-work*. Cloud workers are essentially invisible within the platform apparatus and unlike crowd-workers, their work doesn't involve in-person interactions with end customers - for instance, content-moderation workers, or workers in warehousing, retailing, and manufacturing sectors. Amazon is an example of a platform that employs gig workers across several tiers of cloud-work *and* crowd-work, and where, for instance, only the delivery workers at the end of the supply chain can be called crowd-workers. This thesis focuses on the experiences of **women crowd-workers.**

Sectors of platform work

In India, the dominant sectors of crowd-work today are ride-hailing, home services (including beauty services), delivery, and construction. Of these, the home services sector is the only one that employs a majority share of women gig workers. Within the home services sector, there are several 'verticals' of gig work: predominantly house cleaning, salon and beautician services, and appliance repair. I have chosen to focus on the salon and beauty services vertical, for reasons I

outline in Chapter 4. Therefore, my thesis focuses on the experiences of **women crowd workers** in the **beauty sector** of the platform industry.
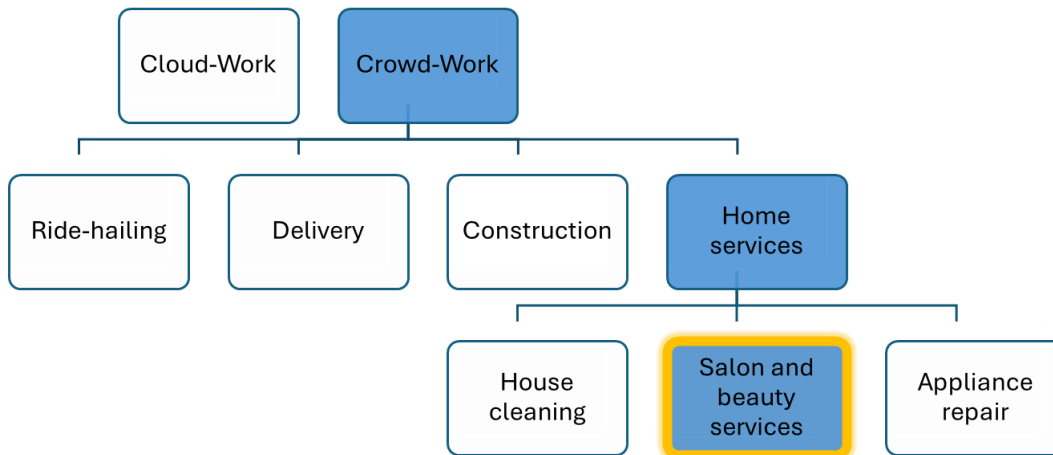
Fig. 1.1. Dominant Sectors of Gig Work.

While my main analytic focus is on the experiences of women beauty gig workers, I have also carried out fieldwork with male gig workers in the ride-hailing sector, as well as limited fieldwork with a few women gig workers employed in the (male-dominated) delivery and ride-hailing sectors. While I do not draw on this data directly in this thesis, it has helped me develop a broader structural sense of the differences between male-dominated and female-dominated sectors of platform work; and differences between the experiences of male and female gig workers within each of these sectors; informing and supporting my conclusions and theorization about the gender dynamics of gig work in India.

Types of Beauty Platforms

The majority of research on beauty platforms is focused on large beauty platforms. In this thesis, I expand this focus by considering three types of beauty platforms that women workers churn

through: 1) large platforms with a national or international presence, 2) subscription-based online platforms which provide job leads, and 3) small local platforms. I use pseudonyms for all the platforms and interlocutors I write about. In particular, I refer to the large beauty platform I studied as *BeautiCare*, and the subscription-based platform I studied as *Sampark*.

My main focus is on large platform organizations, with a secondary focus on subscription-based online platforms. My research on BeautiCare fits into existing work on beauty platforms in India and allows comparison and contrast with large platforms in other sectors, such as ride-hailing and delivery. In addition, my secondary focus on web-based platforms like Sampark and localized platforms offers a broader and more dynamic view of the platform ecosystem beyond a singular focus on large platforms.

Analytical and methodological approach

I applied a mixed-methods approach in this project using ethnographic fieldwork, including in-depth interviews, participant observation, short demographic surveys, group discussions, informal conversations, limited content analysis, and digital ethnography with gig workers, platform managers, and gig union members in Mumbai. I devote Chapter 2 to a detailed discussion of my methodology and analytical approach.

Locating this project within the landscape of platform research

There are many ways to approach the study of digital platforms and their impact on our work and social lives. Platform researchers have used a variety of interdisciplinary frameworks, theories, and concepts to capture the impacts of platform-mediated work on society, to assess its promises and pitfalls, and predict and address potential harms. Platform research is a burgeoning field

today, developed in response to the emergence of digital platforms and platform-mediated work in the early 2010s. In this thesis, I draw and build on perspectives and theories from across critical algorithmic studies, gender studies and feminist theory, informatics, history of technology, critical caste studies, labor studies, theories of social change, sociology of professions, sociology of the family, culture studies, management studies, and anthropology of work, to study the gender dynamics of gig work in India.

Chapter summaries

Chapter 2 offers a detailed account of my research design and methodology. Chapter 3 charts the particular histories of women's work in Mumbai between 1750 and the present, showing how women's productive and reproductive labor have been co-opted by capital and technology in each work era, and arguing that platformization constitutes a distinct work paradigm with gendered implications. Chapter 4 situates and justifies my focus on the beauty sector and argues that it offers a unique lens from which to study women's work in India. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 are my main empirical chapters where I delve into the access, experience, and organization of work in the beauty platform industry. Chapter 8 outlines the key empirical and theoretical contributions of this thesis, makes recommendations for policy and practice, and points to my future work on the politics of gig work.

Chapter 2: Data and Methodology

The Landscape of Gig Work Data

There has been an explosion of interest in research on gig and platform work around the world in the last 10 years, signaled by the rise in research articles, surveys, and consultancy reports dedicated to this topic, which have marked platform work and life as a distinct topic of study in itself (the first journal dedicated to platform research, *Platforms and Society*, was announced as I wrote this, in April 2024). Researchers have employed a variety of methods to study platform work and life across global contexts, and many of the studies of crowd work tend to use ethnographic approaches. Within the landscape of gig research, it is especially rare to find long-term or large-scale studies of gig workers, and studying gig work remains challenging for researchers. This is because 1) gig workers are a hard-to-reach group, as they are constantly on the go, moving across the city in unpredictable patterns every day, making it difficult to map or contact them, 2) gig workers typically switch platforms, or switch between platform and off-platform work, as well as migrate between sectors and locations over short-term time periods, meaning they may not stay in one job for long enough to study, 3) the nature and contexts of gig work keep changing so quickly that it is difficult to pin down and theorize over a longer time period, 4) platform companies are usually very reluctant to provide access to internal data or contacts of gig workers, or to facilitate research by independent researchers, making it difficult to study a particular company or sector in detail, and 5) many gig workers are reluctant to speak to researchers and journalists due to real fears of retaliation from platform companies and the lack of ownership and control over the data and dissemination. These challenges are even more potent in the case of women gig workers, who are harder-to-reach than male gig workers.

Individual researchers have overcome many of these limitations using creative approaches and methods, with auto-ethnography being an especially striking way to access the experience and networks around gig work (Cameron 2020; Poier 2019). In recent years, more and more researchers in India have adopted the approach of working with or alongside gig unions while producing research, allowing them to work with larger numbers of gig workers while maintaining accountability and ensuring their research also feeds back into worker organizing efforts (see Srujana Katta, Esha Kunduri, Mounika Neerukonda, Gayatri Nair, Marini Thorne). My thesis project is situated somewhere between a "traditional" study where I carry out an ethnographic study of gig workers, and a more collaborative and action-oriented approach where I carry out this study in collaboration with gig unions and gig workers. As I outline over this chapter, I have tried to incorporate several elements of an action-oriented and participatory approach in this study, within the limits of bureaucratic and institutional rules, funding, and time constraints.

Multi-Sited Ethnography: Fields of Study

There are different ways of selecting and defining a "field" of study and a unit of analysis. For the purpose of this project, I took the ethnographic approach of "following the person" (here, woman gig worker in the beauty sector) (Marcus 1995) across multiple sites in the city of Mumbai in order to answer my research questions. This allowed me to understand different dimensions of gendered gig work, and arrive at a richer and more holistic overall theory of gendered gig work than could be accessed by studying a single site alone. I discovered the sites during the process of fieldwork by tracing gig workers across different contexts, ultimately identifying five sites that were most relevant to answering my research questions (Marcus 1995).

These five sites are: NGO beauty supply chains, the beauty platform office, city spaces where gig workers travel for work, the platform app, and gig unions and organizing spaces. Many of these sites (such as the platform app and the beauty platform office) involved both offline and online spaces. While my primary focus was on women gig workers, the project involved interactions, conversations, and observation with other entities in these fields: notably, platform managers, male gig workers, customers, security guards in the platform office, and NGO workers.

I view each of the five sites as a distinct field in itself, characterized by three features: the field is 1) co-constituted through interactions ("from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny"), 2) allows for multiplicity of trajectories and experiences, and 3) is always under construction (Massey 2005). Recognizing how women gig workers are multiply situated across these fields, my project compares and combines findings from across these 5 sites to "obtain a more fine-grained picture of similar processes in different places", loosely based on the traditional grounded theory method (Glaser and Strauss 1967). This approach allowed me to triangulate my findings and to address different aspects of platform work, somewhat like "elements of a puzzle that are put together to form a complete picture" (Nadai and Maeder 2005). Finally, this approach allowed me to observe beauty platform work at three interconnected levels – the individual (experiences of women workers), interactional (how women workers interact with customers, apps, managers, family members, etc.) and institutional (how they navigate larger structures: family, law, cities, platform economy) (Risman 2004).

As I detail in the next section, I applied a variety of ethnographic methods across the five sites: formal in-depth interviews, informal conversations, participant observation, digital ethnography, content analysis, and so on. I "passed" differently in different sites, sometimes being seen as a gig worker, other times being seen as a cosmopolitan researcher from the USA, providing multiple vantage points and understandings of how my positionality and perceived social location affected my interactions in the field and shaped the data I have collected. Viewing the same events from multiple perspectives (the gig workers', the platform organization's, and the customer's) allowed me to travel the space between interlocutors' lived experiences and their reporting or narratives around those experiences. Throughout the data collection process, I was particularly attentive to the ways in which individual experiences and beliefs transform into collective or structural patterns.

At the conceptual level, a multi-sited ethnography, with its multiple modes of participation and observation, allows the researcher to cut across binaries such as "local vs global" and "North vs South" (Marcus 1995). This is an important intervention that I apply in my project. Using a multi-sited ethnography, I reject the "additive" approach often taken to studies of South Asia (where projects located outside the "West" are seen as "adding" to and completing knowledge started in the West) and instead center the Indian context as theoretically generative in, of, and for itself (Radhakrishnan and Vijayakumar 2022).

Following this idea of an "indigenous sociology" that decenters the West, in this thesis, I firmly locate my findings and theorization in the particular history and present of Mumbai, while pointing to ways in which the findings mirror elements of platform work in other Indian, South

Asian, and global contexts (starting with Chapter 3). Analyzing the individual, interactional, and structural factors shaping gendered platform work in Mumbai today, I argue that these findings cannot be automatically transplanted or translated into other Indian or global sites without first adequately addressing the historical and cultural contexts of those sites. Thus, I am making a case for the specificity of theory, by questioning whether generalizability without direction or purpose - generalizability for generalizability's sake - has any value when studying the ways in which AI-mediated work and structures travel across very different sites and contexts and how they affect platform workers' lives and wellbeing. I am making a case for generalizing with care, with consideration for contextual factors, and with a clear idea of *why* generalization matters and *how* it can be used to create interventions that would mitigate platform and AI-mediated harms across the varied contexts of use.

Theorizing Specificity: Mumbai in Space, Place and Time

My project, and all five field sites, are located in Mumbai. This is a city that has compelled and inspired so much academic and popular literature on it, that it can be said to be over-represented in studies of urbanity. Located in the Western state of Maharashtra, on the coast, Mumbai is India's financial capital, its most populated and most dense city, and home to the largest number of billionaires in Asia. Famously called "the city of dreams", Mumbai's backbone and beating heart are composed of a constant inflow of migrants from other cities who come here in hopes of lucrative work; at the same time, the city exhibits one of the most staggering and visually spectacular displays of income inequality in the world. Today, even though it feels like Mumbai is past its glory days, it remains a key site of analysis for studies of urban India. Ashcroft writes about Mumbai,

"Overpopulated, under-serviced, with an inadequate infrastructure, Bombay is a commercial centre that has always been a city of minorities, a diasporic city that represents, in a concentrated form, the flow of populations that resulted from colonialism. The city is not just the home of Marathi speakers, but of speakers of Gujurati, Hindi and Tamil, not to mention English – different linguistic groups who referred to it variously as Bambai or Mumbai…[countless novels] trace the conflict between the boundless energy of the city's cosmopolitan complexity and the destructive forces of caste, ethnocentrism and religious fundamentalism". (Ashcroft 2011).

In Chapter 3, I write a genealogy of women's work in Mumbai that situates the emergence of platform work in the city - rewriting the history of work from 1750 to the present, from the vantage point of working women in Mumbai. Ashcroft explains why the particular history of Mumbai makes it stand out as a "metaphor for modernity" in India, symptomizing important trends across the country:

"Bombay has served as an especially compelling 'metaphor for modernity', with its rapid economic growth, its large middle class, its cosmopolitan character, and its early record of popular involvement in national politics. Mumbai also seems to epitomize India's recent process of 'globalization'; the city is associated with the rise of new economic structures based on international capital and the shattering of old economies; with the formation of subcultures centred on film, television and the internet; and with the development of a mobile elite that regularly travels abroad for education, vacations and business. Finally, the recent growth in Mumbai of populist politics built on religious and regional loyalties and the violence that has sometimes accompanied this development exemplifies issues that have increasingly preoccupied scholars of the entire subcontinent. In short, the city no longer seems a special urban enclave whose social, cultural and political attributes mark it off from the rest of the subcontinent; rather, in some ways, it seems emblematic of important trends in South Asia". (Ashcroft 2011).

As a city built on migration and working-class citizens, with a rich history of women workers and legendary working-class organizing that inspired nationwide labor legislations, Mumbai offers a robust vantage point from which to study the emergence and impacts of platform work, which I argue in this thesis is a new and emerging paradigm of work.

I am particularly inspired by Chandavarkar's analysis of the history of industrialization in Mumbai, which centered the agency of Mumbai's working classes and decentered the idea of a

Western-led modernity. Chandavarkar argued that Bombay's modernity was shaped by its interplay with a widening rural hinterland and not simply by the "modernizing' forces of the West" (Chandavarkar in Kidambi 2013). In later work, chronicling the transformation of "Bombay" into "Mumbai", Chandavarkar also pointed to the city's disintegrating cosmopolitan ethos and secular aspirations, noting that the city's modernity "was being dissipated into archaic divisions" (Chandavarkar in Kidambi 2013). Indeed, in the last few decades, Mumbai's social fabric has been marked by deepening religious and linguistic conflicts, particularly between Hindus and Muslims, and between (local) Maharashtrians and North Indian migrants. In 'Bombay Islam: The Religious Economy of the West Indian Ocean, 1840-1915', Nile Green chronicles how Bombay became "a primary city of Islam" with over 150,000 Muslims living in the city by the early 1900s, noting that Mumbai's Muslims were embedded in a pluralistic and liberal religious economy up until the mid-nineteenth century.

Mumbai (and the state of Maharashtra) also carries a rich history of anti-caste organizing and networks, particularly inspired by Jyotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar, with substantial writing on caste emerging from vernacular (Marathi and Hindi) Dalit and Ambedkarite writers, including Dalit feminists like Urmila Pawar, Babytai Kamble, and Meenakshi Moon (Brueck & Merrill 2018; Moon & Pawar 2004). To this day, the city is deeply shaped by caste networks and interactions, and is significantly spatially segregated by caste. In Outcaste Bombay, Junaid Shaikh argues that migration and caste were central to the production of urban space in Mumbai, and that caste plays a significant role in the production and reproduction of capital and labor in the city (Shaikh 2021).

Drawing from these writings on Mumbai, my project theorizes the emergence and impacts of gendered platform work in the particular historical and spatial context of Mumbai. This includes key findings on how gig work is reshaping gender, caste, class, and religious relationships in the city.

Finally: I selected Mumbai as the site of enquiry for this project mainly for practical and logistical reasons - it is my native city, I had a home base to stay in, and a familiarity with the cultural context, local language, and geography of the city. Given the uncertainties of long-term fieldwork during the pandemic, these privileges and advantages helped me complete my fieldwork within time and funding constraints.

Methods and Data Collection

I started scoping out the field and carrying out pilot fieldwork in May 2022. The primary fieldwork took place between September 2022 and September 2023. The majority of my fieldwork was carried out with women working in beauty platforms (a female-dominated sector of platform work). In Chapter 4, I discuss in detail why I have chosen to study the beauty work sector of platform work, and its significance in the broader landscape of women's work in India. To allow for a robust analysis, I additionally carried out limited fieldwork with 1) women beauticians who were unemployed and could not access platform work (this helped me eliminate survivorship bias) and 2) male gig workers in the ride-hailing sector (a male-dominated field of platform work). This helped me carry out a limited comparison and identify gendered features of platform work across and within sectors. This analytical strategy enhances the robustness of this study and the validity of the findings.

In the field, I mostly spoke Hindi with gig workers, but used a combination of English and Hindi depending on the participant and site.

Below, I outline my data collection process in each of the five sites and then go on to describe my data sample in detail.

Site 1: NGO Beauty Supply Chains

Case selection and analytic value

First, I scoped out NGOs in Mumbai that offered beautician training courses for migrant and marginalized women, viewing them as a gig worker supply pipeline for beauty platforms. In October, I located an NGO in a migrant locality in West Malad where several students of their beauty course had gone on to join beauty platforms, and reached out to the manager and staff members. I received enthusiastic permission to join them during their field rounds, observe the beautician and tailoring classes, reach out to beauticians who had completed the course (via the NGO), and to conduct interviews. The NGO regularly hosted Social Work MA students for internships, and had a process set up to facilitate my fieldwork. This phase of fieldwork, carried out primarily between November and December 2022, gave me access to an analytic group of women who were trained in beauty work and were in the process of finding work, but could not access platform work. Through this group, I was able to understand the barriers to finding work faced by women with extremely low access to resources.

Context of the site

The locality in which this NGO lay was home to one of the largest slums in the city, with around 5,00,000 residents**.** It was a mixed neighborhood with a nearly equal proportion of Muslim and

Hindu families, many of whom had migrated from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. The locality was severely underdeveloped with mostly illegal hutments and homes, which meant that it was prone to demolition drives from the city's municipal corporation. There were escalating and serious tensions between the regionalist & right-wing political parties, and the centrist & local Muslim political parties operating there, which played out through communalist politics targeting the increasing proportion of Muslim families in this area, and causing tensions between Muslim and Hindu families. Most men here were employed in informal forms of work, like auto-rickshaw driving, bangle-making, garage work, construction work, and other forms of daily wage labor. A large proportion of women were employed in informal piecework such as beadwork, tailoring, and jewelry making as well as selling local herbs, carrying out domestic work in nearby buildings, working as bouncers for construction sites, and doing beauty work. NGO staff told me that there are high rates of alcoholism, drug dependence, and domestic violence in this area, as well as lack of good employment options, affecting men's ability to earn and placing gendered and classed pressures on women. The NGO, with its mission of improving health, literacy, and employment in this area, employed an explicitly apolitical and anti-ideological stance, and carried out daily programs, most of which were aimed at empowering the women in the locality through information, skills training, public health resources, and feminist messaging.

Recruitment and data collection

I carried out active fieldwork in this locality for 2 months, between November and December 2022. I first spent time in the NGO office, officially interviewing 2 veteran staff members; informally speaking with 11 other staff members to understand the social and economic character of the locality and the life contexts of women living there; and observing tailoring

classes, literacy classes, weekly women's health meetings, the daily routine and interactions at

the NGO office, and other events. I also accompanied a veteran social worker at the NGO on her

daily rounds through the locality, as she visited the 300+ women there regularly to keep up with

their daily lives and issues, and kept a close eye on any health, food, or financial emergencies.

The NGO staff were used to hosting students who would assist them with various tasks and help

them expand their service offerings, and the local community also seemed to be used to this

process. I was initially welcomed by both groups and was able to settle in quickly.

In the NGO office, all the staff members would eat lunch together, sharing their *tiffin dabbas*

(lunch boxes). During the lunch hour, people often discussed and reflected about each other's

cultural, religious, linguistic, and ethnic backgrounds and habits, exhibiting an easy camaraderie

and a strong patriotic sense of Mumbai and India as a wonderful melting pot. In this space, I was

immediately identified as a South Indian due to my dress and my last name. I was seen as a

"simple" and "sweet" girl, and my status as an outsider who was only spending limited time here

led to some interlocutors discussing their office politics and issues with me privately to let off

steam. Over time, various people I interacted with discussed not only personal tensions, but also

communal and caste tensions in the locality with me in private conversations. Some Hindu staff

members, seeing me as a Hindu too, confessed deep prejudices against Muslim and Dalit

families in the area, with one staff member telling me with regret, "I know this is a lack in me, I

have to change myself". These prejudices resisted easy binaries or explanations, as the same staff

members had devoted themselves to serve these families for many years and both them and

several of the women in these families explicitly talked about their close friendships and familial

bonds with each other. These particular NGO staff members would also often go above and

beyond to spend their own limited resources on providing rations, medicines, and emotional

support to Muslim families and friends (Bedi 2016). In the very limited time I spent there, I was

able to recognize the complex social and affective ties that shaped interactions between NGO

staff members and local families, and between Hindu and Muslim women, resisting easy labels

(Bedi 2016).

Through the veteran staff member I worked with, I approached and recruited 15 beauticians for

in-depth interviews, carried out in or just outside their homes. Roughly half the sample consisted

of young unmarried women, and this group was enthusiastic and excited to chat with me. The

other half consisted of married women with kids, who were cautiously interested in participating

in this study. They were initially slightly wary, wanting to know the motivation behind this

project and deciding whether it was worth their time, and then opened up greatly during the

interview. All the respondents lived with their families.

My interview guide focused on women's work aspirations and motivations, the experience of

beautician training, the role of family, marriage, and children in shaping women's access to and

experience of work, experiences of beauty work, and barriers to work. I requested permission to

audio-record the interviews. If participants who consented seemed uncomfortable after I started

recording, I would switch to taking notes. In this site, all 15 interviews were audio-recorded. The

interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 1.5 hours, with an average time of 30 minutes. Interviews

with married mothers tended to run longer as they had more to share around family dynamics,

marriage, and childrearing. Sometimes, interlocutors' young children were present with them

during the interview; on one occasion, the interlocutors' mother was present. On two occasions,

the interlocutor immediately stopped speaking when her husband entered the home, then resumed when he had left again.

I also carried out a short demographic survey after the interview to gather details about respondents' age, marital status, number of children, education, prior work experience and a few other factors relevant to women's employment. Additionally, after each field visit, I wrote detailed ethnographic notes. I also wrote analytical memos at key points during the fieldwork.

After completing the interviews, even as I moved on to fieldwork in other sites in the city, I maintained regular correspondence with the veteran social worker and a beautician interlocutor from this locality over the next 10 months, and occasionally visited them at the NGO to chat and keep in touch. I tried to regularly share my resources and social capital to respond to the urgent needs of the community and especially the women living there, brokered by the social worker interlocutor. This took the form of crowdsourcing funds for and arranging for around 5500 sanitary napkins to be distributed to the 300 women in the locality; facilitating a partnership through a friend with a startup that delivered around 60 air purifying units to schools, homes, and the NGO office for free (helping address the high incidence of air pollution-related diseases); setting up a small emergency fund of medicines and food rations for senior citizens in need; and purchasing and delivering medical equipment for abandoned women senior citizens. This brokering work shifted the way my interlocutors saw me, from a "simple" female student to a privileged resident of the city who had resources and connections that could be requested and utilized; my interlocutors began to approach me with more respect as well as a greater emotional distance and carefulness.

Site 2: The Beauty Platform Office

Case selection and analytic value

A key site for my study is the platform office. I gained access to beauty platform offices first through platform managers during pilot fieldwork in April 2022 and again in January 2023, as well as through gig workers who invited me to accompany them several times between December 2022 and March 2023.

For some sectors of gig work, such as ride-hailing and delivery, the platform office does not feature prominently in the experience of gig work. However, beauty gig workers spend a considerable amount of time in the platform office, especially in the beginning when they are being professionalized and trained prior to beginning work, and subsequently when they undertake retraining sessions, and make occasional visits to resolve issues and conflicts that cannot be addressed online. In addition, unlike ride-hailing and delivery gig work, where gig workers interact exclusively with the app and with their customers; beauty gig workers have to heavily interact and work with human cluster managers and trainers who actively train, manage and problem solve with them over the course of their time at the platforms.

Fieldwork at the beauty platform office allowed me to observe interactions between managers-managers, managers-gig workers, and gig workers-gig workers; identify organizational priorities as they were encoded into the layout, setup and functioning of the platform office; and analyze the atmosphere and process during recruitment and retraining processes for gig workers.

Context of the site

I focused my fieldwork on one of the largest beauty platforms in the city, BeautiCare, which had

a single training office in Mumbai. While the office location was relatively easy to find on

Google Maps, the platform office was located in a gated complex that housed a small cluster of

office buildings. There were three levels of entry - first, into the gated complex; second, through

a biometric security gate into the platform office building; and third, into the offices, located on

specific floors, where visitors again had to sign in to a register. The building itself was unmarked

by any signage, and each level of entry was manned by security guards armed with registers. In

each floor, there were a variety of spaces - meeting rooms, managerial offices, and cubicles,

training rooms, waiting rooms, and so on. Many training rooms were marked "no men". The

offices were well furnished with comfortable chairs, desks, equipment, and whiteboards; but

looked like the back offices - run down but functional. Each of the offices opened into a waiting

room with rudimentary seating, the walls on each side lined with posters that each featured a

smiling woman gig worker describing how this job had helped them achieve financial security,

empowerment, independence, and so on. The offices reflected a power hierarchy, where the

managers (both male and female) who worked there every day were in charge, assisted by

security guards (all male) and trainers (women trainers training women gig workers). All three

entities directed and managed women gig workers, who were temporary visitors into the office,

and who had to follow their instructions.

Recruitment and data collection

I initially gained access to the platform office through a friend who worked at another branch of

the same platform, who put me in touch with a manager at the Mumbai office. I was invited to

the office for a limited visit, to meet a group of gig workers for a private group interview. While

waiting to meet this group, I observed the manager carry out a disciplining session, placing the group of 45 workers on probation for not working enough hours. After the manager left, I introduced myself and shared my project with this group of workers, asking them to share their names and contact details with me if they were interested in participating in the project. 37 women did so. With their consent, I then conducted a 45-minute group discussion about their work experiences using a semi-structured interview guide. Cognizant that the discussion was taking place on company premises, and that the anonymity of this group of workers was at risk, I focused the discussion on their work experiences with customers and the structure of their workdays, and took text notes rather than an audio recording. After the visit, I wrote detailed ethnographic notes as well. My positionality as a "researcher from the USA", introduced by a platform manager, did not place me in a position of trust or confidence with the gig workers I spoke to, as I was seen as a potential representative of the company or a "spy" who might report back to the manager. While the gig workers were very comfortable, open, and expressive in wanting to share their experiences of platform work, particularly with customers, and to have these experiences be written about, they were very reluctant to speak with me outside of the platform office for an individual formal interview, particularly about the platform or managers, due to privacy concerns.

I spent the next few months conducting fieldwork with individual gig workers outside of the platform office, a process that I detail in the next section. During this time, I also reached out to platform managers through my personal network, and on LinkedIn, and requested in-depth interviews. Two managers consented to in-depth informal conversations and one manager consented to an interview on Zoom. All 3 conversations were structured using my interview

guide and lasted between 1 and 2.5 hrs. The informal conversations were recorded through text notes, later written out in detail, and the Zoom interview was auto-transcribed by the program and edited by me. I requested further access to the platform office from each interviewee. One of these managers invited me to the office to interview a small group of high-performing gig workers. This was my second official visit to the platform office, and I spent time with managers in their section of the office, then conducted a private group interview with the 3 high-performing gig workers. As I had before, I took text notes while I was in the office and wrote up more detailed ethnographic notes for both the interviews and the observation after the visit. In addition, I took some photographs of the pilot session as well as a few audio recordings of the pilot program announcement. Over the course of fieldwork, I also carried out informal conversations with 2 more managers within the platform office.

As my ethnographic fieldwork and field relationships with gig workers developed, I was invited by gig workers on several occasions to accompany them to the platform office in different capacities - for moral support during recruitment, interviews or training evaluation days; as a model for training or retraining sessions; and to hang out and help out when they had to go to the office to resolve issues with managers or with the app. During these visits, I dressed plainly in monochromatic pants and a T-shirt, matching the attire of the gig workers I accompanied. In contrast to the official visits, where I "passed" as a cosmopolitan researcher from the USA, during visits with gig workers I "passed" as a gig worker or aspiring gig worker, resulting in differential treatment by security guards, managers, recruiters, and gig workers. This allowed me to experience and understand gig work from different organizational perspectives and through different experiential lenses. During these visits, I carried out participant and site observation,

and engaged in informal conversations with gig workers and managers. I took text notes on my phone while I was in the office, and wrote detailed ethnographic notes afterwards.

Finally, I also spent time following corporate executives of beauty platform companies (such as CEOs, CTOs, COOs, and VPs) online, reading their tweets, LinkedIn posts, and blog posts to get a sense of their belief systems, approach to platform building and gig work, and stated organizational priorities. I also read beauty platform blog posts, went through beauty platform websites, read their annual reports, and checked out recruitment posters and posts for gig workers and managers that were posted on LinkedIn. Finally, I read and watched platform companies' publicly available resources for gig workers, such as explainer videos on YouTube on how to download the app, recharge subscriptions, etc. This helped me get a sense of the beauty platform organization as a whole, from the outward-facing lens of high-level corporate executives.

Site 3: Gig Workers in the City

Case selection and analytic value

While NGOs and platform offices are some key sites where women are trained and formed into professional beauty workers, gig workers spend the vast majority of their time as workers moving through city spaces, between customers' homes, platform offices, and their own homes. To understand the lived experiences of women gig workers, it was essential to follow and participate in their daily work routines across these spaces through the city. I carried out this phase of fieldwork between December 2022 and April 2023 as well as in July 2023.

Context of the site

Ethnographic fieldwork with gig workers took me all across Mumbai. My key interlocutors lived across Malad and Dharavi; platform offices were located in Sion, Andheri, Powai and Chembur; and customer leads tended to be concentrated in areas such as Powai, Bandra, Dadar and Andheri. Over the course of shadowing and meeting gig workers, these were the localities I most frequently traveled to, within and around. When traveling together, we typically used a combination of local trains, share-autos, and walking, to reach customer or office locations. Most gig workers lived in chawls or in small apartments with their families, and traveled extensively to reach their customers, a large proportion of whom were professional working women living alone or with their families in high-rise buildings, sometimes in gated communities. Over the course of fieldwork, I experienced the high level of class, caste, and religion-based segregation in Mumbai, especially when I was "passing" as a woman gig worker inside gated communities. Here, I directly experienced how difficult it is for women workers to enter the buildings even if they work there, due to classist attitudes and barriers enacted by guards and residents – this is something that has been documented and reported on for a long time time now by working-class residents of the city (for instance, Balram Vishwakarma offers a meticulous reportage of this and other issues faced by informal workers in Mumbai on his Instagram account). The obvious divide between working-class residents who tend to live in ghettoized slums and middle and upper-class families who lived in buildings and gated complexes (the former making their livelihoods from providing informal services to the latter), translates into starkly different levels of access to basic resources and amenities, as well as the social treatment of working-class citizens of the city.

Recruitment and data collection

Initially, I reached out to the women gig workers who had shared their contact details with me during my first visit to the platform office. We formed a WhatsApp group for easy coordination. At first, as everyone was located in different areas in Mumbai and busy juggling domestic responsibilities and platform work, it was extremely difficult to coordinate a group meeting or in-person interviews, even though several participants expressed interest in a group meeting. After a few weeks, participants stopped responding. The platform had begun mass layoffs during those weeks, causing a crisis of potential unemployment to prepare for as well as a reluctance to participate in interviews with a stranger who seemed to be tied to the company. One gig worker told me frankly, "We have a lot to say to you, but we are scared of being found out for talking to you". I spent the next couple of months loosely staying in touch with this group of women workers, during which time I got to know that many of them were laid off from the company and had begun to circulate through other platforms searching for work.

I felt uncomfortable pursuing formal interviews when the women I was reaching out to were struggling to secure their livelihoods. So, I shifted gears for a couple of months and tried to center the priorities and needs of the women gig workers who I was most closely in touch with. This took the form of sharing their contact details among my friends in the city who were looking for beauty services; making marketing posters on Canva for individual beauticians; sharing these posters on hyperlocal groups on social media; looking up beauty platforms and salons in the city that were hiring; accompanying gig workers to platform recruitment drives; and so on. Rather than trying to achieve an "insider" status, I tried to use my "outsider" status and privileges to actively share my social capital and resources with gig workers. During this time, I developed a relationship of trust and a tentative friendship with this small group of women gig

workers. We also chatted about why I was in Mumbai, my motivations for this project, and my plans, and as our comfort level and frankness with each other increased, they spoke to me about gig workers' fears and the unsuitability of an interview-based project.

Three of these interlocutors invited me into their lifeworlds and invited me to accompany them through the process of searching for stable platform work, saying that this is the best way to learn about their lives and to write about it. The bulk of my study involved continuous ethnographic fieldwork with this small group of 3 gig workers over several months as they moved through different platforms, as well as time-limited data collection (such as one-time interviews or informal conversations) with a much larger group of gig workers, managers, and gig union workers. This allowed me to capture the relationship between what interlocutors did, and what they said they did; and to build an intuitive understanding of the role of storytelling, narratives, and sense-making in gig workers' lives (Jerolmack & Khan 2014; Polletta et al 2021). Ethnographic research allowed me to observe behavior directly and deconstruct tacit and embodied knowledge, while formal interviews helped me understand the emotional landscapes and personal narratives through which people reported and made sense of these behaviors (Jerolmack & Khan 2014; Swidler 1987; Riessman 2015; Polletta et al 2021). Jacobsson & Akerstrom (2013) ask, what if the interlocutor and the researcher are not able to agree on the meanings co-constructed in the interview? Interlocutors in both ethnographic fieldwork and formal interviews come with their own strategies, agendas, politics of refusal, and areas of resistance (Adler & Adler 2014; Chase). I was attentive to these dynamics and viewed them as generative for my analysis.

My positionality as a woman, a "US researcher", a Mumbaikar who speaks Hindi, largely aided my intimacies with my interlocutors, while my positionality as an upper-caste person, a vegetarian, a Hindu, a South Indian who does not speak Marathi, shaped (both hindered and aided) my intimacies and interactions with interlocutors in particular ways. For instance, my being South Indian limited the extent of my intimacies with dominant-caste Hindu Maharashtrian gig workers who became otherwise close interlocutors; lower-caste women gig workers, placing me as dominant-caste, moved cautiously and took their time before deciding whether to open up to me and share their experiences; and Hindu gig workers in general assumed that it was safe to make Islamophobic references in my presence. Many times though, we surprised each other by crossing these boundaries, challenging each other's perspectives, and developing friendships across contested social locations.

During this process, I routinely met these 3 gig workers, sometimes accompanied by their friends, at different points in the city in between their daily jobs, and shadowed them during their workday. We spoke on the phone nearly daily, and much of the conversation would be about how other gig worker and salon beautician friends in their networks were faring. From this small group of interlocutors, I heard and could trace the concurrent work trajectories of 15-20 other beauty gig workers over several months. I carried out in-depth interviews with women gig workers only after establishing a relationship of trust with the gig worker or if a gig worker in my network reached out asking to participate in the interview; sometimes, I secured interviews through referrals from my close network of gig interlocutors who had likewise been speaking about me to their beautician friends (as they did about those friends to me), and who consented to an interview with me.

In all, I conducted 15 in-depth formal interviews with women gig workers, mostly in public city spaces such as parks. I followed a semi-structured interview guide which covered their entry into beauty work and work aspirations, access to platform work, experience of platform work, the role of the family in their work lives, how platform work has changed over time, and so on. Two interviews were conducted in gig workers' homes. Three interviews took place over the phone. These interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 3.5 hours, with the average interview being around 75 minutes long. Given gig workers' fears, I often did not record the interviews, opting instead to take detailed notes as they were speaking, in a way that they could see the notes (if the interview was in person). However, interviews with 7 of the gig workers were audio recorded, as they were very comfortable with it. Even in these cases, I wrote detailed notes of the interview afterwards.

I took local trains, share autos, private autos, buses, ride-hailing autos, and ride-hailing cabs during my travels through the city, and also chatted with drivers about their experiences with platform apps whenever possible. In particular, informal conversations with ride-hailing auto and cab drivers (all men) yielded rich insights about the nature of platform work in male-dominated platform sectors and allowed me to make (limited) comparisons between the beauty and ride-hailing sectors of platform work. I spoke to 16 drivers in all, reflecting a diversity of age, driving experience, religion, regions in the city, and migrant status. The range of the conversations was between 15 minutes and 45 minutes. I took notes during each conversation and wrote detailed field notes after reaching home. I followed the same semi-structured interview guide for the in-depth interviews as well as the informal conversations - the latter being even more loosely

structured and tending to coalesce around some particular topics depending on the inclination of the respondent.

Site 4: Platform App and Customer Services

Case selection and analytic value

From my ethnographic fieldwork with gig workers in the city, I learnt that alongside large beauty platforms, there is a dynamic, proliferating web of smaller, local beauty platforms which emerge and crumble more quickly; and online platforms which run on subscription models of work (i.e., gig workers pay a monthly fee to receive a fixed number of job leads which they manage through an app). In the two latter forms of platform work, unlike large beauty platforms, there is no active management or professionalization of workers by designated managers, and little need for them to visit the platform office. The NGO, platform office, and city spaces gave me important insights into different aspects of gig work. But I also wanted to understand how gig workers interacted with customers and managed the platform app, through direct experience. I was able to get at this via a subscription-based beauty platform.

In December 2022, along with 2 of my close interlocutors, I purchased a beauty work subscription from a platform called Sampark for 2 months, and got direct experience in managing the app, reaching out to customers, and converting leads into jobs. I also went along as a trainee gig worker on a couple of customer visits. Finally, we made multiple visits to this platform office to work out issues with the app. This leg of fieldwork allowed me to gain direct experience in working a beauty platform app and to better understand the dynamics between customers and gig workers.

Data collection process and sites

The 3 interlocutors I had started working with had been laid off a few months earlier, were not having luck getting jobs at other platforms, and were planning to purchase a subscription to an online platform that would guarantee them work as a group. They discussed the plan with me, and I offered to pay part or whole of the subscription fee as they were allowing me to participate in the process as an ethnographic researcher. They said they "did not want to mix business with friendship" by letting me pay - and in the end, we agreed on our splitting the payment equally, with me joining the group as a kind of trainee beauty worker. The 4 of us discussed a name for our 'business' and went to the platform office to purchase the subscription, download the app, set up our business and start work. In the end, one interlocutor dropped off and the 3 of us remained. The subscription lasted 2 months and guaranteed 100 leads which we had to convert into actual jobs. The three of us took turns manning the app, managing leads, and reaching out to customers - my turn came twice, for a total of 3 weeks. I also accompanied one of the interlocutors on a home service job as a trainee, for beauty services that lasted around 3 hours in a customer's home. Finally, we made multiple trips to the subscription platform office to complain about their quality of leads, bargain for better jobs, and troubleshoot various issues with their app.

During this process, I collected data in the form of detailed ethnographic notes and voice memos, along with a few screenshots and photographs of the app interface at various points. I also joined and frequented various hyper-local Facebook groups to search for customers and post our rate cards. I spent a lot of time on these groups searching for posts about beauty gig workers and reading the complaints of middle and upper class customers about gig workers. The manner in

which they spoke about gig workers, mirrored the ways in which my own, similarly upwardly mobile and cosmopolitan, neighbors, and acquaintances, spoke about them.

This leg of fieldwork helped me understand how gig workers are viewed and treated by customers, and to experience the interactions between gig workers and potential/actual customers. It also helped me analyze how platform apps are designed and directly trace the ways in which platform algorithms gamify work, place pressure, and incentivize gig workers.

Site 5: Gig Unions and Organizers

My time spent in gig worker collectivization spaces, most actively between June and September 2023, and loosely ever since then, was not part of my official fieldwork or data collection process. I participated in this process after I had finished my fieldwork, in a volunteering capacity, and out of a sense of commitment and passion. Therefore, I have not used any of the information I gathered during this time directly in this thesis; however, what I learnt during this process has influenced the way in which I have analyzed and put together my data, and helped me understand the larger economic, legal, political landscape around gig work in India. For this reason, I include a brief account of these activities as indirect sources of information and perspective for this thesis.

In June 2023, gig workers in Mumbai began to circulate photos and videos of a young woman gig worker who had reportedly died by suicide after being suddenly laid off by the main beauty platform in the city. The images spread like wildfire across different cities and states in India and galvanized women gig workers into collective action. During this time, though I was back in the USA, I was added to some of the main Mumbai collectivization groups on WhatsApp and began

to follow the developments. I traced multiple groups forming from the initial chaos of thousands of women gig workers coming together in Mumbai, and reached out to the leader-organizers of each group. Over the next couple of months, I offered to assist each group in the process of collectivization and in bargaining with the company to achieve better conditions of work for gig workers. I worked closely with some of the groups, assisting with tasks such as writing demand letters to labor ministries, drafting press releases, annotating PILs and court judgments, taking notes on Zoom meetings with groups of women gig workers, facilitating these meetings, translating documents from English to Hindi, and so on. Many of these documents were picked up by other gig unions across India and I also spoke to and briefly worked with organizers from these unions as well. On one occasion, when I was out of station, I requested three local students (through a post on social media) to observe one union meeting on my behalf, provided guidelines and suggestions on participant observation, and compensated each of the students for their travel expenses.

My participation in gig organizing spaces took place largely online, through WhatsApp groups, phone calls and Zoom meetings, along with occasional in-person meetings with union organizers and gig workers at protests, planning meetings and arbitration meetings. During this time, I got to hear the lived experiences of hundreds of women gig workers directly on Zoom and to record these experiences for the emerging gig unions (data that I have not used in this thesis). As part of this organizing work, I also interviewed key worker-organizers in the ride-hailing and beauty sectors in Mumbai, and wrote a cross-sectoral report producing a framework to evaluate platform companies, developed out of the direct lived experiences of gig workers. Other activities included sitting in on a collective bargaining session between women gig workers and a large

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beauty platform company, and participating in a protest at the Indian Parliament organized by a new coalition of gig unions.

Finally, the WhatsApp groups where women gig workers in the beauty sector were collectivizing in cities across India contained thousands of members. In the Mumbai groups (which anyone could join), I explicitly identified myself as a researcher. I listened to each and every voice note sent by hundreds of women about their experiences and frustrations with gig work, noting commonalities in their complaints and patterns and themes. Again, this is not data that I have used directly in my thesis, but it has indirectly helped me triangulate my findings and contributed to my understanding of the urgent issues faced by women workers.

Ethics of Compensation

I thought long and hard about how to approach research compensation in this project. In the end, compensation became something that was actively negotiated and renegotiated with my interlocutors over time using different approaches. Since issues and ethics of compensation are not very clear cut in projects of this kind (Warnock et al 2022; Cajas & Perez 2017), I consider it worthwhile to spend some time outlining the process I followed.

First of all - I was lucky that my project was funded by multiple grants. This meant I did not have to pay research participants out of pocket.

In the initial research design, which relied on formal interviews, I planned to compensate participants for their time, especially as they would be losing working time and wages by speaking to me during their workday. I looked up how much other platform researchers generally

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compensated gig workers; spoke to a few platform researchers in India and asked them how they

approached compensation; and looked up average wages of gig workers. It seemed like an

appropriate compensation amount was Rs. 500 (~$6). I felt a tension between 1) keeping the

payments reasonable, so that gig workers would not be motivated to speak to me *only* because of

the money, which would be an unethical way to recruit participants, and so that I was not

skewing the compensation landscape for Indian gig researchers with my USA-funded dollars;

and 2) recognizing that gig workers are severely underpaid for their labor, meaning that paying

them on the basis of what they were making would be unfair and exploitative.

In the field, I developed close relationships with 3 gig workers first, and it was to them that I first

raised the idea of compensation (separately). I was struck by the fact that each of the three

interlocutors vehemently refused money and also passionately told me not to offer compensation

for interviews to anyone else. I was scolded for offering to compensate them, as if I was doing

something morally inappropriate. As we spent more time together, I realized that they felt this

project was being carried out with the spirit of wanting to record and support the issues they face,

and this was meaningful to them. So, they felt that taking money would taint our relationship and

my work, and they also felt protective of me. In addition, they advised me that if I advertise

compensation before I secure interviews with people, the word will spread, and people will make

up whatever they think I want to hear just to get the money.

So, following their lead, I held off on compensating research participants. A few months before

fieldwork ended, we were discussing finances, and this time, my interlocutors suddenly realized

that the money I was paying wouldn't be coming from my private savings, but from the grant I

had secured. Now, they were open to being compensated and in fact asked me to pay them as much as I could. After completing my fieldwork, I reached out to all the interlocutors who had done formal interviews with me and offered them compensation of Rs. 1500 (~20) each. All but 4 participants agreed to be compensated. One gig worker refused the money, and three gig workers asked me to donate the money to social causes in their name - explicitly saying that they were happy to speak to me and would not want to taint the time we spent with an exchange of money. I felt very touched by this, and with their consent, donated this money to the NGO where I had carried out fieldwork. The money was used to set up a small fund that would pay for medicines and rations for senior citizens living alone.

I did not compensate the interlocutors who I carried out one-time *informal* conversations with. And finally, to the three interlocutors I worked very closely with, I compensated them a slightly larger amount, Rs. 2000 (~$25) each. This did not in any way reflect the value of their time or contributions to this project, however. I also paid for a platform work subscription that provided job leads to two of them for one month (the third interlocutor dropped out from this), which cost around Rs. 9800 (~$120). Initially, they insisted on paying me back for this subscription, because they wanted to keep "friendship and business separate". After they realized the amount would be covered by the research grant, they let me pay them their share before I left to go back to the USA.

I had considered whether to purchase services from gig workers as a way of finding and recruiting participants, but was not comfortable becoming a customer and making the request from the vantage point of a customer. However, some months into fieldwork, one of my close

interlocutors was out of work and desperately in need of money, and I asked her if I could purchase some home services. At my close friend's house, she, I, and my interlocutor hung out and chatted as I got a facial and some other services and then had tea and gossiped together afterwards. In this case, the money was acceptable to my interlocutor as it was a fair exchange for her work.

Data Sample & Sample Description

In this section, I describe my overall data sample. First, I provide demographic data tables for the women beauty workers (both platform and non-platform) I conducted formal interviews with, and the platform managers I spoke to. I also provide the number of participants I carried out group discussions and informal conversations with. Then I go on to describe the features of this data sample, and its strengths and limitations.

The main demographic information relevant to my interlocutors is their age, marital status, number of children, religion, and education, as these are factors that directly impact women's likelihood of workforce participation. I was unfortunately unable to capture education levels for all interlocutors, resulting in missing data. I also did not explicitly ask about religion, but have filled this in post-fieldwork based on my interactions with my interlocutors, their names, and outward religious presentation.

Table 2.1: Total Data Sample from All Methods

Type of Interlocutor	Method	N
Women beauty platform workers	Formal interviews	15

	Informal conversations	24
	Group discussion	37
	In-depth shadowing	3
	Total (not a straight addition due to overlaps)	**69**
Beauty platform managers	Formal interviews	1
	Informal conversations	4
	Total	**5**
Male gig workers	Informal conversations	16
Gig union organizers	Informal conversations	8
Non-platform beauticians	Formal interviews	15
NGO staff members	Formal interviews	3
	Informal conversations	8
	Total	**11**

In addition, I heard the experiences of ~90 women beauty gig workers from across the country in Zoom meetings, from a few hundred women beauty gig workers from Mumbai through WhatsApp voice notes, and from 8-9 women gig workers in informal conversations in Mumbai during arbitration meetings with platform companies and other collectivization events. I am not counting these above as they were not part of my formal data collection process.

Table 2.2: Demographic Profile of Non-Platform Beauticians (Formal Interviews)

Non-Gig Beauticians: Formal Interviews (N=15)				
Pseudonym	**Age Range**	**Marital Status**	**No of Children**	**Religion**
B1	10-20	Unmarried	0	Hindu
B2	20-30	Unmarried	0	Hindu
B3	30-40	Married	2	Muslim
B4	20-30	Unmarried	0	Muslim
B5	20-30	Married	1	Muslim
B6	30-40	Married	2	Hindu
B7	20-30	Unmarried	0	Hindu
B8	30-40	Married	2	Muslim
B9	20-30	Married	0	Hindu
B10	20-30	Unmarried	0	Hindu
B11	20-30	Married	1	Muslim
B12	20-30	Married	0	Muslim
B13	20-30	Unmarried	0	Hindu
B14	20-30	Unmarried	0	Hindu

B15	20-30	Married	0	Hindu

Table 2.3: Demographic Profile of Platform Beauticians (Formal Interviews)

Gig beauticians: Formal Interviews (N=15)				
Pseudonym	**Age Range**	**Marital Status**	**No of Children**	**Religion**
G1	30-40	Married	1	Muslim
G2	20-30	Separated	1	Muslim
G3	30-40	Married	2	Hindu
G4	30-40	Married	1	Muslim
G5	30-40	Married	2	Hindu
G6	30-40	Married	1	Hindu
G7	20-30	Married	2	Hindu
G8	20-30	Married	2	Sikh
G9	20-30	Married	0	Hindu
G10	30-40	Married	2	Hindu
G11	30-40	Married	1	Hindu
G12	30-40	Widowed	2	Muslim
G13	40-50	Married	4	Hindu

G14	40-50	Married	2	Hindu
G15	30-40	Married	2	Hindu

Table 2.4: Demographic Profile of Platform Managers (Formal Interviews)

Managers: Formal Interviews and Informal Conversations (N=5)				
Pseudonym	**Age Range**	**Marital Status**	**Gender**	**Educational Background**
M1	20-30	Unmarried	Male	Engineering
M2	20-30	Unmarried	Male	Social Sciences
M3	20-30	Unmarried	Female	Engineering
M4	20-30	Unmarried	Female	Social Sciences
M5	20-30	Unmarried	Male	Commerce

Key features and sample variation

The vast majority of women gig workers I worked with were married women with 1 or more

children, tending to be between the ages of 25 and 45. Given that the vast majority of women in

India experience marriage (Deshpande & Singh 2021), which poses serious barriers to work, this

dataset offers an important view into the work experiences of married and childbearing women

platform workers in particular, a group who are important to factor in in order to address the

dismal state of women's employment in India. Talking to them about how they started doing beauty work, I was struck by how the majority of this group had nurtured strong aspirations towards skills they wanted to learn and careers they wanted to build over a long and fractured period of 10-20 years or more, in the face of considerable barriers from natal and marital families and social institutions, which prevented them from pursuing their goals actively and freely. In contrast, a small but significant majority of women in my sample were single (previously married, widowed or abandoned) mothers who were working reluctantly, as they had no other option. Many were left in the lurch with young children to support, and platform work was one of the ways in which they could quickly access wage employment. Though working for pay brought them certain kinds of freedoms, they yearned for a return to the role of a homemaker and to be free of the economic compulsion to earn and support their families.

I was not able to gather robust information on the education attained by the gig workers in my sample, but through informal conversations and over time, I estimated that a large proportion of gig workers had completed their secondary schooling, a smaller but significant proportion of gig workers had left school before completing 12th standard, and a small minority of gig workers had attained bachelor's degrees through in-person college or correspondence courses.

Caste and class information was not explicitly gathered, but there was a considerable class variation in my sample, with gig workers ranging from extremely poor households to fairly well-off households. I estimate that the majority of gig workers in my sample belong to upwardly mobile lower-middle class to middle-class backgrounds, while the beauticians I spoke to at the NGO were experiencing severe poverty.

Caste was much more difficult to get at or estimate, as dominant-caste dynamics and markers tend to be cloaked in the 'invisibility of caste' (Deshpande 2013). In my sample, the layers of caste between the hyper-invisible Brahmin and the hyper-visible Dalit categories were most salient. I found that those who were most vocal about religious pride tended to be dominant-caste women; for instance, the *savarna* (dominant-caste) Maharashtrian Hindu women in my sample formed a strong and vocal sub-group who often obliquely referred to their caste and religious status. In contrast, lower-caste gig workers in my sample sometimes asked me questions about my family background, eating preferences, and other caste markers in order to place me, treading cautiously and taking more time before deciding whether to open up to me or not.

I had not given specific thought to religious diversity while recruiting participants, however, roughly ~35% of my data sample is composed of Muslim women gig workers while the remaining ~65% were (often very explicitly) Hindu. During fieldwork, I observed Islamophobia and discrimination directed towards Muslim women workers from multiple quarters. Therefore, though religious dynamics were not part of my interview guides, my data carries limited observations and analysis pertaining to the role of religion in the experience of platform work.

Sample limitations

My data sample is skewed heavily towards gig workers who churn through platforms. According to platform managers I interviewed, large beauty platforms experience a "supply churn" of around 1.5% a month - that is, 1.5% of beauty workers churn out of the company every month. They described this as a soft churn - with 30% of these workers dropping out due to pregnancy,

and wanting to return to work after some time. While many of the gig workers I spoke to had only worked at one large platform company and their experiences are well represented in this study, my sample does skew towards this reported 1.5% of the large beauty platform workforce that experiences churn, as a significant proportion of my interlocutors were laid off from the large platform either before or after I spoke to them.

There may be reason to question this reported number: most gig workers I spoke to, even if they had been employed at the large beauty platforms for several years, were experiencing employment instability and increasing numbers of gig workers reported being laid off in the last two years. Gig workers also overwhelmingly reported that a large number of their friends in beauty platforms were leaving, facing probation, or getting laid off. Again, while this may just be a function of my particular sample and their networks, I want to raise the possibility that the rate of churn may be higher than reported by the platform companies.

Next, I was only able to speak to five platform managers, and could not reach complete saturation with this group before my fieldwork concluded. This limits the generalizability of my analysis from this group. The group of platform managers I spoke to, exhibited no variation in age range (all were between 20-30 years old), marital status (all were unmarried), and religion (all were Hindu), and these variables have not shaped my analysis; but their gender and educational background show variation and are strongly relevant to my analysis.

Finally, given Mumbai's prominence as a city of migrants, as well as the role of migration in shaping platform work, I was not able to gather data on the migration status and histories of the

women gig workers in my sample (Van Doorn & Vijay 2021; Katta 2024). Through informal conversations, I found that large proportion of women gig workers in my sample had internally migrated within the city from their natal families to their husbands' families or their husband's home after marriage; in addition, many gig workers were originally from other states but their families had migrated to Mumbai in decades prior and they grew up here. Beyond this, I could not speak to the role of migration in shaping women's transitions into gig work.

Data Analysis

Analytical Approach

I employed an iterative data analysis process in this project loosely based on the grounded theory approach formulated by Glaser and Strauss (2017). In the "pure" grounded theory approach, the researcher arrives at emergent theories through an inductive approach where the analysis is derived solely from the data that is collected, rather than using a-priori theories or literature to form hypotheses beforehand. I apply a modified approach suggested by Glaser (1978), where the researcher is suggested to form prior understandings based on the general problem area by "reading very wide to alert or sensitize one to a wide range of possibilities", as "learning not to know is crucial to maintaining sensitivity to data" (Glaser 1978 in Health and Cowley 2003). Later, the researcher carries out more focused reading "when emergent theory is sufficiently developed to allow the literature to be used as additional data".

Process of Analysis

I followed this approach in an iterative fashion:

Before fieldwork began, I had carried out the 'wide reading' suggested by Glaser (ref), but avoided forming hypotheses or a-priori analytical ideas. After pilot fieldwork, during the primary fieldwork, I often wrote analytical memos to capture key emerging themes or analyses from the field. I also kept a running log of methodological memos to capture the process of fieldwork and my vantage point and personal reflections of the fieldwork process.

After fieldwork was "officially completed" and I was back in the USA, I sorted the text and audio data I had collected into key groups: ethnographic notes, interview data, analytical memos, and methodological memos, and labeled them neatly and by date. In the grounded theory approach, "induction is viewed as the key process, with the researcher moving from the data to empirical generalization and on to theory" (Bulmer 1979 in Heath and Cowley 2003). Typically, coding is done in 2 rounds (open then selective coding) to capture and synthesize the emerging themes. However, as I had been writing analytical memos throughout fieldwork and synthesizing my observations, I already had a sense of the emerging themes from my data. So, I first read through all my analytical memos, and created a codebook with 10 broad bucket codes based on them. I then uploaded my data on Atlas.ti and carried out a selective coding process of the data. I found that the codes fit quite well to the data and did not need much modification. However, 2 additional codes emerged from the coding process ('new ways of feminizing labor', and 'rethinking AI explainability'), capturing key emerging concepts.

My chapters were directly constructed from the data in these key codes. For instance, the 'access to work' code, combined with the 'family' and 'algorithms' code provided the source material from which I wrote the 'Access to Work' chapter (Chapter 6). After inductively developing the

theory and findings for each chapter, I went back and carried out multiple focused rounds of literature review for each chapter to build in the literature and theoretical frameworks for it. In this approach, "the endless possibilities allow the theory to be discovered rather than constructed around a predetermined framework. Rather than demanding details, parsimony, scope and modifiability are stressed" (Heath and Cowley 2003).

Quality checking

After coding the first 10 documents, I went back and reviewed my codes as a form of quality checking. As I continued coding, I occasionally ran a check on my coding distribution, and kept an eye on whether I was under or overusing any codes, making course corrections where necessary. While coding, I occasionally remembered some details that I had not captured initially in my notes - these were not added into the main text document but as memos attached to the document. While reading through coded excerpts, I sometimes caught coding errors or missing codes, which were corrected as I read every single coded excerpt multiple times.

Validity, Reliability, and Robustness

The validity of this study was enhanced by the following methodological and analytical strategies:

First, the mixed-methods and multi-sited research design was appropriate to answering the research questions and to the field I was operating. Second, I employed both purposive sampling and snowball sampling in this project, as I was working with a hard-to-reach group. However, I was cognizant of the internal variation of my sample and tried to maximize this variation as far

as possible. In addition, I included the "deviant" case of "women beauticians who are not able to find platform work" in order to get a comprehensive picture of the gendered nature of platform work. Third, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork until I reached saturation with all groups (enhancing validity) except for the group of platform managers, who I could not access in large numbers (reducing the validity of findings from this group). Fourth, the grounded theory approach to analysis allowed me to inductively derive theoretical findings from my field and data without being unduly influenced by a-priori theory or literature; and quality checks during data coding improved the validity of the study. Also, I triangulated theories and findings from other contexts through detailed literature reviews, after the coding process.

The reliability of a qualitative project is related to the extent to which it fits or expands existing theories or frameworks, or generates new explanations; in short, it has to do with how closely the project is able to arrive at "truthful" explanations (Golafshani 2003). Aside from the factors I mentioned above, the reliability of this study is enhanced by the mixed-methods data collection process, which allowed me to triangulate answers to the same questions from multiple methods, respondents, and vantage points. Moreover, working with a small group of gig workers over time revealed to me a lot about what gig workers really feel and about the veneer often put on for formal interviews, which falls away during longer term interactions (Jerolmack & Khan 2014).

Analyzing algorithms

In "The Ethnographer and the Algorithm: Beyond the Black Box", Angele Christin offers strategies for algorithmic ethnography. She notes that studying algorithms can be tricky, because of intentional secrecy on the part of tech platforms, technical illiteracy on the part of researchers,

the unintelligibility of layered algorithmic processes, and their size, which makes it "impossible for anyone to identify which part of the system is responsible for a specific decision" (Christin 2020). This means that it is difficult to hold algorithms accountable for decisions that affect workers, and they can easily be deployed to automate inequality and hide problematic managerial decisions.

So, how does one study these "black-box" algorithmic systems? I draw heavily on Christin's work in my approach to studying beauty platform algorithms and their effects, and use the technique of "algorithmic refraction", which involves examining how algorithmic systems unfold in social contexts and how they affect human actors: "By focusing on the waves and ripples that take place between algorithms and social actors, we can examine the refractions that such objects create, and in the process analyze the chains of representations and practices that travel across algorithmic systems, shaping their impact in the process". (Christin 2020). I combine this with a view of algorithms *as* culture instead of *in* culture, paying attention to what algorithms *do* instead of what they are or appear to be[2] (Seaver, 2017).

Across the five field sites, I pay attention to the ways in which human actors interact with algorithmic systems, and the consequences that result from these actions. A multi-sited and mixed-methods research design such as the one I apply here is particularly suitable for such an approach.

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[2] This idea also appears in systems research, e.g. the systems theory principle coined by Stafford Beer that "the purpose of a system is what it does", therefore "there is no point in claiming that the purpose of a system is to do what it constantly fails to do.

Untying methodological knots

Unlike in single-method or single-sited research, the researcher's positionality and personal commitments are constantly shifting and contested in multi-sited ethnographic projects. In the paper that first introduced multi-sited ethnography, Marcus (1995) wrote that "as the landscape changes across sites, the identity of the ethnographer requires renegotiation". This approach decidedly rejects the idea that objectivity or neutrality are possible on the part of the researcher. As Chua & Massoud (2024) write,

> "Understanding the conditions under which research creates useful knowledge, and how researchers themselves influence their research, are questions that are as old as the social sciences themselves. … Explaining one's positionality allows a reader to understand how data were gathered, who agreed to talk to the researcher, and why they did so" (Chua & Massoud 2024).

I take this imperative seriously; as I have noted earlier, my "passing" differently in different sites allows me multiple vantage points into the world of women's platform work; even as my social location has shaped interactions with different actors in each field, therefore co-constituting the fields themselves. Rather than viewing myself as exclusively an "outsider" or "insider" who is "detached" from the scenes she is observing (an impossibility), I see myself as an active participant in each site, one who shifts between these positionalities depending on the situation and the perception of various interlocutors (Reyes 2018). I try my best to analyze and account for how my presence shapes how interlocutors react to me, what they choose to share and not share with me, and how my own perspectives, social location, and biases shape the findings I consider most significant and the way I present the findings. Ideally, this would be a collaborative process, however this was something I was not able to attempt here. In addition, I myself am affected and changed by the city spaces I enter and the interlocutors I develop close relationships with.

Many researchers have provided thorough accounts of how the embodiment of the researcher is a key ingredient in the process of research. Pullana (2017) writes that "a researcher needs to have an embedded sense with people in the field, which will need bodily competence as well so that one can relate, observe, and experience their worlds". Pointing to how research tends to celebrate the agency and individuality of the researcher, he instead calls for scholars to interrogate the politics of caste through personal interactions in the field (Pullana 2017). In this project, I found that these caste embodiments were most visible in the body aspects of beauty work and the interactions between gig workers and customers, as I detail in Chapter 6.

Such embodied reflections on the caste politics that shape the social fabric of Indian life are, however, quite rare. Perhaps this is because, as André Béteille said: 'Everything or nearly everything that is written about the Indian middle class is written by middle-class Indians…[who] tend to oscillate between self-recrimination and self-congratulation' (Béteille 2003). The "invisibility of caste" or "castelessness" that marks upper-caste sociality and behaviors prevent a full accounting of caste relations from researchers of social life in India, who are largely from the same group (Deshpande 2013); in the same way that gender or class declarations, and reflections, are carried out easily and are quite common. In addition, analyses of caste by upper-caste researchers, particularly those trained abroad, can be prone to a kind of ahistorical approach to caste, rather than offering an analysis of caste that is rooted in specific local histories and contexts. This may also be something I have been prone to here, due to my training and positionality, though I have tried to avoid doing so.

During fieldwork, I found that I experienced an easy camaraderie with platform managers, due to overlapping networks and similar caste and class locations. When the managers I reached out to were kind to me and facilitated access to the platform office, I observed in my methodological field notes that my stance towards them softened. The way researchers are treated in the field consciously and unconsciously shapes the way they think and write about people and organizations. It is important that as researchers, we are aware of how we are affected and how this affects our approach. For upper-caste researchers located in centers of power such as the USA, this raises important questions about our responsibility to the interlocutors and the field, how we can be held accountable for our research practices, and to what extent we control data, narrative, and voice.

Kanagasabai (2023) offers a fantastic analysis of the inherently problematic nature of social research and theory building from this perspective, problematizing the politics of knowledge-making by asking: "what is theory, who is a theorist, who gets to travel and make knowledges, who is an expert and on what?" She calls for us to trouble projects that are framed as "co-production of knowledge within feminist transnational praxis" (Kanagasabai 2023). My research falls squarely into this description. On questions of feminist responsibility and co-creation of research, I have been deeply inspired by Richa Nagar's work and writing. Nagar argues the importance of practicing feminist solidarity through meaningful collaboration, underscoring the importance of "circulating multiple truths that are meaningful to the communities being studied" (Nagar 2018). Throughout this project, I felt morally and intellectually aligned with the interests of gig workers, as they were placed lower in the power hierarchy of platform work. At the same time, I strove to avoid homogenizing, valorizing, or villainizing any of the groups I worked with,

instead attempting to understand each group's perspectives, and trace how their individual-level beliefs and behaviors translated into structural patterns. This allowed me to sit with the "multiple truths" that emerged during fieldwork from different types of interlocutors, and then to weave them together during the analysis stage.

I often found myself performing virtuosity in various ways in order to gain access to my field sites, claiming familiarity with city spaces that I was very recently a stranger to, and deftly translating "findings from the field" for transnational audiences. While I tried my best to split up my time and efforts such that the research was not just being performed for American audiences and helping me advance my research career, but also circulating back into the field, into reports and writing for gig unions, or discussions with women gig workers who were organizing, my funding and visa ties to my university ultimately limited the extent of these efforts and ensured that the majority of my time and energy was spent in developing' theory and analyses that would be approved and appreciated by the academic communities I am a part of in the USA.

In a talk titled "Participation without Observation: Engaging Refusal and Research Fatigue in Ethnographic Work", Shilpa Parthan, working with over-researched populations in Kerala, grapples with some of these questions in deeply generative ways. She examines the tropes of familiarity and strangeness "upon which we rely to perform virtuosity and authority as anthropological researchers" and tries to practice a different, more politically engaged approach (Parthan 2024). Shilpa's project employs ethnographic refusal and thin description as a core methodological intervention to protect the interests of her interlocutors. In my project, I continuously grappled with questions around anonymity, credit, privacy, risk, and safety.

Ultimately, I have employed various methods to anonymize my research participants thoroughly in order to protect them, such as constructing ethnographic composites (Humphreys & Watson 2009; Murphy & Jerolmack 2016; Arjomand 2022; Willis 2018; Corman 2020), and using pseudonyms to mask all platforms and interlocutors; however, I wish there was a way to directly credit the gig workers and organizers I worked most closely with, for their ideas and time.

I also deeply struggled with the idea of monitoring, observing, and recording my interlocutors closely and continuously, both in the beginning and also later as we developed closer friendships with each other. I felt the need to take "enthusiastic ongoing consent" repeatedly but this was difficult in practice, and I compromised by making sure I kept discussing my project with them so that they would remember my role as a researcher. Sometimes, I found these anxieties addressed by unexpected sources. While writing this thesis, I often listened to podcasts featuring Paromita Vohra, the founder of Agents of Ishq and a documentary filmmaker who has chronicled Bombay for so many years now. She combines fun, pleasure, intellectuality, analysis, philosophy, research, and excitement in her work. In one podcast, she said, "How many kinds of intimacy are there? Is intimacy only when I tell you "my husband beat me", or "I am the victim of incest", or if I tell you the pornography of my pain, is that the only intimacy there is, or can there be another one? And actually, if you live in a city, think of the intimacy between strangers. You get into a train, you talk to somebody about your love life. … I'm thinking, there is a kind of intimacy of choice between strangers which is very intellectual" (Paromita Vohra, in "Anything but Bollywood", Episode 2).

Both Paromita and Shilpa, in different ways, are talking about protecting the everyday intimacies that enrich our lives deeply, rather than mining them mindlessly for intellectual achievement.

Tuck & Yang (2014) write about how "feeling wrong" can lead us to the right places, and help researchers practice ethical refusal: "refusing to share sensational interview data, refusing to search for the subjectivity of the Other, refusing the god-gaze of the objective knower, refusing to draw conclusions about communities—choosing to write instead about power in the form of institutions, policy, and research itself". They call on researchers to study institutions and power rather than people and their problems.

Though my unit of analysis is women gig workers working in beauty platforms, my approach of building up from individual and relational experiences to structural analyses allows me to apply this intervention, by tracing institutions and power structures rather than mining "pornographies of pain". In Audra Simpson's (2007) iconic article, "On Ethnographic Refusal", where she discusses her ethnography on Mohawk nationhood, of which she is a member, she discovers her limit: "What am I revealing here and why? Where will this get us? Who benefits from this and why?" (Simpson 2007).

During data collection, I applied these ideas of ethnographic refusal by not recording many of the intimate details that interlocutors shared with me with trust. This approach has also been carried through in data analysis in writing. So, this thesis, while rich in data, intentionally does not contain thick or graphic descriptions of any participants' homes, family relationships, appearances, or transgressions. I have used only as much data as needed to robustly make my point. It also intentionally does not carry accounts of some of the more inventive strategies used by gig workers to hold the platform to account and to push back against platform oppressions, as these strategies have successfully escaped the notice of platform managers, and would not serve anyone if I were to employ them to construct theory and publish papers.

Finally, talking of theory, Radhakrishnan and Vijayakumar (2022) point out the inequalities of knowledge production in South Asia, particularly the exclusion of Dalit and Adivasi theoretical lenses in research, which are reproduced through diasporic circuits in US and Europe even as empirical papers and theoretical ideas on Dalit and Adivasi communities from dominant-caste researchers are welcomed (Guru 2002). My lack of engagement with vernacular scholars in Maharashtra and Mumbai is a serious limitation of this project, as I cannot speak or read Marathi, and I did not draw on rich local reporting, literature, and intellectual engagement in Marathi or Hindi for this project. I have tried to address the politics of citations by citing women scholars of platform work based in India; Dalit Maharashtrian thinkers, writers, and influencers I know about; "non-academic" but deeply intellectual thinkers, writers, and reporters based in Mumbai and across India who have inspired my thinking and analysis of gendered platform work. At the same time, my engagement with theoretical frameworks and 'big T' theorists reflects the "diasporic circuits" Radhakrishnan and Vijayakumar write about above.

Chapter 3: The Emergence of Platform Capitalism in Mumbai (1750-Present) from the Lens of Working-Class Women

"Theories of modernity have been almost unremittingly western and it has been taken for granted that modernity accompanied European imperialism as it washed over non-western societies like a wave. This assumption comes from a belief in modernity as an inevitable but essentially acultural movement of universal "progress" and modernization. But modernity is not a neutral acultural force of progress, it is multiplicitous and proceeds from many sites, adapted, transformed and often expanding to other non-western regions with little account of the west. It is the postcolonial city from which the multiplicity of modernity extends. Rather than a passive recipient of western technology, postcolonial cities have been the sites of a flowering of multiple modernities. No city demonstrates this better than Bombay." (Ashcroft 2011).

"How do we employ gender analytically so as to write history from which women were not absent and gender was not a missing category; one in which women and gender were not afterthoughts and appendices?" (Najmabadi 2006).

Abstract

The previous chapter described my methodology and analytical process. This chapter offers a gendered historical framework to map the emergence of platform work in Mumbai, with attention to working-class women. It traces the trajectory of 4 dominant work paradigms - piecework (1750-1900), Fordist work (1900-1970), Post-Fordist work (1970-2010), and platform work (2010-present) in Mumbai - looking at how they trickled down in historically contingent ways from the Global North into Mumbai, and further how they trickled down to affect Mumbai's working women. This offers an alternative, feminist history of platform work rooted in Mumbai. Through it, I show that the core features of each work paradigm disappear and reappear throughout history and that the deployment of new work paradigms in the majority

world is deeply shaped by capital, labor, patriarchy, and colonial relations. I also show how women's productive and reproductive labor have been co-opted in the service of capital and with the help of new advancements in technology in each work era, a pattern we see repeating with platform work today. Ultimately, I argue that though it carries forward features of past paradigms, platform capitalism merits being called a work paradigm in its own right.

Part 1: Piecework and the Industrial Revolution - 1750-1900

In the Global North

Piecework emerged as the dominant employment relation during the Industrial Revolution in the USA and Britain, which allowed manufacturing to be divided into a series of discrete, measurable tasks[3]. In the piecework system, a worker is paid a piece rate per unit of output or per discrete task, rather than for the time spent carrying out that task. Piece-workers were typically employed on an on-demand basis, in a contract relationship that did not guarantee long-term or ongoing employment, and often had to supply their own capital and tools, including the place of work (typically the home) (Stanford 2017). Piecework was initially carried out at home and then in newly emerging sweatshops and factories, and by 1850, had become entrenched across sectors

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[3] Piecework supplanted the earlier model of "putting out", which itself was a system of subcontracting manufacturing and textiles work that replaced the crafts and guild system. Under this model, manufacturers would "put out" the raw materials to the domestic workers, who would then create the items by hand at home. This system came about because it was not possible for rural workers to commute from homes to factories in the absence of working roads and transportation. It also allowed women and girls to work while balancing household responsibilities. The putting out system originated in the USA and Britain, and the ready network of dispersed rural workers it created were the precursor to, and laid the foundation for, the success of the Industrial Revolution in Europe. Under it, women and children were able to access purchasing power and some degree of independence and control, a theme that is seen to repeat with each paradigm of work.

in the USA and UK (Alkhatib et al. 2017). At the time, this new employment relation was said to afford workers a new sense of freedom, control, and independence over their work[4].

In Mumbai

As the Industrial Revolution spread across Europe, replacing decentralized hand manufacturing with mechanized and centralized modes of production, and replacing master craftsmen with capitalist employers; Britain was expanding its colonial territories abroad, including in India. The new industrial capitalist class in Britain now sought to expand into and capture colonial markets abroad. Between 1661-1668, Bombay was gifted to King Charles II as part of his bride's dowry, then given over to the mercantile English East India Company, which began to colonize and construct the city, building the first banks, universities, railroads, and hospitals. During this time, Bombay's first cotton mill, built in 1854, introduced the piecework model into the city. The Charter Act of 1813 broke the monopoly of the East India Company and allowed British industrialists to turn India into an agricultural colony that supplied raw materials to Britain while buying Britain's manufactured goods. This effectively set back and broke the spine of the Indian handicrafts industries, which couldn't compete with cheap, British, machine-made goods and lost both their foreign and domestic markets. By subordinating Indian economic development to the interests of the British capitalist class, colonial rule restricted the development of capitalist production in India while also using the resources created in India to sustain the process of industrialization in Britain (Sahoo 2015). Despite this, with the assistance of British engineers and scientists, cotton mills in Bombay managed to expand and flourish in the second half of the 19th century, handling the majority (92%) of India's cotton exports. This was sustained by the

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[4]However, this can be seen as an illusion of freedom, because while industrial employers could stop the machinery and the work whenever they wanted, without compensating workers for loss of wages or time, the pieceworkers had no freedom to set their work hours or time of work (Stanford 2017).

influx of rural Marathi migrants into the city and largely facilitated by the American Civil War interrupting the USA's raw cotton exports to Britain (Sahoo 2015). In *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay,* Chandavarkar outlines the centrality of Bombay in the industrial development and history of India[5], noting that the labor issues and conflicts taking place in the city acquired a national significance due to its position as the largest cotton market in Asia (Chandavarkar 1994). In 'Outcaste Bombay', Junaid Shaikh complicates this account by describing how Bombay's expansion into a city of cotton mills was dependent on the labor of lower-caste workers, who formed a significant proportion of the city's residents, and how lower-caste organizing groups sowed the seeds of the workers' movement that played a significant role in shaping the Mumbai of today (Shaikh 2021).

Women in Mumbai

Both in the US and UK as well as India, as piecework became entrenched within homes, sweatshops, and now industrial factories, it could be observed that the most precarious forms of industrial piecework were the ones carried out primarily by women, such as sewing. This was no coincidence. Industries preferred single, never-employed young women, who were considered obedient and pliable (in addition to gendered stereotypes about their "dexterous fingers" and "fast hands"), and capable of higher productivity compared to married women and mothers. Due to gendered stereotypes about feminine weakness, as well as the fixed nature of women's domestic and care responsibilities, industrial employers both in the US and UK, and in India, were able to openly set lower wages and lower bonus rates for women workers as compared to

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[5] The process of industrial development in the US and Europe is theorized as a linear process with familiar signposts following one another. In India, this process looked different - "the differentiation of the peasantry, the expansion, decline and stabilization of artisanal industry and the emergence of large-scale factory production ran concurrently" rather than taking place one after another (Chandavarkar 1994).

male workers, giving them an incentive to bring a reserve army of poor, single young women into the industrial workforce.

Industrial sectors such as garment and textiles, which employed relatively large proportions of women workers, slowly came to be associated with women's work, though managers and supervisors would always be men. In India for instance, women made up 25% of the textile factory workforce in 1890. Meanwhile, the few women workers in male-dominated sectors such as industrial manufacturing, were prohibited from doing certain types of tasks and operating heavy machinery as they were presumed to be physically weaker than men, limiting and reducing their tasks and wages. At this point, legislation (such as the 1881 Factory Act) sought to regulate women's work, including their working hours and which industries and types of jobs they could work in, by employing essentialist arguments about women's lack of physical strength and capability (Anand et al 2022)[6]. Across the board, women industrial pieceworkers frequently had no proper contract with their employers, no fixed minimum wages, and faced unregulated dismissals including dismissals when they decided to marry (Betti 2016, Safa 1981). They did not have job security or benefits, including maternity or sick leave, and worked under the precarity of being able to lose their jobs at any moment, without warning, explanation, or compensation. As Safa (1981) recorded, "The poor wages earned by a female factory worker would drive her to step up the pace to the point of exhaustion in order to reach the target and take home the bonus on her pay packet.".

Finally, the class and caste dynamics of this period in India pitted women's reproductive roles and their role as a worker against each other. Even as industrial capitalists debated and planned

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[6] Notably, many of these legislations persist till today.

for bringing in poor and lower caste women into the industrial workforce, elite society began to see the first debates around the need to educate women and to raise the age of consent laws, premised around the experiences of upper-class and upper-caste women (Sen 2008). These two strands of progressive debate never connected, and they solidified class differences between working class women (who had always worked) and upper-class women (who were fighting for the right to study and work). Additionally, in the early 1900s, as the nationalist movement gained steam, the nationalist construction of womanhood sought to emphasize and idealize women's role as mothers and wives.[7] This shows how the tension between women's productive and reproductive roles have shaped women's ability to work in emerging technical fields since at least the postcolonial period in India.

Part 2: Taylorism and the Fordist factory - 1920-1970

In the Global North

By the end of the 19th century, industrial capitalists felt the need to standardize and discipline the piece-rate workforce. In 1895, Taylor's papers on 'Scientific Management' introduced the idea of a "differential piece rate system" in the USA, where accurate measurements of productivity rates would be used to create a "standard" production output target, and workers

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[7] Union developments in this period: within an already unequal system of piece-work, industrial employers found further ways to undercut piece-workers' wages, including fining them for being unable to meet impossibly high production quotas, creating a wage system that limited the amount workers could earn, and forcing them to produce higher units for very low wages (Safa 1981). In response, piece-workers in the railways, textile, and manufacturing sectors began to form worker organizations to push back against industrial employers and call attention to the many ways in which they undervalued and failed to compensate for workers' time (Alkhatib et al 2017). The first strikes against piece-work regimes were carried out by women in 1888, followed by women garment workers in Philadelphia. Alkhatib et al. (2017) report that pieceworkers' employment relations developed into a pattern of using labour advocacy groups, and that following the template of the matchgirls, collective bargaining became a central and favoured tool used by pieceworkers to negotiate with their employers, kickstarting nearly a century of the most potent collective action and labour advocacy organizations seen in modern history.

failing to meet these targets would be penalized or fired. The Ford factory exemplified this system, standardizing the production process through factory assembly lines. Fordism came to be marked by the intensification of work, the detailed division of tasks and mechanization to raise productivity, and various forms of 'monopolistic' regulation to maintain this dynamic. Piecework was therefore placed under the discipline and control of industrial management, and productivity and efficiency began to rise (Alkhatib 2017). A key feature of the Taylorist, Fordist model of work was that it separated the ideation and execution of work, therefore giving the employer larger control, appropriation, and ownership over the work being produced and the technology used to produce it, as well as a means to discipline and control the increasingly alienated worker (Braverman 1998, Coombs 1974). Fordism was not just a new economic relationship, but a work paradigm which changed the general pattern of social organization in the USA. The rising productivities generated by Fordist factories led to higher wages, higher profits, increased investment in new mass manufacturing technologies, increased consumer demand, the consumption of standardized mass commodities, and the rise of nuclear households (Jessop 1991 in Amin 1994)[8]. As Dubal (2020) points out, housework reformers reified the new Fordist family and its ideal of the male breadwinner, as piecework was seen as a threat to the gendered division of labor and "sacred motherhood". Dubal argues that this reinforced the economic dependence of women on the Fordist family wage, while masking the ways in which women's unpaid work contributed to the production of industrial labor. Fordism came to be associated with welfare capitalism, as industries had to incentivize and attract workers to join the factory during the uncertain wartimes (Burawoy, 1979, p. 234). World War I (1914-1918) and II (1939-1945)

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[8] In addition, the era of Fordism saw the rise of strong worker unions; union recognition and collective bargaining; wages indexed to productivity growth and retail price inflation; and monetary emission and credit policies orientated to securing effective aggregate demand (Jessop 1991 in Amin 1994).

significantly shaped the development of Fordism and the entry of women into the industrial workforce[9].

In Mumbai

Between 1910 and 1950, as Fordism was becoming an established work paradigm in the USA, Bombay was going through the early stages of industrialization, marked by the migration of rural workers to urban areas to join newly emerging industrial factories. Industrialists were hesitant to invest in new technologies, preferring labor-intensive forms of production. They employed a variety of strategies to maintain flexibility in the face of fluctuating demand and varying labor needs[10]. Far from the scientific management and ruthless discipline seen in Fordist factories, in Bombay "discipline at the workplace was fundamentally lax and ramshackle" between 1900 and 1930 due to the particular features of industrial production (Chandavarkar 1994). The structure of authority at the workplace was diffuse, and workers displayed an inordinate amount of power in collectivizing against new disciplinary norms and maintaining control over their labor[11]. This limited the ability of industrialists to implement coherent economic policies, and the lack of industrial discipline intensified the economic crisis experienced by Bombay's textile industries in Bombay in the 1920s and 1930s.

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[9] Wartime mass manufacturing needs, combined with a depleted wartime workforce, forced industries to find new ways to maintain and increase production capacity and efficiency. In the USA, they did this by bringing in women into the workforce. Whereas women were earlier confined to feminized sectors of piecework, such as sewing and garment work, now they began to receive training in "narrow subsets of more comprehensive jobs" such as engineering and metalwork, raising their work capacities to equal conventional male workers, and proving their proficiency and expertise (Alkhatib et al., 2017, p. 4601). Thus, women's workforce participation surged in these countries.

[10] One of these strategies was an ambiguous definition of occupations - as long as employers did not specify the duties of workers, they could ensure a flexibility in the use of their labor - to the extent that in 1923, the Labour Office experienced "very great trouble in finding out exactly what each occupation was doing" (Chandavarkar 1994).

[11] Bombay became famous for its mill workers' general strikes, which often brought the entire city to a standstill.

In 1927, the colonial state attempted to introduce a program of rationalization to modernize management strategies and increase worker discipline and productivity, however, this failed to change the prevailing work norms and failed to have the same disciplinary effect that Fordist factories were having in the USA. The gradual introduction of new technology during this period actually had the opposite effect, as it "reduced skill, undermined the worker's control over his own labor process and contributed to the continuing degradation of work" (Chandavarkar 1994). In 1939, as World War II began, Britain implemented the Essential Commodities Act in India, ruling that the vast majority of cloth produced in the mills was to be reserved for military orders. Demand for cotton skyrocketed during this period and the mills experienced a boom. Later that year, 90,000 workers from the textile mills went on a 1-day strike against Britain's declaration to drag India into the World War on their behalf. This is considered the first anti-war strike in the world working-class movement. By the 1940s, the character of industrialization in Bombay was marked by the processes of modernization-industrialization on one hand, and the rapid process of labor unionization on the other. The factories, mills, and mines that comprised the organized sector and formal work in India were fully unionized by the 1960s and exerted considerable bargaining power with the state and with employers.

Women in Mumbai

How did women industrial workers in Mumbai, who formed a quarter of the industrial workforce, fare during these developments? In fact, the combination of rationalization, unionization, and progressive reformist movements served to push out women from the industrial workforce between 1930 and 1960, as we see below.

In the 1930s, attempts were made to rationalize the industrial workforce in Bombay as part of a broader global push towards establishing labor protections in the workforce and equalizing the work sphere in terms of welfare schemes and working hours for men and women. This program viewed women as special workers because of their responsibilities as wives and mothers, and sought to protect their dual roles in the productive and reproductive spheres. Though it was limited, the increasing protection of women workers by legislation made industrial employers worry that the flexibility of the female workforce would decrease, therefore increasing production costs. The social environment in India during this period also gradually turned against the idea of working women. For instance, public debates around the high rates of maternal and infant mortality in India focused on the idea that working-class women should reduce work in order to improve maternal and child health. Meanwhile middle-class women, who had previously not had access to education or employment, began to train as doctors to address this national issue of maternal and child health - this served to pit these two groups of women against each other though it appeared that one group was seeking to serve the other.

Through the 1930s and 1940s, rationalization programs intensified the pressure on industries to eliminate surplus labor and work sharing. Worried that the government would introduce mandatory minimum wages, industrial mill owners began to reduce the strength and increase the productivity of their workforce accordingly. Following the public debates and concerns around working women, industrial employers used working-class motherhood as a weapon to reduce the female workforce and to push women industrial workers out of the workforce to offset the costs of rationalization. In the 1950s, the labor unionization process gained strength, and labor unions began to secure significant improvement in wages and working conditions. During this time,

trade unions played an active role in further eliminating women workers and hindering women's recruitment in industrial work:

> "As the process of organisation created a relatively more secure enclave of employment approaching a 'family wage', working-class family strategy changed. In working class households where many members previously worked in industry, the trend turned towards a single male breadwinner. But this was a tiny enclave and the proportion of families with a secure foothold in this sector was on the decline. In the less advantaged agricultural and/or the 'unorganised' sectors, the participation of women and children remained steady and often increased during downturns in the economy when the 'security' of the 'organised' sector failed. Such adjustments within the family economy were made possible by the continuing authority of male heads of households who were able to command the deployment of women's labour in consonance with 'family needs'. The male workers' control over 'their' women's productive/reproductive activities came to be reflected in trade union policies" (Sen 2008).

Sen's account demonstrates how a working-class masculinity predicated on controlling women's productive and reproductive labor was created through the combined efforts of middle-class industrial employers and working-class trade unions, by pushing out women from the industrial workforce. This served to "bolster a growing ideological commitment to the notion of a cohesive and solidaristic (male) working class" and "reflect the adult male workers' status aspirations and desire for maintaining family authority" (Sen 2008). By the 1960s, with the decline of women in the industrial workforce, the importance given to women as a special category of workers earlier, also disappeared. Women were now excluded from the rapidly improving organized sector work, the political space occupied by labor unions, as well as the social and public concerns surrounding women's work and rights. This period showed how the state can help to structurally balance and support women's roles in the productive and reproductive spheres, however such legislative protections are not enough when patriarchal social norms, class dynamics, and rationalist logics of employers work together to protect the interests of capital over the interests of women and society.

Part 3: Post-Fordism and Globalized, Outsourced Work - 1970-2010

In the Global North

Fordism began to decline in the USA in the 1970s, when a severe recession followed by deflation brought high levels of unemployment, causing an employer's market where workers were ready to accept lower wages and weaker conditions of employment. The 1980s and 1990s ushered in rapid advancements in information technology, the liberalization of global markets, and the rise of multinational corporations that were autonomous from state control[12]. Industrial production in this new post-Fordist era was marked by the principle of flexible specialization, which allowed industrialists to keep up with varied and changing consumer demand in fragmented markets across the globe. Now, instead of a single company controlling an entire assembly line, the production process itself became fragmented with individual companies specializing in particular components, often spread across the globe. A very high level of flexibility entered into the labor process, and was expected from individual workers as well, whose roles became even more varied. Multinational corporations (primarily located in Western economies) created a new international division of labor, seeking to consolidate relatively secure employment relationships for a "skill-flexible core" of domestic workers, while creating an insecure, underpaid, outsourced "time-flexible" periphery of workers located in developing nations (Harvey in Amin 1994, Safa 1981, Alkhatib et al., 2017)[13]. In fact, the piecework that

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[12] These new multinational enterprises essentially manufactured exports in less developed countries and sold them in developed markets. These export-processing markets sprung up in economies where low wages, high unemployment, limited natural resources, low levels of unionization, and politically stable regimes prevailed. Local governments sought and encouraged this foreign investment by lifting trade barriers and loosening labour restrictions over the use of their reserve army of labour. (Safa, 1981; Harvey in Amin 1994).

[13] This has led to an interesting dichotomy in research literature during this era. Western theorists like Giddens, Beck, Castells, Hall, Harvey, and Sasken produced a rich galaxy of theoretical debate and discussion about the emergence and features of post-Fordist, specialized, flexible work; writing with hope and excitement about the

had been replaced by a stable, Fordist form of work in the USA and UK, now reappeared as outsourced, sub-contracted, export-processing work in developing economies. Like the previous two work paradigms (piecework and the Fordist factory), post-Fordism was not just[14] a new employment relation, but it also ushered in broader social and cultural changes, such as the rise of the service economy and white-collar work, greater global fragmentation and pluralism, the weakening of older collective solidarities and block identities, the 'feminization' of the workforce, the targeting of consumers by lifestyle, taste, and culture rather than categories of social class, a decline in the proportion of the skilled, male, manual working class, flexible and decentralized forms of work organization, and the maximization of individual choices through personalized consumption patterns (Amin 1994).

Women formed a large proportion of the new class of peripheral translational workers located in developing economies (from 'professional' casualized work to sub-contracted home-based work). Angela McRobbie notes that the nature of work in the post-Fordist economy favored the large skill pool and the flexibility of the female workforce (McRobbie 2008). Aihwa Ong documents how foreign multinational firms deliberately created workforces of young single women in East and South Asia, preferring to employ women rather than men (Ong 1991). She shows how patriarchy, capital, and colonialism operated together to create a technological labor market of married women in the first world and single young women in the third world (Ong 1987). A

new post-modern, urban, tech societies formed in the post-Fordist era of work; while feminist theorists in the Global South depicted the way in which transnational companies created industrial reserve armies of unemployed, poor, young men and women, and used Fordist methods of management to discipline, control and punish the so-called post-Fordist transnational workers while accumulating profits. This dichotomy between Western and Southern theorists of this era indicates that we would be served well by rejecting binary depictions between "rigid old times" and "flexible new times", instead recognizing that there is always "a mixture of continuity and change from one period to another" (Amin 1994).

[14] Amin argues that this process of creating a labour dualism "should be interpreted as a process of further 'enslavement' of labour by capital, through 'marginalization' in the case of peripheral workers, and 'desubjectification' in the case of core workers now fully 'incorporated' by capital into its historic mission" (Amin 1994).

significant body of research from this decade documents the effect of Fordist industrialization and Taylorism on the female workforce in Global South countries, especially in East and South Asia (Ong 1991; Nanda 2000; Safa 1981; Sassen-Koob 1984; Sen 2008). In contrast to Fordism in the USA, where it is associated with increased wages, worker stability and welfare capitalism, Ong analyzes Taylorism in the Global South as a multinational management policy that aimed to maximize production and profits, and minimize the possibilities of resistance, through the systematic construction and disciplining of a new class of "subordinate" women workers (Ong, 1991).[15]

In Mumbai

As Fordist work declined and became replaced by post-Fordist economies in the West, Bombay saw a decline in domestic industrial production and the rise of export-processing and service sectors. With mill owners failing to invest in the latest technologies, the handloom mills with unionized labor working eight-hour shifts "could not compete with new power looms that operated with unorganized workers toiling for 12-hour shifts on low wages" (Gyan Prakash 2010). By the 1970s, the Bombay mills had gone into an irreversible decline, employment in the mills plummeted, and industrial conflicts between workers and unions escalated. A series of strikes, with a final strike in 1982-83, spelt the death knell for Mumbai's textile industry. The majority of the over 80 mills in Central Mumbai closed during and after the strike, leaving more than 150,000 workers unemployed. The high levels of unemployment and economic despair following the strike sowed the seeds for the rise of the Mumbai underworld - the most notorious

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[15] Ong wrote that "the social organization and cultural discourses produced by these new industrial management styles are seen to "naturalize the subordination of women in industrial enterprises"" (Ong, 1991, p. 291).

gangsters of this era were children of mill workers and they recruited largely from working-class

neighborhoods besieged by unemployment. Gyan Prakash charts how the decline of the mills in

"a space-starved city" paved the way for the urban development of Mumbai, fueled partly by

Indian real estate developers and partly by the influx of FDI (Foreign Direct Investment)

following economic liberalization and globalization (Prakash 2010).

In the wake of these developments, and alongside an increasingly dispossessed majority

working-class population in Mumbai, emerged a software-proficient new middle class in the

1990s. Mathangi Krishnamurthy charts this rise in her book 1-800-Worlds, writing that the Y2K

crisis called for the training and employment for a large number of software workers in India,

leading to public and private investments in computer science education and infrastructure

(Krishnamurthy 2018). Soon, "Western countries began to recognize India as a repository for

cheap software development, due to the existence of computer-literate populations that could be

easily trained to provide transnational customer service work", sowing the seeds for the rise of

India's ICT sector (ibid). In particular, she focuses on the emergence and impact of the

transnational call center industry in Mumbai and Pune between the 1990s and early 2000s,

noting that "since 1998, when the first call centre was set up in India, corporations in the US and

UK have been subcontracting large amounts of customer service work to the transnational Indian

outsourcing industry… Around 2003–04, call centre workers began to be recognized as an

important driving force behind the Indian consumerist wave, with an average salary equaling two

and a half times the salaries in other job openings at the same skill level" (ibid).

Women in Mumbai

Thus, between the 1970s and early 2000s, Mumbai had shifted away from being a city of industrial mills and a stronghold of working-class trade unions and power, to being a city where the service sector became dominant, controlled largely by multinational corporations and export-processing work, and where the new middle class emerged and began to consolidate power. Reflecting these shifts, in the early 2000s, public debates in India took on a moralistic tone against the consumeristic, promiscuous, "Western" lifestyles that were being fostered among young people, and especially young "respectable" women, by this new multinational economy (Krishnamurthy 2018).

A large body of research has focused on documenting and analyzing the feminization of this new globalized, outsourced service workforce in developing nations. In these accounts, transnational women workers in developing countries are simultaneously seen as vulnerable, exploited and invisible; and as entrepreneurial subjects and empowered economic agents enjoying consumption and leisure in urban sites for the first time[16] (McRobbie 2011). How did these developments play out for women workers in Mumbai?

In 1974, following the pushing out of women industrial workers from the mill workforce and the rise of the service sector in Mumbai, women's workforce participation fell, and became

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[16] McRobbie writes: "A spectacular sphere of feminine consumption emerges. Consumption becomes an archetypal female leisure activity, often carrying with it a kind of faux feminist legitimacy. It is coded as a new kind of women's right or entitlement on the basis of having become a wage earner and thus of having gained certain freedoms." (McRobbie, 2011, p. 67) In fact, and perhaps ironically, it is this post-feminist consumer that the female gig worker services and that her livelihood is based on.

concentrated in the service, manufacturing, and trade sectors[17] (Ramanamma & Bambawale 1987). In 1978, the minimum legal age for marriage was increased to 18 for women and 21 for men, creating a pool of unmarried women who were mobile and able to access new opportunities of wage labor in export processing zones or with multinational companies. Sen argues that this was not a large enough pool or wide enough trend to lead to 'feminization' of labor more broadly in Mumbai or India (Sen 2009). In the 1990s, economic liberalization and the emergence of a private services sector created conditions for the "New Indian Woman" - she was middle-class, upper-caste, highly educated, an informed and globalized consumer, a professional working in the IT sector, and a devoted mother. This new ideal-type vision of the modern Indian woman reflected the outsize place occupied in the public imaginary by the new middle class, leaving very little space for the working-class woman.

After 2000, the proportion of casual workers employed in the service sector increased significantly in Mumbai, especially among women, indicating that stable work opportunities were becoming harder and harder to find. In 2001, women workers in Mumbai outnumbered men in street vending, domestic work, and messengering, while men dominated in manual labor jobs in the manufacturing, construction, and transport occupations. Essentially, during this period, working-class women had moved out of stable industrial and manufacturing jobs and into casualized service professions in Mumbai, marking a major shift from formal to informal work, and from manufacturing to the service sector (Singh 2010). During and since this period, the public narratives and writing on women's work in India have documented the trajectories of upwardly mobile middle-class and upper-class, professional women who began to enter into the

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[17] Quick note that at this time, daily wage rates for men in manufacturing sectors were 1.5-5x that of women (so imagine how much more on a monthly basis).

formal tech and finance sectors (Radhakrishnan 2009; Buddhapriya 2009; Patel 2010). Between 2001 and 2011, women's workforce participation rate in Mumbai increased from 13.7% to 18.3%, according to the national census. However, this may not be a cause for celebration, as it signifies that economic helplessness is forcing working-class women into poorly paid, exploitative, informal service work (Lewis 2013; Patel & Mondal 2022).

We see that the post-Fordist era brought a further retrenchment of women's work protections and forced working-class women to move from formal manufacturing work to informal service work in Mumbai. Now, not only did working-class women have to manage their contradictory productive and reproductive roles, but their productive work also involved carrying out socially reproductive (service) work for upwardly mobile customers. This also shows how social reproduction work more broadly was being offloaded into the informal economy, intensifying the invisibility and feminization of such work.

Part 4: Platformized Work - 2010 - present

What marks a form of work as a distinct work paradigm? This is worth asking, as the eras of piecework, Fordism, and post-Fordism were characterized by fierce debates over whether each of them could rightfully be called a distinctive work paradigm, how much overlap between successive work paradigms can be permitted before they can be distinguished, and where precisely the line between two work eras lies (Amin 1994). Writing on platform work in the last few years already seems to echo this pattern. For instance, Stanford (2017) and Berg (2018) argue that platform work marks a return to the mode of piecework, the only difference being that today it is mediated by digital tools, and this is not enough to merit calling it a new work paradigm. However, Cole (2023) argues that platformization is a distinct work paradigm as it

entails a novel institutional logic, regime of accumulation, and mode of social regulation, completely transforming the wage-labor nexus and allowing work to be disembedded from national contexts. Moreover, it gives rise to new norms of control, discipline, and labor extraction[18] (Cole 2023).

By tracing the history of work over a long period, as I have in this chapter, we see that each work paradigm carries over certain overlapping features of previous work eras. But the transitions between successive work paradigms are never clean and linear (as many histories of work focused on Western contexts suggest), but in fact these paradigms travel unevenly across time and space - for instance, I have shown how even as Western economies transitioned from Fordist factories to post-Fordist flexible work, Fordist factory management appeared in the new transnational workforce in developing economies. By writing a genealogy of women's work rooted in Mumbai, I have shown that the history of work reveals recurring patterns, that the core features of each work paradigm disappear and reappear throughout history, and that the deployment of new work paradigms in the majority world is deeply shaped by capital, labor, patriarchy and colonial relations. This makes it even more difficult to establish whether a new form of work merits being called a distinct work paradigm in itself.

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[18] Burawoy (1979) identifies 3 types of industrial bureaucracies, "The mock bureaucracy in which there are few rules and little conflict between management and workers; the representative bureaucracy in which rules are legitimated by both management and workers; and finally the punishment-centered bureaucracy in which rules are enforced by management against an unwilling and resistant labor force through the application of disciplinary sanctions" (Burawoy, 1979, p. 254). Platforms appear to be indulgent bureaucracies but are actually punishment centered and coercive. Burawoy further notes that a punishment-centered bureaucracy "becomes a way of organizing conflict in ways that do not threaten the survival of the firm" and may help reduce the working class to "homogeneous unskilled laborers hostile to capital." (Burawoy, 1979, p. 255)

In this last section, I compare platformized work to each of the three previous work paradigms, noting similarities and divergences with an eye towards analyzing what about platform work is new, and what is carried over from previous modes of work. Through this discussion of how the current climate of platform work is similar and different to past eras, I draw out whether it can be called a distinct work paradigm or not.

Platform Work and Piecework

Many of the core features of platform work today, such as 1) the return to piece-rate wages, 2) the externalization of production costs to workers, and 3) the conversion of homes into workplaces, echo the core features of the piece-work paradigm. However, the algorithmization of work, combined with the cultural, historical, and social landscape surrounding this work today, extends and transforms the piece-work model in new directions. Platforms have codified the precarities of piece work in new ways, for instance by gamifying the work and constantly shifting the conditions for entry and exit without input from workers (as I show in chapter 5). Van Doorn (2020) shows that platforms reconfigure the piece-rate wage into a dependent variable composed of multiple factors each of which can be dynamically varied and adjusted without transparency to the worker. Analyzing the algorithmic uncertainties that are baked into the system of platform work, I argue that it represents a new kind of slavery because of the belief system underlying this form of work, which clearly separates corporate platform employers who decide everything about the conditions of work, from the gig workers who have practically no control over any of the aspects of their work (as I show in chapter 7). Finally, echoing the nature of piecework in postcolonial Mumbai, the barriers to entry that women face to platform work today, allow platforms to co-opt their labor easily while appearing to offer better conditions, control, flexibility, and autonomy.

Platform Work and Fordist Work

Platform work today appears to offer flexibility in the same way piecework seemed to offer it, however, platform companies employ a variety of strategies to force workers into a Fordist, disciplined workforce while upholding a veneer of flexibility and autonomy. Platforms subcontract out gig work, refuse to recognize gig workers as employees, and do not offer fair wages or benefits; yet they also employ comprehensive forms of algorithmic surveillance and control to discipline and manage their gig workforce according to classic Taylorist principles. Kellogg et al (2020) note that the algorithmization of work allows more comprehensive modes of worker control than before (what they call "algorithmic comprehensiveness"), while also imposing "algorithmic instantaneity", that is, real-time nudges, rewards, and penalties to discipline workers. In addition, "managerial disintermediation" allows certain management decisions to be automated, meaning that "there are fewer opportunities for workers to appeal to the empathy of human decision-makers, and often fewer rule exceptions granted" (Kellogg et al 2020). Or as Alkhatib et al (2017) put it, "While historically the management of workers had to be done through a foreman, foremen … have largely been replaced by algorithms of the 21st century. Consequently, the agents managing work are now cold, logical, and unforgiving".

For these reasons, Kellogg et al (2020) argue that platform work transforms the structural mechanisms of control by personalizing, speeding up, and expanding disciplinary mechanisms. In addition, like Fordist work, gig work separates the 'ideation' and the 'execution' of work between the corporate workers and gig workers, shifting control to the platform managers, and leaving gig workers with less control and ownership over their work. Workers from traditional informal sectors who are in a marginalized position are able to view gig work as desirable despite algorithmic forms of control. Today, platforms impose Fordist discipline on workers but

without the accompanying labor protections and unionization that workers enjoyed in the 1930s-1970s. Women were systematically excluded from these benefits then - this is now the lot of all gig workers, but it hits women gig workers hardest as their productive and reproductive roles are once again pitted against each other, leaving them in a double bind.

Platform Work and Post-Fordist Work

Similar to post-Fordist globalized, outsourced work, platform work also employs the model of a stable domestic core of workers (the managers) and a precarious outsourced periphery of workers (the gig workers). This model arises from the geographic core of tech work (large tech companies in Silicon Valley) and is deployed and trickles into the geographic peripheries of the tech industry (such as India), visible in the employment models of local platforms. Extending the previous model of outsourced globalized work, Howson et al (2020) argue that platforms "globalize new types of markets in new ways", expanding the previous ambit of global production networks by their ability to turn anything into a service that will then be commodified:

> "While [platforms] generally match a service provider with a service user directly, they do so via a digital infrastructure which is often designed and governed in a different country—typically in the Global North. In turn, rent from that (ostensibly) direct and localized transaction is extracted and captured offshore. In order to facilitate transactions in dozens of different countries, multiple permutations of a platform's proprietary digital infrastructure may be deployed. Decisions about management and allocation of tasks, about workers' earnings, and about enrolment and termination (or deactivation) of participants can all be made at the global scale and the unprecedented ease with which platforms control the supply of workers contributes to the commodification of labour in digital value networks" (Howson et al 2020).

Overall, they argue that the algorithmization of work allows platforms the ability to "optimize production capabilities while externalizing ownership and costs, accumulate both monetary and nonmonetary forms of value, and concentrate power at the global scale in both existing and new

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sectors" (Howson et al 2020), marking their difference from previous modes of post-Fordist work.

Similar to the entry of working-class women into the globalized and outsourced workforce in the 1990s, today women's entry into the gig workforce is celebrated by state and private capital by framing women gig workers as empowered entrepreneurs entering the employment market, rather than as a reserve army of labor that is underpaid and overworked. These entrepreneurial platform workers' creative, affective, reproductive labor is co-opted by platforms in the service of value generation - but for the platform, not the workers. Further, platform work takes place in the service sector, marking the informalization of socially reproductive work on a large scale. As Howard et al (2020) note, "service sectors have historically been resistant to commodification, due to the difficulty of increasing labor productivity through economies of scale or automation in service work. Digitalization and advancement in information and communications technology (ICTs) offer solutions to these impasses". Overall, this expands the socially reproductive labor carried out by women gig workers (in addition to their domestic labor and their productive labor), placing them in a triple bind and adding to the burdens of women's invisible and unpaid labor.

Platform Work as a Distinct Work Paradigm

For the reasons outlined above, I argue that while platform work marks a return to certain core features of piecework, Fordism, and post-Fordism; at the same time, the algorithmization of work has enabled it to extend, transform, and combine these previous work paradigms in such a way that it merits being called a distinctive work paradigm in itself. Like the previous work paradigms, platformization is not just an employment relation but a phenomenon that has

transformed the way we live our daily lives (Raval 2020). Platform capitalism is characterized by what van Doorn & Badger (2020) call 'dual value production', where the monetary value of the service offered by the platform is "augmented by the use and speculative value of the data produced before, during, and after service provision". This means that gig workers become the human conduits of an algorithmic system that extracts and produces their data as a new data asset, producing recursive forms of value, none of which can go back to the worker they are drawn from (she may not even know of the existence of these data assets). In fact, the algorithmic foundation of platform work has exponentially increased the difficulty of tracing the production process and decisions made therein, which have become deeply fragmented, complex, and opaque due to the proliferation of black-box AI systems. In addition, as Singh et al (2023) note, platform work relies on neoliberal social control mechanisms which combine algorithmic governance and strategic management to extract worker consent and prevent worker disruption. Finally, platform capitalism has given rise to a novel situation where increasing proportions of workers across sectors, and even in affluent societies, are engaging in insecure, casual, informal, or irregular labor. Essentially, precarious work is now being experienced not only by a marginalized working class, but it is also spreading to become a normative feature of work among middle and upper-class workers (Gill and Pratt 2007, McRobbie 2008, Betti 2016)[19]. McRobbie calls this a situation of reversal, where the reserve army of labor has moved into the mainstream, into 'the heartland of new forms of work" (McRobbie 2008).

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[19] One of the prominent theoretical frames used to analyze the rise of platforms, is that of precarity - it is used to refer to all kinds of flexible, insecure work, from temporary and casual employment, to freelancing and piecework. It is useful to note that precarity is a geographically and temporally specific movement - it originated in the 1970s in Italy as a completely Western-centric working-class movement (for more, see Betti 2016).

Platform Capitalism, Women's Work, and Social Reproduction

During the industrial revolution, workers' physical labor was commodified. Today, in platform capitalism, every aspect of human life is a target for commodification, leading to new dimensions of feminization of work. McRobbie calls this "a widespread transformation of all work such that it is increasingly dependent on communicative and emotional capacities" (McRobbie 2010). In previous paradigms of work - piecework, Fordism, and post-Fordism - we saw that one of the reasons that women were able to gain entry into industrial work was that gendered stereotypes and domestic obligations incentivized industrial employers to systematically underpay them. Morini argues that today, platforms and cognitive capitalism seek to co-opt women because the human qualities that they seek to monetize and commodify - flexibility, ability to multitask, relationality, affective labor, creativity, care – have traditionally been associated with women (Morini 2007). McRobbie, viewing this as a "re-traditionalization" of women's work, warns against the increasing privatization and individualization of legitimate work concerns, especially for women, and argues that they represent the "subtle forces of patriarchal retrenchment" (McRobbie 2010).

This "patriarchal retrenchment" has been going on for a long time, as I have shown over the course of this chapter. Responding to the history of women's work, Federici (2020) offers a hard-hitting argument that social reproduction should lie at the heart of any enquiry about women's work. As she points out, women have been the shock absorbers of the weakening economic conditions produced by post-Fordism, being forced to compensate with their work for states' disinvestment into social reproduction work. As she also notes, the return to informal piecework affects women the most because it allows them to hold both domestic and paid work,

but in doing so, it enslaves them to work that would pay much more in a formal setting, while reproducing "a sexual division of labor that fixes women more deeply to housework". And finally, as she argues, "the growth of female employment and restructuring of reproduction has not eliminated gender labor hierarchies and inequality", in fact it has intensified men's fears around economic competition and the loss of their role as breadwinners as they themselves face increasing unemployment and harsher economic conditions.

These patterns are particularly salient in the contemporary era of platform capitalism. Women's entry into platforms today, as largely a reserve army of labor, once again echoes historical patterns. As Gill & Pratt (2008) write, "the working class is 'not just made, but incessantly remade, as its contestation brings on successive rounds of capitalist reorganization, which in turn generate new strategies and tactics of struggle". In India, where women's workforce participation is abysmally low, their entry into informal rather than formal work tells us a lot about the employment landscape for women at large. In particular, women are held back from the workforce and constrained in their work participation choices largely because of the inflexibility of their domestic and other socially reproductive work. Federici (2020) very astutely points out that "while production has been restructured through a technological leap in key areas of the world economy, no technological leap has occurred in the sphere of "housework" significantly reducing the socially necessary labor for the reproduction of the workforce". At most, socially reproductive work is contracted from privileged women to marginalized working class women, in a way that maintains its status as underpaid, invisible work. Federici argues that this is because the work of social reproduction is so complex that it is impossible to automate or mechanize - only human beings can do this work. This is why socially reproductive work can only be distributed but not technologized.

Federici also crucially connects women's entry into the wage labor force to the commercial organization of socially reproductive work, leading to the origination of the service industry, which today is the largest sector of waged work in India. And yet, "neither the reorganization of reproductive work on a market basis, nor the "globalization of care," much less the technologization of reproductive work have in any way "liberated women" and eliminated the exploitation inherent to reproductive work in its present form". In fact, due to de-investments in public services, the amount of unpaid work performed by women is actually increasing. And this is also spreading beyond women workers to slowly affect all workers. The co-option of social and reproductive labor by platforms, their feminization and commodification of the non-work aspects of our lives, is also a deeply gendered phenomenon that increasingly extends the conditions of socially reproductive work to all workers. And therefore, the only way to address the harms caused by platform capitalism is to address the heart of these inequalities - which lie in the invisible, underpaid, devalued nature of socially reproductive work in society.

CHAPTER 4: Women's Work Aspirations and the Place of Beauty

"How do you struggle over/against reproductive work? It is not the same as struggling in the traditional factory setting, against for instance the speed of an assembly line, because at the other end of your struggle there are people, not things. Once we say that reproductive work is a terrain of struggle, we have to first immediately confront the question of how we struggle on this terrain without destroying the people you care for". (Silvia Federici, Lecture at the Bluestockings Radical Bookstore in New York, 2006).

Abstract

The previous chapter offered a history of women's work in Mumbai and situated the emergence of platform capitalism as a distinct, gendered work paradigm that relies on the co-option of women's productive and reproductive labor. In this chapter, I shift my gaze and zoom in to the particular case that my thesis focuses on: women gig workers employed in beauty platforms in Mumbai. I make a case for why I am studying the beauty work sector and theorize how it marks an important and unique case study in the landscape of women's work in India today. Then, I briefly set up the founding question of my thesis: how does platform work shape women's employment? The chapter is structured in a way that also lays out my theoretical commitments and conceptual approach to this thesis.

'Serious Work': A Fulfillment Framework

When I began my investigations into the world of women platform workers, I had chosen to focus on beauty work mostly for practical reasons - it was the only sector of platform work that employed a majority of women. A niggling doubt came up even then - would it be better to study more "serious" sectors like ride-hailing or medical care work? It was important to me that in response to the unprecedented challenges posed by platform capitalism, this project should make

a strong and legible case for why we need to value and invest in women's work and why it is important to track and mitigate the harms of AI-mediated work. I wanted the findings to be compelling and important to policymakers, platform managers, and government officials, whom I pictured as sanctimonious men who might wave off women's work as largely unimportant to the important affairs that went on in the Real World. Since then, I keep returning to the question, 'why study beauty work?'. What is it going to tell us about women, platforms, and work in India that is new, interesting or valuable? I discuss the answers to that question in this chapter before going on to outline my key empirical findings.

The tension between "frivolous" and "serious" topics of research is something every researcher encounters. Especially if you study gender inequalities, you must contend with it at every turn. With research "hot topics" constantly changing, and changing the flavors of prestige politics, award decisions, and funding waves with them, it can be difficult for researchers to stick with their convictions and passions while also doing justice to their work. In recent years, the "frivolous" vs "serious" binary has been interrupted in gender studies by a welcome burst of research and writing on the importance of women's leisure, pleasure, and happiness. The 'Women at Leisure' project by Surabhi Yadav is a beautiful and widely accessible example, as is the hugely popular book 'Why Loiter' by Shilpa Phadke, and the 'Agents of Ishq' website by Paromita Vohra. These projects, along with many, many others, make the argument that the dominant culture of protectionism around women, which focuses mainly on addressing gender-based violence, sexual danger, risk, and respectability, actually ends up narrowing the scope of women's lives instead of broadening it. The protectionist approach towards women in research, policy, and public culture leads to solutions of "control", which advise that all these "issues" can

mainly be avoided if women just behave differently, dress differently, speak differently, learn martial arts, keep quiet, stay behind, follow decorum, and stop trying to live too large. Instead, Phadke and others argue, echoing Sen's capability approach (Sen 2005) and Nussbaum's feminist capability approach theory (Nussbaum 2000), that we need to take a rights-based approach to women that expands girls' and women's access to pleasure, freedom, and happiness. They say, let us loiter around our cities, let us meet all kinds of people, let us relax in public, let us live our lives, let us learn, and let us be. Their importance is marked also by their immense popularity as projects that are widely enjoyed, shared, and cited by the public. This approach goes beyond the end goal of "absence of violence" and dreams much bigger, of fulfillment, capability, and happiness for women throughout their life course.

Given that Indian society and culture tends to be deeply suspicious towards women who are merely "looking too happy" or "laughing too loudly", this theoretical and conceptual pivot is important and necessary for researchers studying women's lives. Though this PhD project is ultimately written in a "serious" manner, the larger theoretical orientation towards fulfillment and capability is one that I have adopted in my way of thinking and approach to my findings.

The Caste-Patriarchal Degradation of Work

Socially undesirable bodily work (such as midwifery, manual scavenging, leather tanning, barbering, to name a few) has always been relegated to lowered-caste communities in India, particularly lowered-caste women, and they have always been looked down upon for doing it (Gopal 2013; Gopal 2012; Ray 2016). Casteism is core to gender-based violence in India, and it has been perpetrated for centuries without any serious interruption. In The Vulgarity of Caste, Shailaja Paik offers the first social history of Tamasha (a popular form of public theater in

Maharashtra) and shows how Dalit Tamasha women, who embodied both the desire and disgust of caste-patriarchal society, struggled to claim *manuski* (human dignity) and transform themselves from *ashlil* (vulgar) to *assli* (authentic) *manus* (human beings) (Paik 2022). In Street Corner Secrets, Svati Shah brings two previously disparate domains - sex work and daily wage labor - into the same frame by showing how in Mumbai, women laborers earn a living through a number of ways, and selling sexual services is one of them (Shah 2014). She shows how different ways of earning ("legitimized or stigmatized, legal or illegal") overlap with each other, and have to be managed and navigated by women on a daily basis to make ends meet. Women's multiple identities as migrants, slum dwellers, daily wage workers, and sex workers, as well as their caste, class, and gender identities produce them as "dirty" encroachers who have to be "protected against" rather than "protected".

At the same time, caste logics can also produce certain types of mobility for certain forms of work. The Sanskritization of Bharatnatyam is one example - the claiming of this dance form from Devadasi communities by Brahmin communities elevated it from "low" art to "high" art in postcolonial India (Meduri 2005). In contemporary urban India, Donner (2023), Malik (2022) and Bannerjee (2023) variously show how beauty work embodies caste hierarchies - for instance, the "dirty work" of waxing, bleaching, massaging, sweeping up hair is separated from the "glamorous" work of styling hair, applying makeup, creating nail art, and so on - while the former is considered undesirable, impure, and low-skilled work, the latter is highly coveted and considered aspirational and high-skilled work.

One subtext to take away from these studies is that working for pay has always been the norm in India for caste-marginalized women and women in poverty - not a choice, but a compulsion. These women form the majority of women in India. They work in the home and they also create informal work opportunities to support themselves and their families. But this work is undercounted in official estimates. Over 90% of the Indian workforce (both men and women) is employed in the informal sector, which is estimated to contribute 50% of the national GDP, but they work without protections, fair wages, or dignity of labor (Mehrotra 2019; Chandrasekhar 2023; ILO 2019). Moreover, longstanding debates argue that the size of the informal economy, and particularly the contributions of women informal workers, is underestimated and so is its contribution to the national GDP. Even more pressing is the fact that none of the considerable and grueling domestic or care work (typically) performed by Indian women every day within the home is included in the GDP. Women's work is unpaid, unappreciated, invisible, and considered low-skilled and unimportant to the national economy, yet, without this work, the country would not be able to function for even a single day[20]. Formal workers whose work is highly valued and considered crucial to the national economy rely heavily on informal workers (including the women in their homes) to be able to do their work. The formal workers, too, would not be able to function for even a day without the essential and socially reproductive work done by women and informal workers.

This marks a gigantic discrepancy in the definition of "serious work" that feminist researchers have been calling attention to for many decades now, starting from feminist economists like Naila Kabeer in the 1970s. Drawing greatly on this body of work, in this thesis, I pay attention to

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[20] I qualify this argument by adding that it is not just women who perform informal and invisibilized care work; as Komarraju (2022) points out and I have highlighted in Chapter 1, marginalized caste men have historically performed care work in India, and the devaluation of socially reproductive work affects all care workers.

the ways in which work is feminized, moralized, valued, and dignified differently, depending on who is demanding it and who is doing it. Noting that the most essential and important forms of work for a society to thrive are the ones that tend to be the lowest paid and least dignified (look at teachers, homemakers, nurses and ASHA (Accredited Social Health Activist) workers, grocery workers, sanitation workers, for instance), I question normative understandings of what constitutes essential work; how we view, value, and dignify such work; and how caste-patriarchal belief systems percolate through platform organizations to set up these structural logics of gendered work. At the heart of this analysis lies the intent to trouble the binaries between "frivolous work" and "serious work", by making visible the entities that establish these binaries, and the biases and worldview that lead them to construct work in this manner.

Escaping the Paradoxes of Women's Work

I found that across age, caste, class, marital status, religion, and whether they are in the beauty industry or not, women feel excited to learn beauty work skills and feel drawn by the idea of being a beautician or make-up artist. As Donner (2023) notes, beauty work seems to offer the idea of glamorous possibilities, an escape from the drudgery of daily life and its demands, a form of mobility that is at once immediately accessible and far away. The world of beauty offers an escape into a space that seems filled with creativity, color, art, pleasure, self-discovery, and possibility. It also holds the promise of soft intimacies, of feminine support, and beautification and care (Baghel et al 2014). Women are fully aware of their precarious relationship with neoliberal ideals of work and empowerment, oscillating between desire and frustration as they navigate the gap between "the dream worlds of commodities that saturate their everyday lives and the persistent realities of low wages and poverty at home" (Maitra & Maitra 2023). Waged beauty work brings them into contact with the worlds of middle-class and upper-class customers,

turning their bodies into sites of surveillance and control, embodying the "contested sites of gendered performances of 'tradition' and 'modernity' under consumer capitalism in urban India today" (Maitra and Maitra 2018). For this reason, many women strategically slip in and out of informal beauty work, entirely avoiding formal work in order to preserve their freedom and time.

Banerjee (2023) notes that beauty work sustains itself on the notion of laboring femininity both as a skill and a product, producing forms of gendered capital in the process. Women across social locations aspire to beauty work because it is seen as easily accessible, interesting, fun, and pleasurable, and it can be reached towards even if one drops out of school or is unable to speak English fluently (Islam 2022, Kamran 2022). In fact, as Donner (2023) shows, the relationship between women's education and employment is complex, as many women view college as an impediment to their finances, employment, and domestic chores, particularly after marriage and motherhood. Vocational training such as beauty courses offer women "peaceful time" where they can indulge their interests and spend time with friends, taking a break from the pressures of the household. There are several forms of beauty work and many kinds of skills that can be learnt, offering multiple entry points depending on what someone is interested in learning or pursuing, and their access to capital (more in chapter 5).

This *liquid, malleable quality of beauty work* is important because it is precisely what allows women access to work in a socio-cultural environment that creates multiple barriers to women's employment. In the last 30 years, despite rising education levels, Indian women have paradoxically been dropping out of the workforce. Today, only 25% of working-age women in India are employed, representing a gigantic missed opportunity for national productivity,

especially as we trail towards the end of our demographic dividend period (Ghosh 2021). This is partly because - across the life course, Indian women's work lives are repeatedly interrupted and challenged by marriage, pregnancy, and childbirth, and social and economic institutions are simply not able to provide a supportive enabling environment that can support women's employment through these life course events[21]. It is partly because - patriarchal norms and familial cultures limit women's mobilities and decision-making capacities even today, constraining whether and how much they are able to work and how far they can step out beyond the home (crucially, this includes the fact that Indian women cannot escape the demands of the home even if they are breadwinners; and most Indian men have not yet stepped up to share household labor even if their wives have equally demanding jobs). Finally, the decline in women's workforce participation also signals something about the broader landscape of employment - work opportunities are increasingly difficult to access, the only work that is available frequently tends to be in the informal sector, and even white-collar professions are increasingly exhibiting features of informality, signaling a rising precaritization of work more broadly.

Some of the most incisive scholars of Indian women's workforce participation suggest that the decline in women workers is not because women are not working, it signals that they are entering the workforce mostly in informal professions out of greater precarity and economic need, rather than out of aspiration and with security (Ghosh 2021; Ghosh 2008; Deshpande & Singh 2021). Despite facing these complex barriers to work, women and girls across the country

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[21] These are life events that are nearly impossible to avoid for women, evidenced by the fact that 23% of women in India experience child marriage and 60% of women in India are married by the age of 21; but only 33% of married women are able to carry out some form of paid work (formal or informal, counted or invisible) (National Family Health Survey 2019-20).

continue to aspire, dream, and work towards their goals while navigating the gendered

constraints of their daily lives, usually chipping away at the "big goal" of getting a job in bits and

pieces, often in secret or hiding or in active negotiation with their families. Beauty work is one of

the few forms of work that is conducive to this kind of long-drawn-out process of access, which

fluidly combines "frivolous" pleasures with "serious" paid work while holding women's hopes,

aspirations, and daily enjoyments.

I argue that three characteristics of beauty work in particular, mark its unique location in

women's efforts to access work in India:

First, beauty work allows for *feminine masking*: the stereotype of beauty work as a frivolous,

unimportant, harmless female preoccupation, visibly marks it as a "women's activity" and helps

women accumulate monetizable skills and practice them without it being seen as a threatening

attempt to become employable. The fact that beauty work is learnt and practiced inside women's

homes, where there is no "threat" of male interaction and where women are not crossing the

societally-set bounds of private space or physical mobility, also helps with this masking. Here,

gender roles and stereotypes work in women's favor, as they can prepare for employment in a

gradual fashion without raising any alarms within the family, allowing them to choose their time

and place for transitioning into paid work, and choose the level of visibility of this work.

Second, beauty work offers *low-barrier entry*: a lot of women first learn beauty work skills from

their friends, family members, or neighbors, at each other's houses. Notably, the fact that beauty

work is always in demand among women, means that there always is a reliable market to tap

into. They can then expand these skills over time through online tutorials, local informal classes, online classes, seminars, or full-blown courses and training. The core skills can be learnt and practiced in a variety of low-resource and informal ways without having to "ask for permission" from family members, or spend money that would be questioned, and can easily be learnt clandestinely.

Finally, beauty work offers *layered possibilities for mobility and monetization*: beauty work can be monetized and upskilled in a host of formal and informal ways. Women can carry it out just inside their family at first, then expand to houses of friends and family, then to their locality; and then expand to local salons, salons outside their area; as well as use a variety of online platforms, platform subscriptions, and platform-based gig work. This work can be scaled up or down depending on their family constraints and life events such as marriage, moving into their husbands' homes, and bearing and raising children. It can be easily shared or swapped with peer beauticians. This range of possibilities allows women easy transition in and out of beauty work depending on the shifting gendered norms and constraints around them, and the demands of their life course transitions. Women are in a continuous process of strategizing, negotiating, and expanding the co-constituted norms around their work.

These three characteristics of beauty work trouble the easy association of beauty work as "frivolous", by showing that its seeming frivolity is precisely what allows women to access "serious" paid work in a sociocultural context where their desire for higher education, monetizable skills, and employment may not just be blocked but also actively punished. These three qualities are also the reason that beauty work so easily lends itself to informality. This

thesis rejects the easy application of "frivolous" to women's beauty work and offers it as a worthwhile, "serious" lens through which we can analyze the nature of women's participation in the Indian workforce and the push and pull factors influencing them. I take seriously women's piecemeal attempts to gain employment, in a context where their absence from the workforce is a serious national problem, rather than waving off their "in-again out-again" character of work. Moreover, my data is skewed towards the experiences of married women with children, who represent decades-long efforts to be a part of the workforce despite considerable barriers (as opposed to young single women who are new to the workforce and have very different experiences). By examining their experience of accessing and keeping platform beauty work, this project offers a valuable contribution to the understanding of women's work in contemporary India.

Unique Features of the Beauty Work Industry in India

One of the unique features of the beauty work industry in India is that *women dominate both the supply and demand sides of the industry*. We know very little about such markets. The *demand side* is increasingly marked by a cosmopolitan, female consumer market that is growing exponentially in size and profitability (partly due to the rise of middle and upper-class women in tech and consultant sectors) (Singhi & Jain 2017; Sayre & Silverstein 2009). However, the malleable nature of beauty work which I described in the previous sector, combined with customers' constant shifts between formal and informal beauty services, makes it extremely difficult to accurately estimate the size of the beauty services market in India**.** On the *supply side*, while the owners and middle management in large beauty salons and large platform organizations tend to be men, yet, in small and medium sized beauty salons and platforms, often women are the business owners and managers. Across different economic and social locations,

the women I spoke to frequently reported opening up a beauty salon as their dream - both women living in extreme poverty, and women coming from well-off families. Many had opened up small "salons" of their own with sisters or friends in the past as well and this often formed a reference point for their aspirations and provided experience in setting up and managing a business for the first time. Moreover, there is a *continuous demand* for beauty services among women[22], if not the high-end services, then certainly at the local level (purchasing informal beauty services within the locality, for instance). This means that there are always proximate consumers to tap into and aspiring beauticians usually do the work of creating and cultivating their own local consumer markets (Malik 2022; Bhallamudi & Malik 2023).

There are few other markets that employ majority women on both ends, while offering tiered opportunities for women from various backgrounds to enter into the market and to gain upward mobility. This makes it an interesting and valuable market to study, as it looks like women's consumer power is here to stay, and will increase in the coming years as more women enter the workforce in India. The expanding opportunities open to women beauticians today go hand-in-hand with the consolidation of an industrial, capitalist, and hyper-consumerist approach to beauty and care, where shifting and corporatized beauty norms (with the help of social media platforms and trends) are employed to attract women consumers into continuously purchasing new beauty products and services. Here, beauty becomes yet another moving goal post to keep up with in a

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[22] Whether or not they care for it, it is impossible for women to escape the beauty imperative. This is because childhood and adolescent socialization for women, carried out in homes and schools, remains concentrated on training them to perform and uphold feminine looks and behavior. Girls are punished and humiliated for failing to adhere to appearance-based norms. In adulthood, social spaces, educational institutions, and work organizations socialize women to follow gender-based rules and norms, which both reward and punish women based on their proximity to conventional beauty standards. Women's social and professional experiences to this day are heavily shaped by how attractive they are perceived to be, with beauty standards being derived from colonial and casteist stereotypes of women's beauty. So, even if they wish to entirely avoid the pursuit of beauty, the social, cultural and economic landscape around them makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible.

world that has increasingly commodified its pursuit. The tensions between a feminist approach to beauty (beauty as pleasure, care, connection) and a capitalist approach to beauty (beauty as consumerism, productivity, and anxiety) are experienced and co-constituted by both the suppliers and the consumers of the beauty work industry. Given that this industry is fundamentally composed of one class of women serving another class of women, now mediated through AI technologies with the entry of digital platforms and platform-based work, this project offers an important view into feminist relations as constituted by digital technologies in women-dominated markets (Ray & Qayum 2009).

Conclusion

This chapter uses the frame of a "serious" vs "frivolous" binary to outline the particular theoretical commitments I bring towards the study of women's beauty work in the age of platform capitalism. Discussing various unique features of the beauty work industry in India, I argue that beauty work forms an important and unique lens through which we can examine and understand Indian women's work landscape at large. This raises the question: how has the entry of platform work affected the beauty services sector, and what can this tell us about the factors shaping women's employment in India? I go on to discuss this in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: How Women Access Beauty Platform Work

"If workers' labor produces all the wealth in society, who then produces the worker? Put another way: What kinds of processes enable the worker to arrive at the doors of her place of work every day so that she can produce the wealth of society?" (Bhattacharya 2020).

Abstract

The previous chapter introduced and set up the specific case that my thesis focuses on: women gig workers working in beauty platforms in Mumbai. The following three chapters delve into key findings from my study. I devote this chapter to examining how women beauty workers *access* work at beauty platforms. Through their experiences, I will show how access to platform work is not a singular, "one-and-done" point of entry for women, but is actually a dynamic and shifting process that I characterize as an *algorithmic maze*. This fractures platforms' claims of gig work as being easy to access, claims that both lure women into the maze and leave them unprepared to navigate it. I show how this precarity is accelerated for women workers due to gendered factors and end by discussing the factors that shape women's access to work more broadly.

Introduction

India has one of the lowest rates of women's formal workforce participation in the world, with only around 25% of working-age women employed today. This rate has been inexplicably declining over time despite a steady rise in women's education, falling from 30% in 1990 to 20% in 2019, and rising to 25% since then (WHO 2020). Several explanations have been put forward to explain the puzzle of Indian women's declining work participation. Demand-side explanations cite the lack of demand for women's work, and the U-shaped influence of education on women's employment, which indicates that illiterate women and highly educated women show the highest rates of employment while moderately educated women tend to fall from the workforce

(Deshpande & Kabeer 2019). Supply-side explanations argue that poverty pushes women into the workforce while upward mobility pushes them out of the workforce. Finally, sociological explanations focus on how gendered social norms strongly control and block women's access to work even today, with marriage, which is near-universal, being a particularly severe barrier to work (Deshpande & Kabeer 2019). In addition, the proportion of women employed in formal work pales in comparison to the proportion of women employed in informal work, indicating that formal work opportunities are especially hard to come by.

Research on women's work in India tends to view their access to work in binary terms - a woman is either in, or out, of paid work. But as I carried out fieldwork with dozens of women gig workers over many months, observing them enter and exit platform work multiple times, I began to view access to work as a long-drawn-out and fraught process that could not be captured in binary terms. This has implications for how we understand the puzzle of women's declining workforce participation rates. If we are unable to accurately capture the prolonged processes through which women try to enter the workforce and the factors which shape multiple attempts at re-entry as well as those which facilitate multiple exits from work, then we cannot adequately understand the factors pushing women out of the workforce and keeping them there.

The little research that exists on Indian women's exit from work and subsequent re-entry is focused on professional, middle-class, working women in the management, finance, and IT sectors. This body of work typically traces women's attempts at re-entry following a maternity break or career leave (Ravindran & Baral 2014; Kaushiva & Joshi 2019; Gwal 2016), and views their exit from work as a voluntary decision made in the face of structural, systemic, and social

challenges (Singh & Vanka 2020). Like the majority of research on women's work, it too views access to work as a one-time event rather than a *process* marked by multiple entries and exits. We do not know much about re-entry into work as it pertains to working-class women, and we do not understand the factors (particularly social and family factors) which compel women to exit and re-enter the workforce multiple times.

This chapter makes a valuable contribution to the study of women's access to work in India by studying *working-class* women beauticians' *process* of access into platform work through multiple entry and exit points; and identifying the factors that shape women's repeated entries and *involuntary* exits from the platform workforce. Instead of viewing these multiple entry and exit points as evidence of women's lack of commitment to paid work; I instead argue that this shows women's high levels of commitment to work and the high unmet demand for work among women (Deshpande & Kabeer 2019), in a context where stable work is deeply scarce.

Assessing the Promises of Platform Work at the Point of Entry

I carry out this inquiry with a focus on beauty platform work. Before the entry of platforms, women interested in beauty work would have joined beauty salons or carried out informal forms of beauty work for pay. Today, women gig workers report a range of reasons which make platform work a much more highly desirable option for them compared to traditional beauty salons. In a work environment marked by informality, why is platform work particularly preferred by women who have a hard time accessing formal work?

Flexibility: For gig workers who are also homemakers and mothers, singularly responsible for childcare and domestic work that their husbands and family are not willing or able to share,

platform-mediated home services are much more suitable compared to the 9-5 demands of a salon job. Overwhelmingly, women gig workers working at platforms reported that the flexibility offered by platforms is the biggest draw for them, followed by the relatively higher salaries compared to part-time work at salons. Meera, an interlocutor with 2 children, said, "Home service works better for partner [gig worker] and customer both, it saves their time". In addition, when she gets a job, she can go, finish it, and come back instead of being at the salon all day. Unlike the salon, platforms make it possible to do childcare and work both. She said decisively, "If it comes to choosing between work and childcare, women will always choose childcare".

Convenience and 'convince power': Another gig worker I spoke to, Maya, who is in her early thirties with a toddler daughter, said it is about what she termed as "convince power". "Working by myself, I have absolutely no convince power. I can't sell services and I really hate begging and convincing customers to purchase additional beauty services. The app is perfect. A job comes on it, and I go and do it, without also having to be a salesperson". This "clean" way of getting a job through an app without having to attract, bargain with, and coax customers is highly appealing to gig workers in the same way customers like the option of booking a service with a single click, without having to talk to anyone or go through a long process of finding services and bargaining over the process.

Standardization: Platforms also appeal to gig workers' sense of justice in some way. "Parlors will fleece rich people, but the platforms treat all clients equally by charging the same", Maya explained. "However, there is more compassion in a beauty parlor if we have to take leave or suddenly go home to care for someone - the platforms don't really take excuses, they are heavy

on gig workers. We come to platforms for flexibility although it feels like that is becoming harder and harder to get".

Dignity and respectability: Working at a platform is also associated with pride and respect. Maria, a gig worker who lives in a chawl in Andheri, talked about how the company uniform made her well known and recognized in her locality as a "BeautiCare girl". A manager I spoke to described this as well, saying that he frequently hears from gig workers that they are treated with respect because they work at a company, and that this respect and prestige is a big factor in why they want to work here. Working at the platform company is an explicit symbol of upward mobility and prestige in ways that beauty parlors cannot offer, signified by visible markers like the company uniform and kit.

Pleasure and Possibility: Though platforms impose heavy surveillance on women workers, they also enable them to escape the constant surveillance of the home and drastically increase their mobilities. Working at a "company" rather than a "parlor" arms women workers to command more respect in the home and to gather the courage to push back against gendered family norms, and to gradually access experiences and spaces that were previously prohibited to them (Kamran 2022). Working as a gig worker, even as it imposes grueling schedules and difficulties, also allows women to access moments and spaces of leisure, freedom, and dignity while traveling around the city to work.

Platforms routinely frame gig work as an easy access and low-barrier form of work, and as I have outlined above, women gig workers are attracted to this work due to platforms' promises of flexibility, convenience, and ease of access, expecting standardized processes, trustworthy systems, and a guarantee of employment once they get work. In this chapter, I assess these

promises at the process of entry itself, framing the process of access as moving through an *algorithmized maze* with no clear end point. Thus, I offer a second, crucial contribution to the literature by providing an account of how AI-mediated platforms shape the *process of access* to gig work before going on to discuss women's experiences of gig work in the next chapter.

I present my findings through the use of ethnographic composites, reconstructing the trajectories of 5 composite women beauty workers as they move in and out of platform work. Each composite is crafted around the core experiences of a specific type of gig worker, loosely based around a particular interlocutor, then layered and obscured using additional details taken from my conversations with numerous other gig workers in a similar position as her. This allows me to draw on and make use of the considerable variation in my sample while also maintaining a rigorous and accurate analysis that is directly drawn from the data I collected (Humphreys & Watson 2009; Murphy & Jerolmack 2016; Arjomand 2022; Willis 2018; Corman 2020).

Case 1: Secure Insecurity: Tanisha's Experience Accessing Platforms as a Model Gig Worker

"India me purush jaldi agree nahi karte" [In India, men do not agree quickly]: bargaining with patriarchy

Tanisha is a 36-year-old beauty worker with two children. Over a phone call, she told me how she started learning beauty work in her late teens from a neighbor who worked in a salon. "I really wanted to become a beautician, but then my marriage got arranged and I had to move in with my husband's family to a different part of the city". Tanisha's husband did not allow her to seek work. After several years, following the birth of their first child, Tanisha signed up for a

beautician course without his knowledge, and completed it while juggling a baby and household chores. This shows the extent to which she had to go, and the amount of time it took her, just to access certifiable skilling (a crucial pre-employment step) without raising alarms in her family. Tanisha described the gradual process of her husband getting comfortable with her working outside the home. Soon after they got married, she began to help him run his newspaper stand business, which they soon started running together. When the business began to make losses during the pandemic, it provided an opportunity for Tanisha to seek work elsewhere. Her friend Kashi, who worked at BeautiCare as a gig worker, suggested that Tanisha monetize her beauty work skills by joining the platform as well.

But before she could apply to the beauty platform, Tanisha had to convince her husband to okay her decision. He flatly refused. "India me purush jaldi agree nahi karte [In India, men do not agree quickly]", she told me matter-of-factly. It took some time for her to convince her husband, but eventually, she worked out an agreement with him which allowed her to apply to BeautiCare. Bargaining with reluctant husbands was the first step for a lot of women gig workers, before they could think of joining a platform company. This is such a widespread problem that large beauty platforms have systems in place to manage it. Beauty platform managers I spoke to described how recruiters and managers consider managing gig workers' families as part of the job - during the recruitment process, families often come along with gig workers to their job interviews. Managers are used to having to convince and counsel gig workers' parents, husbands, and parents-in-law to allow women to join the company. A female manager told me, "These women were not working at all. They just wanted to work. They wanted to acquire a job. A lot of times women wanted to join, but then they didn't. You know, the family wasn't supporting. So we used

to talk to the family members. We used to call them to the offices to convince them to it. So it's like you're not convincing an individual. You're convincing the entire family".

This highlights how the family plays a crucial role in mediating women's access to work. Women are engaged in a constant bargaining process with family members throughout their work lives, but the most difficult part is initially convincing families to let them step out to work. Platform companies recognize this and have developed mechanisms to facilitate this bargaining process and support women's entry points into their company, in what Rahman & Valentine (2020) might call collaborative repair; or what Shestakofsky (2017) might call algorithmic complementarities. Women's family members therefore are a crucial factor shaping their entry and exit points into work (Deshpande 2021).

"The training was very difficult": recruitment and training at the beauty platform

Tanisha's friend Kashi provided her with a referral, and took her along to the BeautiCare office to interview for a job. The bustle of well-dressed, businesslike corporate workers and gig workers, and the expansive and luxurious-looking beauty platform offices, made a favorable impression on Tanisha. This seemed like a respectable and aspirational place to work at. Some aspiring gig workers had come for the interviews with their families or husbands. When it was Tanisha's turn, the recruiter pitched the job to her enthusiastically, answered her questions, and sent her in to be evaluated by a trainer. After the evaluation, she was told that she was selected to join the 'intermediate' tier of gig work, which came with higher fees per job but also a higher commission rate. She was pressed hard to pay the trainer fees (Rs. 3000, or ~$36) immediately and lock down her commitment (with the understanding that she would pay the Rs. 12,000, or ~$145 in compulsory training fees before the training and Rs. 22,000, or ~$265 in the

compulsory company kit fees after passing the training exam)[23]. If she couldn't afford these fees, the company could offer her a loan, which would be paid back through auto-deductions from her daily wages. Tanisha agreed to the conditions and paid Rs. 3000, out of trust in her friend Kashi and her impression of the platform office as a respectable space that would not cheat her. What the recruiter specifically did not mention is that the platform can reject aspiring gig workers even after they complete the training and pay the fees. So, there is no guarantee of actually obtaining employment even after going through this whole process.

Gig workers are expected to complete 10-20 days of training at the platform office, which includes soft skills and professionalization, standard operating procedures, expectations of work, how to use company-specific products, and the skills and training in that particular sector of work (Raval & Pal 2019). Tanisha recounted:

> "The training was very difficult. I would wake up at 4 am to go to the train station with my husband to pick up the morning newspapers. Then I would have to prepare the meals for the day and pack my kids' tiffin boxes, leave the house at 730 am, to reach the office at 9 am. My husband would have to drop my kids to school at 1030 am, which is usually my task, and manage in the afternoons, including picking up the kids at 5 pm. The training would go on from 9 am till 730 pm, every day, for 10-15 days. I cried a lot the first day. Mera dimag ghoom gaya [My head started spinning]. I had a severe headache, as they gave us only 15 minutes for lunch, there is no time to yourself at all. You also have to find a model to practice on, who will come with you for free each time and on time. It cost Rs. 200 ($2.4) every day just for me to go and come for training. After going back home at night, I had to make dinner, and catch up on household chores. It was just impossible to manage at home".

This highlights how women workers have to juggle competing responsibilities, each of which represents a full load of work, on their own, which can take a toll on their physical and mental health over time. The platform ideal of an 'entrepreneurial worker' pushes them to manage

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[23] Tanisha had joined in 2020. In 2023, gig workers I spoke to consistently reported that the joining fees had increased to Rs. 42000 - 48,000 (~$506-578), depending on the tier of work.

impossible workloads "somehow" by 'doing jugaad' (Rai 2019; Prabhu & Jain 2015) without providing any institutional support. Though the training was a grueling process for her, Tanisha managed to go through it successfully, pass the final exam, and be approved as a gig worker. Within a few days, the platform quickly made her "live" on the app so she could start working. At the time of joining, she says the managers told her, "Tum partner ho, naukar nahi ho. Tumhe jab kaam karna hai tab karo. Din me 2 ghante ya 6 ghante, aapki marzi". [You are a partner, not a servant. You decide when you work. Whether you want to work 2 hours or 6 hours a day, it is your choice". Seemingly reflecting this promise, everyone at the platform office only referred to gig workers as 'partners'. The respect and dignity of work that this promise offered felt very meaningful for Tanisha, who had been fighting a mighty battle for so many years just to be able to work outside the home. The flexibility and autonomy the platform promised made all the difference, allowing her to enter the workforce by giving her the time she needed to manage her inflexible domestic obligations and family members. Tanisha and her training batch were shown how to use the platform app. They were to mark working availability on their calendars and would be assigned leads during that time.

This highlights how accessing work is often a long-drawn-out process for women whose families do not approve of them working outside the home. They have to strategize and plan for years before being able to start paid work of their own. The absence of any structural support towards their inflexible domestic and care work obligations places them in an impossible position that they are expected to magically and automatically navigate to the satisfaction of both the platform company and the family. When there are unavoidable domestic emergencies, the inflexibility of their roles as homemakers forces them to exit from their jobs if they miss too many days of work

or fail to attend the training program consistently, though they would like to stay. This points to an urgent need for structural support that can help women manage their domestic and care work obligations without completely sacrificing themselves to it.

"Things can change anytime": Navigating shifts in work expectations

Tanisha has been working at BeautiCare for nearly four years now. She has received consistently high customer ratings and is considered as a model gig worker, who always puts in more time than expected. She contributes to her family's income both by co-running their newspaper stand business and also carrying out beauty platform work. "Abhi mai poora support nahi karti, lekin family ko sambhal leti hoon [I don't fully support us financially, but I do manage the family]", she said. She is not seen as the primary breadwinner or the head of the family despite taking on three streams of work for her family (newspaper business, platform work, and domestic and care work). Though she has successfully negotiated her husband's "permission" for her to work, she is watchful as it can change any time, and she has to be ready to mediate any turbulence. But she doesn't anticipate issues now. "My husband can't say anything, he has to learn to adjust", she said confidently. "Abhi activa bhi hai" - the scooter, especially popular among working women, allows her to cut down traveling costs and time as she works in the city while juggling her responsibilities at home.

Tanisha's hard-won equilibrium did not last very long. Over the last year, her working conditions have changed dramatically. The platform company has been taking back the flexibility it promised, by penalizing her for not working according to a fixed pattern. When I last spoke to her, she said they were expected to mark 12 hours of availability on the calendar every day of the week (when she joined, it was 7 hours), and that it was compulsory to work on weekends. If a

gig worker cancelled more than 3 jobs a month, she would be penalized and put on probation.
Tanisha complained that it is impossible to mark 12 hours of availability per day in the calendar
if you have kids. In addition, she reported that her overall wages have been dropping, because
the quality and frequency of jobs through the platform has reduced. From Rs. 10,000 - 15,000
($120-180) in net wages, she barely makes Rs. 3000 – 4000 ($36-48) a month with difficulty
now.

Summary: entry and exit patterns

Tanisha's account shows that entry into platform work is hard-won, typically facilitated through
word-of-mouth and referrals from colleagues or friends in the beauty sector, and involves a high
amount of financial investment. Despite being a model gig worker, who manages to adhere to the
shifting expectations of the beauty platform, Tanisha's experience illustrates that security in
platform jobs can be short-lived as gig workers have close to zero control over the conditions of
their work or visibility into the decision-making processes of the platforms - this is concerning as
the conditions of their work can change very suddenly without their input (Ghosh et al 2021;
Nair 2022). Though she follows all the rules and expectations of the platform, Tanisha has
nevertheless experienced a severe drop in her earnings and quality of leads due to AI-mediated
decisions and factors outside of her control, moving her towards precarity once again. The
structural format of the platform therefore troubles her hard-won access to paid work and creates
conditions of exit. This underscores that entry into a platform job is a dynamic and unpredictable
process rather than a fixed point, which can be revoked at any time.

Case 2: Work That Locks You Out: Saba's High-Cost Entry and Exit into Platforms

"I want to stay close to home": bargaining with patriarchy

Saba is 33 years old, and has a baby daughter. She lives with her husband and mother-in-law. A couple of years back, she took a beauty skills course from a local NGO that focuses on women's empowerment and skills training; seeing her excel in the course, one of the teachers told her about BeautiCare and got her a referral there. Saba went through the same recruitment process as Tanisha, took a loan from the platform in order to pay the fees, and began working as a gig worker. Saba's husband has a small business, but he has been struggling to make ends meet ever since the pandemic. Saba told me that her husband and mother-in-law are supportive of her working, particularly as the extra income is welcome in their household, but they are not comfortable with her traveling too far from her locality in Malad. Since she lives in an area where there is extreme poverty, the frequency of jobs and customers is extremely low here, meaning she has to travel farther to get good jobs. However, Saba finds this to be difficult, as a woman who has been prohibited from moving beyond her locality for the majority of her life, and is not used to traveling alone. In addition, with an 8-month-old baby, it was difficult for her to keep up with the working hours imposed by the company, even with her mother-in-law helping out with childcare.

Saba worked at BeautiCare for a year. She was extremely happy with the pay, but given her difficulty with the greater distances she was expected to travel per job and the need to travel back home between jobs to breastfeed and take care of her baby daughter, her cancellation rate was

higher than the limit of 3 cancellations per month imposed by the platform. In addition, due to a couple of especially low customer reviews, her average customer rating dropped. She was placed on probation by the platform, resulting in a temporary block on her platform app. After two rounds of retraining and unblocking, Saba was permanently blocked from the platform.

Saba's account shows how compounding gendered barriers can build up to push women out of the workforce (Israni & Kumar 2021; Deshpande & Singh 2021). Her difficulty with traveling alone shows how gendered norms can become internalized and turn into pernicious barriers that are difficult to overcome alone (Goel 2023). In addition, it once again highlights the lack of structural support options that women can draw on in order to maintain their entry into work.

"Bring others with you to the interview": how platforms feminize work

The recruitment process that Saba went through initially to join BeautiCare, illustrates at least three different ways in which platforms feminize women's work even before they join the platform.

First, *peer referrals*: at Saba's recruitment interview, she was demanded to bring more women with her who could be recruited by the platform, by managers who were trying to fill their recruitment targets. Afraid that if she didn't do this, it would affect her employment chances, Saba brought along two of her friends who went through interviews for her sake. Typically, BeautiCare pays a gig worker Rs. 1500 per successful referral, but Saba was not compensated in any way for this work as she had not yet joined the platform.

Second, *customer sharing*: during the training program, Saba and her peers were encouraged to tell their old and personal customers about BeautiCare and to ask them to try their services. Since most beauty workers maintain detailed rosters of their past customers, this can supplement the platform company's customer base, but it can also take employment away from gig workers if they are laid off from the platform later and need to revert to their old customers to make ends meet while they find another job. Saba was not compensated for this work either.

Finally, *supplying models for training*: Saba was asked to bring her own 'model' to practice on each day of the training and evaluation. She was not compensated for their time, food, or transport, which she paid out of pocket. This is another way in which platforms cut down their operation costs at the expense of the gig worker.

Reflecting on her process of entry at BeautiCare, Saba expressed that she felt upset thinking about the women who go through the training program. She said that in each batch of 10-15 women, around 3-4 women don't pass the final evaluation, and therefore don't get the job. They also don't get their money back. She said fiercely, "If you go to the training sessions, you will see so many girls crying. A lot of very needy girls come to the platforms for a job, some from NGOs, like me. Some girls come because they have lost their husbands, and have kids to feed. Many of us take loans or otherwise scrape together the money to pay the fees for the training. After paying more than Rs. 35,000 (~$421) for the training and kit, they get rejected from the job. How will they feel, what state will they be in?".

Saba's account of the recruitment process highlights how social and financial capital is a key factor in successful entry into platform work (Yao et al 2021; Ray & Sam 2023; Bourdieu 1987). The process of gaining work is heavily reliant on the size of one's social network and the power of word of mouth; women with greater social capital are more likely to achieve successful entry. In addition, women with more financial resources can attempt repeated entry whereas women without it get locked out of the market after one or two attempts, due to lack of money to invest into the entry fees.

"Khali baithi hoon" [I am empty of work]: turning to old customers to make ends meet

When Saba got laid off from BeautiCare, it came as a huge blow as she had invested a lot of money into this job and had been banking on it being stable. She had taken a loan from the platform in order to afford the kit, and was now left with debts to pay as well as the huge kit, which the platform could not take back. Over the next few months, Saba went back to her old local customers to try and make money. She, like most of the other gig workers I met, kept a meticulous roster of all her (non-platform) customers and kept up with them semi-regularly. This came in handy during times of need. However, as most customers had themselves shifted to online apps, this didn't provide enough work for her to make ends meet.

Several months later, I heard from other gig worker interlocutors that Saba's husband had abandoned her, leaving her in a dire financial position, as she had to make ends meet in addition to paying off her debt from the platform. In our infrequent phone calls, Saba had mentioned nothing about this, but I noticed that she sounded more stressed about finding jobs. We made a poster together to advertise her services and shared it on hyperlocal women's groups on social

media, but with limited results. A few months later, over another phone call, Saba said, "Pichle 4 mahinon se haath khali baithi hoon". [I have been sitting empty handed for 4 months now]. She expressed that platforms were far preferable to freelance or salon work. "At least the platforms give you *something*, guarantee some flow of jobs, some income, no matter how high or low". She mentioned some gig workers we both knew, who relied on financial support from their husbands or boyfriends, who had the money to invest into skilling classes, and who had large rosters of old clients to draw on, and said, "I am in a very different situation, I don't have anyone to help me". Remembering her brief employment at BeautiCare, she said she now deeply regretted not disintermediating (making off-platform, private arrangements with platform customers, which is deeply frowned on by the platforms). She had refused to do so out of a sense of loyalty and principle, but now, after being blocked from work in such an impersonal, dehumanized way, she regretted it, saying "now I have no other options for work, and no work".

Summary: entry and exit patterns

Saba's brief experience of platform work shows that entry into platforms, even when it is hard-won and paid for, can be rescinded at any time, and gig workers do not have any bargaining power or work rights that they can draw on, due to their classification as contract workers and not employees (Dubal 2017). Moreover, gig workers in precarious financial positions can find that the process of accessing seemingly stable and prosperous platform work can actually leave them in a worse financial position than before, having drawn out their savings and leaving them in debt, what Fleming calls the 'human capital hoax' (Fleming 2017). This is because women are compelled to invest large amounts of money into the platform even before they are guaranteed a job - so this job can block them from investing into and exploring other options, and locks them into this one employer no matter how bad the conditions of work might get. Saba's experience

also highlights that social and financial capital facilitate access to work but only temporarily. *Maintaining* that access without being pushed to the exit, requires more social and symbolic capital than most gig workers have.

Case 3: Running to Stay in the Same Place - Sheetal's Experience Repeatedly Churning Through a Large Beauty Platform

"Khich khich hote rehta hai" [We keep quarrelling]: bargaining with patriarchy

Sheetal is 42 years old with two children; her sister is a make-up artist in the Bollywood film industry. Sheetal first learnt beauty work from her sister as a teenager, and helped her run a small, local beauty salon. After that, marriage and childbearing paused her career and work plans for several years. During the pandemic, facing a financially, emotionally, and physically abusive husband during the lockdown, Sheetal decided there was little to lose, and started looking for customers in and around her neighborhood. Then, through friends, she learnt that local beauty platforms were mass hiring beauticians, and applied to a large beauty platform. She went through the same process as Tanisha and Saba, and joined the platform using money she had secretly been saving in FDs (Fixed Deposits) and through a local women's self-help group.

Sheetal said her in-laws and husband were initially not so supportive of her working. She told me matter-of-factly that for women, families come in the way of working. "This is why, with marriage, there was a gap in my working, and I had 2 kids, so it was a while before I could get back into it. My in-laws and husband had a problem with me working outside, so I would call customers home, but that also got troublesome for everyone. I felt I should also make money to help with expenses, because it is hard to run on one person's salary, especially with kids and

their schooling. So I started to work at BeautiCare. I don't give my family a reason to complain. Barah baje tak nipta deti hoon saara ghar ka kaam, phir 1215 ko 1 baje ke job ke liye nikalti hoon [I finish off all the housework by 12, then leave at 1215 for a job at 1]. Phir bhi beech me khich-khich toh hote rehta hai [even then, they keep raising a quarrel with me every once in a while]". Sheetal also made sure to save her earnings into independent bank accounts so that she had access to financial resources that were not controlled or accessible by her husband, and started FDs for both her kids' higher education.

This once again highlights the role of gendered norms, marriage, and childbearing, in creating strong barriers to women's work access (Deshpande & Singh 2021). It also shows how gendered violence in Sheetal's case became a catalyst for her re-entry into work.

"Left in the lurch": navigating unemployment

Around 1.5 years into her job at BeautiCare, Sheetal was suddenly given a warning and blocked from the app. She did not understand why she had been laid off, though some explanation was sent by the company through the app. In fact, she was one of several hundred gig workers to be mass-laid off by the platform during this time, because the platform had changed their minimum average-rating cutoff from 4.5 to 4.75, causing all gig workers with a rating above 4.5 but below 4.75 to be automatically fired after a few chances to raise their ratings (which most were not able to do in time). This AI-mediated management decision left Sheetal and hundreds of other gig workers in the lurch, and it raises questions about explainability, accountability and transparency in the context of AI-mediated employment structures, especially when the people most impacted get no visibility, say, or redressal into the decision-making process (Kellogg et al 2020).

Sheetal immediately called her trainers and managers, appealing to them to let her rejoin and give her another chance. She spent nearly three months calling them, going to the office to meet them, and being made to run back and forth between different people who said they would see what they could do, but who couldn't offer concrete help. After 3 months of no luck, she drew on her informal networks to find out about other local platforms, and concluded that working there was going to be even more chaotic and unreliable. As a result, she decided to keep trying at BeautiCare. "BeautiCare takes, but at least they also give. Everyone else just takes and takes. Who will do all this for free anyway?", Sheetal asked me, referring to the costs and difficulties associated with setting up and running a big platform, and sympathizing with her old trainers and recruiters in a rare moment. "And maybe salons are better than platforms, but I just can't join one with 2 kids".

Sheetal's experience of a layoff highlights the role of AI-mediated structural changes in locking women out from platform work suddenly. It shows how platforms often rely on algorithmic variables to make decisions about gig workers; decisions that are hidden to gig workers until the last minute and which can force sudden exits from the workforce without any safety net (Bhallamudi 2023). Even women workers with large social networks and some financial capital at hand may have great difficulty re-entering platform work, as Sheetal's account shows.

"Something went wrong": Algorithmic glitches and bureaucratic barriers

After 4-5 months of going through other small and local beauty platforms as well as failing to get her old job back, Sheetal thought of applying for a different position at the same platform. Instead of re-applying as a beautician at BeautiCare, she tried to apply as a masseuse.

She got a referral from a friend and went for the job interview. The recruiter gathered her contact details and realized that she had been laid off from BeautiCare before - her profile was marked permanently blocked with no chance of return. He made a new profile for her, using an alternate phone number, and rushed her to pay the initial training fees plus a credit recharge, which she did. She downloaded the platform app next, though it kept glitching on her phone, and was asked to upload bank, ID, and address proof documents. Here Sheetal ran into another roadblock - the app would not let her upload her documents. She spent the next several days running pillar to post asking recruiters, managers, and trainers to fix the glitch on her app manually, so she could complete the entry process. This happens often - gig workers end up having to come to the office repeatedly to fix app glitches which prevent them from working, and which require human intervention to be solved. Next, Sheetal had to watch un-skippable online training videos and answer test questions, after which she had to book her training schedule - here, the app glitched again and wouldn't let her book a slot or see when the training sessions were offered. As she waited for a slot, there was yet another problem. The platform runs background safety checks on all prospective gig workers, and her profile was not passing the check. She was asked to go to the nearest police station and get manually verified. Sheetal did not want to go to the police - the only time she had gone to the station was after being severely hit by her husband, to file a domestic violence case against him. Sheetal was sure that this case was the reason her verification was getting held up. She did not want to share any of this with the platform company, and she did not want to go back to the police station. The process stopped there.

Though Sheetal did not get the job she wanted, she tried again at the same company, this time in the hairstyling vertical. She first joined a brief hairstyling course near her home to brush up her

skills and get a certificate to strengthen her application. At the platform office, she solicited the help of a friendly security guard, who used to help her out when he could, to get her an interview with a sympathetic recruiter who could push her through. At the interview, instead of using her real name, she used a fake name and a new phone number to create a profile, trying to avoid the issues with the background check. But even before she was found out, there was yet another issue - at the interview, the trainer told her that she was not eligible because of a new age limit - women above 40 years would not be recruited. She was also told by the trainer that she was "too fat" for the job and should try losing a few kilos. In the end, this third attempt to re-join the platform also did not work.

Summary: entry and exit patterns

Sheetal's experience accessing work at a large platform company, being laid off suddenly due to AI-mediated management decisions, and churning through the same company multiple times attempting re-entry, emphasizes how "entry" is not a single point of access, but is a dynamic process with multiple gendered barriers. It shows how technological glitches combined with gender-neutral bureaucratic barriers can hold up entry, while human intermediaries (managers, trainers, security guard) in the office try to facilitate it (Shestakofsky 2017; Rahman & Valentine 2020). Finally, Sheetal's account emphasizes again how gendered violence and inflexible family obligations heavily shape women's access to work - the background check, then the arbitrary age limits and comments about weight, effectively locked her out of access both times.

Case 4: Everything Everywhere All at Once: Salma's Experience Juggling Multiple Platforms and Work Streams to Access Work

"I like to be back before dark": bargaining with patriarchy

Salma is a 33-year-old single mother to a 10-year-old boy. She separated from her husband a few years back. Salma rents her own one-room house in West Malad, living near her parents. She joined BeautiCare two years ago, and lost her job in the same mass layoffs that impacted Sheetal. While Sheetal kept trying to rejoin BeautiCare, Salma went through the re-entry process once and then gave up. She had already been struggling with the platform's increasingly untenable expectations and conditions of work, and fighting with her managers. Salma kept a broad eye open, speaking to sympathetic recruiters and trainers, old customers, peers and friends, and her beauty worker networks to find new sources of work, while also keeping an eye out should BeautiCare open up mass hiring again. During this time, she drew on her old clients to secure work and make ends meet.

Since she lives alone with her son, she does not have to bargain with her husband to be able to work. However, Salma mentioned that other types of gendered norms constrain her conditions of work. "I like to be back home by 6 pm, because otherwise people in my locality question what I am doing outside after dark [insinuating that I am involved in sex work]". Salma is affected by these rumors and gossip as her family lives nearby, and she relies on them for various forms of support, including childcare. The effect of these rumors on her shows how gender norms and stereotypes, combined with constant social surveillance, leveled not just by family members but by neighbors and strangers, can nevertheless severely impact how and when women choose to

work, constraining their zone of entry (sometimes forcing exit) and limiting the kinds of work

they can take up (Sultana et al 2021). Even though she lived in her own home that she rented

herself, Salma was not immune to these rumors and their implications as a separated woman

living alone, with family nearby.

When she first started working, Salma said she used to take a share-auto from her locality up and

down daily looking for jobs and interviewing at various places. The share auto driver asked her

about the daily commute, and she told him that she is going for interviews but not getting work.

He asked how she presented herself at the interviews, and advised her to say that she is from

Andheri rather than from Malad. Salma said, once she did that, people started giving her jobs.

She said "If you say you're from Andheri, pakka milega [you'll definitely get it]. But if you say

you're from Malad, nobody gives you a job because they think it's a 'bad area'. And if you say

you're from West Malad, there's no chance at all". West Malad is home to a lot of migrant

Muslim families from Uttar Pradesh and a site of increasing communal strife in Mumbai.

Salma's experience illustrates how her residence in a predominantly Muslim locality, during a

time of strong anti-Muslim sentiments in the country, locked her out of several work

opportunities. In order to bypass these communalist barriers, avoid discrimination, and secure

work on her own merit, she had to mask her religious identity and place of residence.

"It's the same story everywhere": fraud jobs, sunk costs, and repeated risk-taking

Salma drew on her large network of beauticians, managers, trainers, and customers to find out

where else she could get reliable work (Granovetter 1978; Davidson & Sanyal 2017; Deshpande

& Khanna 2021). She often spoke to me about how tough it is to differentiate between scams and

real jobs, because they all take some money from you before giving the job, and rely on word-of-

mouth advertising from people you know. Shadowing Salma during her search for work at small

and local beauty platforms, I found that the process of securing work was deeply messy, and

involved repeated financial investments, sunk costs, and risk-taking.

Salma first approached a small local beauty platform called Magic Beauty, where a few other gig

workers from BeautiCare had joined. Magic Beauty seemed to be promising to fix all the issues

that gig workers had with BeautiCare; for instance, there was no ratings system; there would be

two days off every week; there was a travel allowance; beauty materials would be home-

delivered to the workers every week. They said they deeply valued beauticians: "10 customer

aise hi milenge, lekin hamare liye beautician lakhon me ek hoti hai [you can get 10 customers

easily, but for us a good beautician is one in a million]. The recruitment at small beauty

platforms often seemed to be managed by ex-women beauticians, who were good at building

relationships of trust and camaraderie with gig workers and used their grievances with large

platforms to draw them in. However, after joining Magic Beauty, paying several thousand rupees

in joining fees, Salma found these claims did not match up to reality - there were barely any jobs,

and she could not get any of her money back. There was nobody to take her complaints. During

this process, she also briefly took up a freelance platform subscription with a friend, which

promised a fixed number of jobs for a monthly fee. The subscription cost ~Rs. 10,000 (~$120),

and promised close to 100 customer leads, which Salma and her friend would have to convert

into actual bookings. However, this too did not work out well. Here and at the other small beauty

platforms - For You, Salon Now, SaatPhera[24] - it was the same story. Each platform falsely

claimed to have customers and promised steady jobs, attracting beauticians disenchanted with

large beauty platforms, only for them to realize that BeautiCare was more reliable in comparison.

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[24] All platform names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

But out-of-work gig workers had no choice but to keep investing money into these platforms in the hope of work.

Salma had some back-up plans in case beauty platform work did not work out. With one of her male friends, she started a fabric business, buying fabric from Surat and Delhi and selling it to wholesalers in Mumbai. She also sought advice from her new boyfriend about job opportunities in other sectors in case she needed to make a switch.

Salma's experience highlights the strength of weak ties and financial capital in facilitating re-entry into other small platforms (Deshpande & Khanna 2021), but also emphasizes that re-entry requires repeated risk-taking and sunk costs, as it is difficult to differentiate fraud jobs from real ones. Most of the small platforms did not last very long, and proved to be unreliable employers. This shows that risk-taking, though unavoidable, also often had adverse outcomes that could push women beauticians out of work once their financial capital ran out.

"You need to network": constant upskilling and cognitive overload

Having exhausted all avenues for jobs, and feeling fatigued at the prospect of keeping up a cycle of juggling multiple job opportunities at various platforms, none of which were able to ensure stable work, Salma decided that her best bet was to go back to BeautiCare. Trying to diversify her skillset and improve her mobility in this career, Salma invested Rs. 30,000 (~$362) in a 6-month course on hydra-facials from a cosmetics institute in Ghatkopar. Alongside attending this course, she also sought out beauty workshops, seminars, and certifications that she could get to bolster her credentials and legitimize her expertise and experience. I once met her a few days after she attended a beauty seminar on skincare. She said, "I got the numbers of some salon

owners, some people in Lakme, and there were also a lot of homemakers who were there wanting to work in this sector. It is good professionally to get all these numbers and maintain your contacts". Eventually, over a period of around 14 months, after trying out entry at multiple local beauty platforms, taking a platform subscription membership, networking at beauty seminars and classes, going back to old customers, trying to start a fabric business on the side, and completing her hydra-facials course, Salma reluctantly went back to BeautiCare. They were starting a new hydra-facials vertical - Salma had invested in the right trend - and recruited her. She once again paid the significant training fees and kit fees (which in all, cost around Rs. 50,000, or ~$602), went through the training, and secured a job as a gig worker. One year later, as I write this dissertation, I found out that that vertical is being scrapped, so she has been laid off unexpectedly again.

Summary: entry and exit patterns

Salma's experience underscores how skills, networks, and capital can provide multiple points of entry to women workers (Malik 2022), but a stable re-entry is extremely difficult after the first exit point. In this fast-paced, shifting, and unpredictable landscape of beauty platform work, even with limited financial resources, Salma spent a lot of time and money investing into certificates, networking, professional development, and new skillsets, to give her an edge in the market and open up employment options (Malik 2022). This habit of constant skill development, networking, and job diversification was not limited to Salma, but was a quality I found in a lot of the beauticians I spoke to. Though many of them were used to working in informal markets and facing the pressures of precarious work, the entry of beauty platforms had added new levels of unpredictability, dynamism, and precarity to beauty work which required even greater efforts and constant cognitive labor from workers, to maintain access to work in the face of constant changes

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and shifts. Salma's experience also shows that beauty workers spend considerable amounts of cognitive labor finding out about, assessing, and adjudicating between different beauty platforms, a process which involves repeated financial and time investments into each platform (extending Daminger 2019). Eventually, gig workers churn back towards large beauty platforms, which, in the broader landscape of flexible beauty work, remain the most stable, reliable and trustworthy option for gig workers. Once again, this account emphasizes how "access" is a continuous process with changing expectations and environments, and which involves constant financial, cognitive, time, and energy investments in order to keep up and maintain.

Case 5: Can't Afford to Be Offline: Archana's Experience as a Freelancer Using Platform Subscriptions to Get Work

"Things are tough if you are a freelancer": finding work on freelance apps

Archana is a 31-year-old freelance beautician, who is married with no children. Since her early twenties, she has been working as a freelance beautician, offering home services to customers in central and west Mumbai and steadily building up a roster of reliable, "regular" customers. However, the entry of digital platforms into the work sphere changed everything. Many of Archana's old customers began to purchase home beauty services through platform apps, and she found her freelance routine threatened. Archana described how she has pivoted towards digital platforms, and has tried out various beauty platforms and platform subscriptions in the last few years, updating herself to the shifting demands and expectations of platform life in order to not be left behind.

At first, Archana checked out a large beauty platform where many of the beauticians in her networks seemed to be joining. She said she was shocked by the terms and conditions of work, especially the high joining fees, and decided that this arrangement would not work for her, as she preferred to be in control of her work. She signed up on a few popular job aggregator apps like Apna and WorkIndia, and soon started getting a stream of WhatsApp messages, calls, and texts offering salon, home service, and freelance jobs. It was a challenging task to figure out which jobs were real and which were scams, to assess the tradeoffs of each offer accurately, and to ask the right questions to enthusiastic and skilled marketers who were pushing her to purchase their services. Archana appeared to be very business savvy with a good sense for where to invest her time and money. She took up the challenge and has settled on a model of a shifting set of freelance beauty work subscriptions, which she continually assesses, weeds, and curates to make sure that she achieves a satisfactory return on her investments. She emphasized that she can't avoid doing this: "I have no choice but to go through platforms - things are very tough if you are a freelancer".

Archana's experience suggests that trying to operate offline can create an automatic exit point; to ensure entry to work, gig workers have no choice but to be online.

"I never made the money back": freelance apps and algorithmic uncertainties

I asked Archana about the freelance subscriptions in her "portfolio" of platform apps, and she described her journey with various platforms in a brief account:

> "Two years ago, I bought an annual subscription at MarryMe, which cost Rs. 25,000 (~$300). Before that, I had an annual subscription at Matrimonials for Rs. 7,000 (~$84) - I got back Rs. 8,000 (~$96) in net wages. Matrimonials took out a merger with ShaadiServices the next year, and they hiked up the subscription price by several times, to Rs. 25,000 (~$300). I got that subscription, but they looted me. I didn't get any jobs and they haven't paid me back for it!

Then…before the pandemic lockdown, I would buy subscriptions from CallMe on and off. Then, they gave me an early bird offer, Rs. 10,000 (~$120) for an annual subscription - I took it and struck gold! I made several lakh rupees from that one subscription. I thought I'd just keep doing that, but then CallMe switched from annual subscriptions to offering only monthly packages, which cost Rs. 4000 (~$48) per month, plus taxes. I tried that for a few months, but they gave me mostly fake leads. I didn't even break even, the quality was so bad".

Archana's experience of accessing work through platform subscriptions shows how access involved continuous, tremendous amounts of cognitive labor, assessment, and decision-making around which platforms to purchase, even as the terms, conditions, and returns from each subscription kept changing without warning. Similar to Salma's experience of being able to assess a work opportunity only after investing in it; here, Archana, too, was forced to keep investing money and taking risks in order to maintain her access to work.

Summary: entry and exit patterns

Archana's experience shows that platform freelancers cannot rely on stable work - a freelance subscription that works for you one year might completely tank the next year. The process of tracking, assessing, trying out, abandoning, switching between numerous platform subscriptions and services is an overwhelming and never-ending task with a high cognitive load. There is no point of "rest" as you can lose work anytime. Platform freelancers like Archana often rely on word-of-mouth from other beauticians to parse out and select subscriptions that are reliable, to minimize economic losses. This process of accessing work through platform subscriptions inherently involves a lot of risk taking and repeated financial investments. Even women beauticians who are struggling for resources are used to having to put in money repeatedly into various platforms, knowing that some of them won't bring in any revenue. This is one way in which beauticians "diversify their portfolio of risk" in informalized work markets which are constantly changing and shifting, just to avoid being thrown out of work. This also greatly

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contradicts the common-sense stereotype of women as risk averse (Kappal & Rastogi 2010), and it challenges the prescription that if only women become more risk-taking, this will counteract gender inequitable market and wage effects (Maxfield et al 2010; Rao & Djohari 2023) - in the context of platform work, we see that this is clearly not the case.

Discussion: Structural Factors Shaping Women's Entry and Exit Patterns in the Gig Workforce

Through the journeys of multiple composite women gig workers, this chapter has shown how access to work is an uncertain, constantly changing, and long-drawn-out process - akin to navigating through an *algorithmic maze* - that involves multiple exits and re-entries without a definite end point in sight. The journey through the maze looks different for different women depending on their marital status, family norms, social identities, financial capital, social networks, and capital, and so on, which shape their paths as well as the barriers on their way. Though platforms promise "low-barrier" entry, they can also revoke this entry at any time by pushing gig workers out of work for a variety of reasons. Re-entry into platforms is always a possibility for workers who were forced to exit, but it is a fraught one that often keeps workers stuck in an endless loop of risk-taking, sunk costs, and repeated investments without return - no way out of the maze. Bureaucratic barriers, algorithmic glitches, shifting organizational criteria, and AI-mediated layoff decisions complicate the process of access and make it difficult for gig workers to access work in a way that feels secure.

Women's passionate, repeated attempts to maintain employment in the face of such a punishing process reflect their tremendous desire for stable paid work outside the home, and I echo Deshpande & Kabeer's (2019) finding that there is a massive unmet demand for work among

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women. Their process of accessing work also reflects how "women's daily lives are episodic and escape linearity, balancing productive and care work" (Smith 1987 in Komarraju et al 2022). This makes it very difficult for women to fit into the patriarchal, androcentric expectations of the platform organization in the face of their inflexible domestic work obligations (Komarraju et al 2022). In the absence of structural support to help them balance these contradictory demands, women find themselves constantly bargaining with various institutions (the family, the platform, the community) in order to maintain their precarious and slippery access to work.

I will conclude by highlighting key factors which shape women gig workers' entry and exit into the labor market.

Marriage, Childbearing, and Gendered Family Norms

Nearly all women in India experience marriage and childbirth over the course of their lives. These two life course events decisively interrupt employment. For married women, the process of accessing employment is more challenging because of their subordinate role within the family structure. Rumors, suspicions, moral panic, shame, and honor - these are still active deterrents for women's physical mobility and attempts to secure work. After marriage, maintaining the reputation of two families as well taking care of everyone, becomes the role of the woman. Married women therefore face very high barriers to accessing work due to the severe restrictions on their mobility, what has been called the 'marriage effect' within the female labor force (Sudarshan and Bhattacharya 2009). As Deshpande & Kabeer (2019) note, this diverges from the 'motherhood penalty' found in the Global North: for Indian women, marriage is a larger disruptor of work than childcare responsibilities. Caste and class factors compound the marriage effect: poorer and lower caste women are more likely to be working outside the home compared

to upwardly mobile women. As women become more upwardly mobile, they tend to drop out of work due to caste patriarchal familial expectations and constraints. Or in Deshpande's (2007) words, "since constraints on women's public visibility rise with a rise in the caste status, working for wages is seen as a mark of low status and thus that one is doing so is often denied".

Though women gig workers struggled to arrange childcare, they were usually able to draw on their mothers, mothers-in-law, or other female relatives to manage their children while they were at work; sometimes, their husbands would take on this work. However, they could not delegate tasks like cooking, cleaning, and other domestic chores, which remained inflexible. Successfully accessing work therefore hinges on women managing all the other aspects of domestic and care work and eking out time against the odds - here, the family structure works against them. They have to be constantly bargaining with and negotiating the demands of husbands, parents, in-laws, and children, to be able to work. Given that men do not yet take on equal levels of housework in India, women end up defaulting to leaving their jobs if they are forced to choose between the home and their employment. The role of inflexible domestic work is also reported by Deshpande & Kabeer (2019) in their economic analysis of the factors causing women's low workforce participation rates; Deshpande (2020) further notes how both men's and women's time spent on domestic chores increased during the pandemic lockdown, and the gender gap between them reduced for this period.

Financial Investments and Repeated Risk-Taking

Accessing work in beauty platforms involves taking repeated risks, and investing resources into jobs that may never materialize. Each platform requires payments and subscriptions without guaranteeing quality leads or jobs. The landscape is dynamic and fast-moving, with platforms

appearing and disappearing. It is hard to keep this up without having a minimum level of resources to invest. This means that lack of financial resources is a significant barrier to women's access to work, given that access to work at beauty platforms requires paying a high amount of entry fees up front. Women gig workers become habituated to repeated risk-taking and financial investments, standing in contrast to white-collar women who exhibit financially highly risk-averse behavior (Kappal & Rastogi 2020). We see that despite these repeated high-risk investments (Rao & Djohari 2023), women beauticians still struggle to access work.

Weak Ties and Social Capital

Word-of-mouth information, a large network of weak ties, and greater social capital strongly aid women in gaining access to work. Most of the gig workers I spoke to thoroughly and extensively drew upon their social capital and informal networks, mediated through online WhatsApp groups, in order to find out about new work opportunities, assess risk, evaluate the likelihood of frauds and scams, and decide which jobs to invest entry fees into (Deshpande & Khanna 2021; Granovetter 1973; Davidson & Sanyal 2017; Bourdieu 1987). While many gig workers I spoke to had signed up on various online databases, apps and platforms which played the role of employment aggregators, bringing them leads, connections, and job offers; yet it was only the word-of-mouth information and leads that women trusted. These groups and relationships also formed a space for women to develop friendships, have fun, and escape boredom (Islam 2020).

Algorithmic uncertainties and digital barriers

Finally, the algorithmization of work further complicates the process of access. App glitches, bureaucratic barriers, and gender-neutral interfaces can prolong women's entries and re-entries into the workplace (Ma et al 2022; Broussard 2023), while high-level AI-mediated decisions can

create sudden exit points for women gig workers, leaving them without work (Jarrahi et al 2021; Kemper & Kolkman 2018). The structure of large platform companies, small local platforms, and freelance subscription apps, all place shifting and untenable algorithmized expectations upon women workers, which are nearly impossible to keep up with - failure to meet these expectations can also lead to a forced exit. Since women gig workers are placed at the lowest tier of the platform organization, they have no real ways to seek redressal or explanation in the case of adverse consequences.

Repeated Exit and Entry: a normative mode of work for women

There is a great desire among women to work. But neither the home nor the platform organization is set up to help facilitate their continuous employment. Women have to constantly create their own employment by finding customers, up-skilling, and juggling various platforms even after they access work, because their entry is frequently followed by an (involuntary) exit (Bhallamudi & Malik 2023). This means that women platform workers are often stuck in the *algorithmic maze* of access, between repeated entries and re-entries, which become their normative mode of working. In this maze, the point of entry matters - some entry points facilitate easier journeys while others lead to more difficult journeys. The paths chosen inside matter - some paths leave you locked out of the maze searching for a new entry point; some paths throw up predictable barriers that you can navigate; while others throw up unpredictable barriers with no clear solutions. Those armed with the right tools (such as financial capital, large social networks, social capital) can easily move past some barriers while others get stuck without being able to successfully gain access. Most importantly, the maze never really seems to end.

Women have to actively bargain and negotiate with various institutions in order to maintain their access to platform work, while algorithmically-mediated recruitment systems create weighted barriers that are designed to keep workers on their toes even after they access work. This quality of precarity at the point of access itself, I argue, is a key feature of platform work today. By precaritizing the process of access itself, platforms are therefore intensifying the feminization of work. In the absence of structural security or assistance, women find themselves expending huge amounts of cognitive labor in adjudicating between work options and keeping multiple options open at all times just to stay employed. In order to retain women in the workforce, there is a need to provide stable jobs, to address the precarities imposed by platform work, as well as apply structural solutions to ease the burden of inflexible domestic responsibilities (Deshpande & Singh 2021).

This is a particularly notable finding as AI-mediated platforms are held up as a model for worthy, easy, and low-barrier access to work, and women gig workers are attracted to this work due to platforms' promises of flexibility, convenience, fairness, safety, and ease of access. This portrayal of platform works lulls women into a false sense of safety and a trust that the platform will not renege on these promises. However, as I show in this chapter, these promises do not quite hold up. Therefore, the maze-like quality of access to platform work is not just troubling because access is *difficult* to navigate, but because women workers are lured into the maze through *inaccurate promises* of easy, one-time access, leaving them unprepared for the conditions of precarity waiting within.

Chapter 6: How Women Experience Beauty Platform Work

"When we said that housework is actually work for capital, that although it is unpaid work it contributes to the accumulation of capital, we established something extremely important about the nature of capitalism as a system of production. We established that capitalism is built on an immense amount of unpaid labor, that it is not built exclusively or primarily on contractual relations; that the wage relation hides the unpaid, slave-like nature of so much of the work upon which capital accumulation is premised". (Silvia Federici, Lecture at the Bluestockings Radical Bookstore in New York, 2006).

Abstract

The previous chapter showed how women access platform beauty work, framing the process of access as navigating an algorithmic maze. This chapter delves into women gig workers' experiences of work in beauty platforms. Part 1 investigates how platforms engage in social reproduction, by maintaining the gender, class, caste, and religious social dynamics that underlie beauty work. Part 2 of the chapter identifies the aspects of beauty work that have been transformed by algorithmic platforms, focusing on how platforms gamify risk, feminize work, incentivize competition, alienate workers, and erode community ties. Finally, Part 3 offers a gendered analysis of the idea of 'disruption'. I conclude by situating social reproduction as a central theoretical concept for understanding the present and future implications of platform work.

Introduction

One morning in December 2022, Sheetal called me at 10:30 am, our usual time for a daily phone call. She and her friends Saba and Afreen had been out of work for some time, and were

planning to meet in the afternoon to talk about purchasing a platform app subscription together. She invited me to come along. We met at the newly renamed Ram Mandir train station and then walked to a park nearby. As we started chatting, Sheetal told us she was dealing with a strange customer, a woman who wanted to book a massage, and needed our help talking to her. The customer, who called herself Anita, was insisting on a full body massage, and Sheetal was getting a bad gut feeling. They had been talking on WhatsApp for a few days, and Sheetal showed us the messages, in which the customer kept asking very personal and suggestive questions, while insisting on a full body massage including "chest" and "bikini" areas. She had also sent a couple of photos of herself, and picked up Sheetal's phone call briefly, so we were reasonably certain she was not a man catfishing. As the messages progressed, we all felt this woman was asking for sex, and Sheetal was in such a precarious financial situation that she couldn't afford to travel there for a false job, but at the same time couldn't risk missing out on a real one. In the park, we all pitched in to help, collectively messaging the customer with questions to assess the situation. The customer's evasions put us all on high alert. If this had been a man, it would have been a no-brainer to avoid the job. As it was a woman, we all felt confused about how to proceed. We found ourselves joking and laughing about the situation, making fun, and lightening the mood.

As we kept texting Anita, the customer, back and forth on Sheetal's phone, Sheetal, Saba, and Afreen started trading stories about facing sexual harassment from women customers. Saba, who was trying to open a side business in wholesale fabric materials, had a policy of not interacting with men online on her business account, but said that she added a lot of women to try to pitch her products and advertise the business. However, it backfired unexpectedly - she showed us the

"sleazy" DMs (direct messages) she gets from girls on social media, on her business account. She said, "They all ask for video calls and they're perverts!". I asked, "But how do you know they are not men pretending to be women?". Saba replied, "Because they often send voice notes also. It's the same on Instagram, so I had to block a lot of people. *Isse acchha toh ladkon ko add karti* [I may as well have added men only]*". She continued, "I used to think that we have to be careful of the men who pretend to be women customers, but the women customers can also be really horrible themselves. Sometimes, they are worse." Afreen shuddered and said, "This is the reason I never offer massage services or bikini waxing services. I don't want to put myself in these situations". Sheetal disgustedly described a customer who stripped completely before getting a wax, and described how violated and uncomfortable she felt because of it, exacerbated by the customer's husband walking around. When Sheetal requested that she cover up, the woman shouted at her for trying to police her in her own home; but because she (Sheetal) was in their home and had already plugged in her equipment, she was not able to leave as quickly as she wished[25]. Through the conversation, Sheetal, Saba, and Afreen registered surprise at facing sexual harassment from women customers and slowly realized that this might be a more widespread issue than they had thought. Recounting stories they had heard from other gig worker friends, including situations where their close friends had faced graphic sexual violence from women customers in their homes, they put together and identified this issue as a new one. In all these stories, the perpetrators were cosmopolitan, upwardly mobile women who seemed to have a noticeably different idea of sexual norms and culture compared to the gig workers.

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[25] I have chosen not to describe the more graphic and violent instances that gig workers have shared with me, of the sexual harassment and outright physical violence they have faced on occasion from women customers.

This conversation surprised me, because I, just like my interlocutors, was used to thinking about sexual risk and violence only in relation to men. During this project, all the women gig workers I spoke to, without a single exception, said they flatly refused service to men as part of their comprehensive strategies for managing safety at work. In contrast, this afternoon, the four of us had spoken about a new kind of risk for the first time - the threat of sexual violence from cosmopolitan women customers. This made me wonder 1) how the emergence of platform work is intersecting with a novel cosmopolitan female consumer market to shape new relations of risk and safety between gig workers, customers, and platform apps. The pre-platform informal beauty work market represents a very rare phenomenon - an economic market completely dominated by women on both the demand and supply end, each setting the terms of the market. We don't know much about the nature of such markets, nor is there much writing on this topic. 2) What happens when male-dominated platform companies "disrupt" such markets, and apply algorithmic logics to "formalize" such a market and "streamline" it? How does this change the experience of work and the structural logics of work? I investigate these questions by discussing women gig workers' experiences under two types of platform-mediated beauty work: the large beauty platform (BeautiCare), and a subscription-based online freelancing platform (Sampark).

Part 1: How Platforms Affect the Relationship Between the Gig Worker and Customer: the "Stickiness" of Caste, Class, Gender and Religious Norms

"My day starts at 5 and ends at 11": Balancing home and platform work

Divya is a gig worker at BeautiCare, a large beauty platform in Mumbai. She wakes up at 5 am, gets ready quickly, and starts cooking for her family - 2 kids, husband, and her parents-in-law. Aside from breakfast, she packs *tiffin dabbas* (lunch boxes) for her kids and husband, who leaves at 7 am for work. She gets her kids ready for school and kindergarten and drops them off between 7 am and 930 am, returning to finish up chores at home. Then, she splits the work of making lunch with her mother-in-law, who helps her with household chores and childcare but also picks up fights with her just as often, which have to be managed. By 10:30 am, her work day is clear thanks to her efficiency. She opens the BeautiCare app on her phone and starts checking for the leads she has been assigned for the day. She has marked herself as available for work from 12-7 pm; the platform expects gig workers to mark at least 6-8 hours of availability per day, including buffer time for travel, or at least 220 hours per month. Today, Divya is assigned one job at 1 pm, for waxing and eyebrow threading, and another one at 5 pm, for waxing and a facial, both in different locations in the city. The app gives her very limited control over what jobs she gets and where she gets them - this is decided by platform algorithms and their demand-supply matching process. Each gig worker is assigned to a "hub" in the city depending on where they live, and should not be getting jobs that are farther than 8-10 km away (except in rare cases if they have worked very little or if no jobs are available). But in practice, depending on customer demand patterns, they often get jobs much farther than their hub. According to platform

managers, the cost and time of travel is factored into how gig workers' wages are calculated. In addition, the app requires gig workers to have their location tracking on at all times. Depending on the day, Divya completes between 1 and 5 jobs, returning home at around 7 or 8 pm. She immediately sets to work making dinner for her family, making sure the kids have finished homework, washing up the dishes, and cleaning the house.

This account of Divya's day, which reflects the daily distribution of time for the majority of married women gig workers, shows how women gig workers have to manage multiple, competing social reproduction roles on a daily basis (Kwan 2022). They face a fundamental contradiction between their invisible, unpaid role as socially reproductive caregivers, who ensure that their husbands and children are nurtured and maintained into productive members of society; and their role as workers who participate in the economy to generate capital.

"Only Residents Allowed in this Lift": Traveling to the Workplace

Before Divya leaves for her first job of the day at 12 pm, she calls up the customer to confirm the booking and the address (as the impersonal app cannot be trusted to convey last-minute changes, and the address on the app sometimes turns out to be inaccurate) (Komarraju 2020; Anwar et al 2021). Often, customers never pick up the calls, but she is persistent. This customer picks up on the second call, confirms the address, but asks, "Can you actually come a bit earlier at 1230? I need to be out of the house at 3". These kinds of sudden informal requests are commonplace from customers, but can create hassle for gig workers depending on how tightly their work day has been wound by the platform algorithm. They intensify the complicated management of time, traffic, and transportation in Mumbai, what Raval & Pal (2019) have described as the time-agnostic booking process of platforms, which prioritizes the time convenience of customers

while leaving gig workers to manage impossible time restrictions alone. Divya lets the customer know politely but firmly that it will take her an hour to travel from her home, so she can't come any earlier. The customer grumbles and puts down the phone. Divya hefts her work kit, which easily weighs 10-15 kg, onto her shoulders, and sets out.

To get to this customer's apartment in West Andheri, she walks 15 minutes to the railway station nearest to her house, takes a local train on the Western line, gets off at Andheri station, squeezes into a share-auto from there (earning glares because of her big kit, which she balances on her lap), and then walks the last 15 minutes in search of the apartment. Sometimes, customers cancel the booking at the last minute, and the costs are borne solely by the gig workers. As Lalita, another gig worker had told me a few weeks before, "Many of the customers cancel us after we've reached their house. Customers should be made to pay our travel costs in such cases". However, gig workers say that the cancellation fee levied to the customer by the platform is not shared with them.

In a group discussion with 37 workers a few months earlier, Shamita, a gig worker, had remarked, "They [customers] don't understand how much time and effort we put in to get there, with the traffic, the heat, etc. A customer who is paying Rs. 300-400 (~$3.6-4.8) has the attitude of someone who is paying Rs. 1000 (~$12)" (the room erupted in supportive laughter). Gig workers who are lucky have *scooties* of their own, which they can clip the kits on to and drive through the city, saving them a lot of time and energy; for many gig workers, working at beauty platforms has allowed them to earn enough money to buy their own two-wheelers (Komarraju

2019)[26]. The beauty kit is so heavy that it is difficult to lug around the city through multiple types of transport, up railway station stairs, in horribly squeezed and cramped local trains, and through the hot roads. Aliya, another gig worker, had recently told me how she is sometimes barred from entering the local BEST buses (the lifelines of the city, apart from the local trains) during rush hour because of the size her kit takes up.

Accessing the customer's house can be tricky at the best of times. When I was sharing a platform subscription with Sheetal and Salma, they advised me to pick up monetizable skills by watching, learning, and doing, often saying, "*haath pair chalana seekh lo*" [learn to put your hands to use]. They were very generous with sharing time, advice and offering opportunities for me to come along as a kind of trainee gig worker. One day, when I was at the NGO, Sheetal called me at our usual time, 10:30 am, asking if I wanted to come with her for a client's home service in Dadar. I said yes, though I would be running late. I took a share-auto to Malad train station, then a local train to Dadar station, and Sheetal gave me verbal instructions on how to walk to the customer's building from there. I rushed around searching for the right building, taking a couple of wrong turns. Finally, running down a narrow lane framed by leafy green trees and old Maharashtrian restaurants, I found the right building, but couldn't figure whether to enter Wing A or Wing B. I couldn't call Sheetal as she had started the job. I approached the security guard outside Wing A and said I was with the beautician who just went up. As a young woman wearing monochromatic T-shirt and pants, hair in a neat bun, a bright lipstick, along with a backpack and mask, I mirrored the typical appearance and uniform of a beauty gig worker. The security seemed to assume that I was a gig worker and let me in. He was very kind to me, noting my rush, asking me

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[26] There is a reason the *scooty activa* is such an aspirational item among women across classes, coveted, saved up for, learnt and practiced with aunts and neighbors and friends.

to take a minute and drink water before I go to the customer's house and work there. I felt there was a sense of camaraderie between service workers which helped to buffer the alienation and strains caused by platform work. This is not always the case. Often, security guards act as troublesome gatekeepers. They note gig workers' uniforms and the telltale kits, which instantly mark them as service workers, and demand further proofs of identity before letting them inside (Kain 2022).

I entered the building and went into the lift. I was feeling nervous about being an "assistant" and scared of unwittingly causing any complications for Sheetal. Often, buildings such as these in Mumbai have separate elevators for "residents" and "service personnel", so that residents don't have to interact or share the space with "unclean" service workers (Bharati et al 2020; Kain 2022; Sheth in Lara 2009). This underscores how, even when socially reproductive work (such as beauty and care work) moves into the economic sphere, its designation as undesirable, invisible work sticks to it still. Gig workers can be subject to nasty glares and remarks if they step into the wrong lift by mistake. In addition, gig workers belonging to large platform companies, like Divya, are required to take a selfie in front of the house after reaching and upload it to the app, which is scanned to verify that they reached the location correctly.

"Converting pain into pleasure": Beauty, Body and Class

I waited outside the flat, on the stairs, and texted Sheetal that I had reached. The main door to the opposite flat opened and a middle-aged lady squinted suspiciously at me. I tried my best to look non-threatening as I sat on the stairs, and she closed the door on me. After some time, Sheetal quietly opened the door to the customer's flat and let me in with her finger on her lips. I tiptoed

inside to the bedroom, where a young woman, wearing only a waxing sheet around her, was on the bed.

The customer, who had been informed by Sheetal about me, paid absolutely no attention to me nor did she ask who I was or say anything. She was scrolling idly on her phone while Sheetal waxed her arms, legs, and underarms, sitting on a stool on the floor. I sat on the floor as well, next to the sheet on which Sheetal had neatly kept all her tools. I handed out waxing strips to her as she finished each one. For the first hour, we worked in silence. Sheetal used chocolate wax – the *dabba* of wax was placed into a heater, which was plugged in using an extension cord into the plug point on the wall. There was a small black plastic bowl on which she placed the discarded wax strips. Working systematically, she powdered each limb, then waxed the limb, then checked for leftover hairs and waxed corrections, then asked the client to check, then rubbed a soothing cream on the limb. Underarm. Upper arm. Forearm. Wrist. Foot. Front leg. Back leg. Front thigh. Back thigh.

The waxing was followed by a facial with five steps, where I assisted Sheetal by (inexpertly) wiping off each layer with a small microfiber cloth, then washing it in the bathroom while she applied the next layer on the customer's face. I initially closed the bathroom door with a small snap, and was chastened as Sheetal said, "You will need to be quiet as her baby is sleeping, we can't make any noise". Towards the end of the facial, I filled a steamer and set it up for Sheetal. Throughout this process, the client's sister came in several times, agitated, and rushing us to be faster as they had to go out for a family outing. Sheetal handled it with aplomb, keeping the environment calm and professional, while completing the work diligently. The client took a

break in the middle to soothe her baby back to sleep. She asked for extra services - eyebrow and

chin tweezing - where I assisted Sheetal again. The whole time, Sheetal kept reading the room,

aware the client was in a rush, and able to manage the pressure and get things moving quickly,

but also giving me multiple chances to assist her. She made the tiny microfiber cloth work for the

entire 2.5-hour session without throwing it away. Finally, the client paid Sheetal for the service.

Sheetal packed up her huge kit neatly and quickly, and placed the trash into a black plastic bag,

tied it up, and disposed of it.

This 'family management work' which requires a high level of emotional awareness and

aptitude, illustrates some of the varied forms of socially reproductive care work that women gig

workers have to be clued into and participate in within the space of a customer's home, to

succeed at being seen as 'professional'. This kind of socially reproductive work is hyper-

invisible within the ambit of home beauty work which already "struggles with the 'invisibility'

of labor" (Anwar 2021).

Sitting, observing, and participating in this process, I found myself reflecting on the moral norms

that underlie the experience of beauty work for both the customer and the beautician:

> "The customer seemed like she was in her early thirties. As Sheetal waxed every inch of hair off
> her limbs, she was absolutely expressionless and unreactive as she scrolled on Instagram. The
> sound of the wax strip being ripped off her skin again and again created its own painful music. I
> found myself thinking – this experience is a woman's way of pampering herself? This is how she
> likes to spend a free afternoon? I was thinking about the complex relationship between pain and
> pleasure. Where does waxing come into that? Women come to a point where they are immune to
> the pain, or where the pain of waxing seems like nothing to the other pains they have been
> through. We see the pain as a price we pay for beauty, or we see it as a necessary part of
> grooming that doesn't need to be analyzed, or we feel it is hygienic and cleansing. We feel more
> beautiful, groomed, and clean afterwards. But by ripping hair off our bodies? I was also struck by
> the spaces where exposing and nakedness is allowed for women. This was a space where this
> woman was exposing herself nonchalantly, to us - I felt in my bones that we didn't fully exist as

human to her, and it didn't register as nakedness, not really. The underarm, the thigh, the butt, the "bikini area" – usually areas of shame, now treated with a businesslike approach. Normalized as just another body part, but only in this space. In this liminal space between the customer and the client, both women are bound by the act of (painful and pleasurable) beauty work. Outside of this space, these body parts have a moral significance and rarely can they exist without being sexualized and attached with moral boundaries. However, here, she can just be. That is just a body and not more. But she can only get this because of the beautician who is toiling to provide this experience.

My experience as a 'trainee gig worker' underscored how beauty work is inherently coded by caste, class, and gender norms. The customer has to convert the objectively painful experience of beauty work into pleasure by recasting it as a fun and relaxing experience. This "fun and relaxation" for the middle-class customer comes at the expense of the working-class gig worker's toil, where she is sitting in one position for several hours, maintaining hypervigilance over her environment, and managing several emotional and cognitive tasks at once along with the physical work she is doing, though she is being compensated for her time and labor (Daminger 2019; Federici 2020; Hochschild 1791). Most of the beauty platform clientele are professional working women or homemakers, who themselves are also managing housework and paid work. Booking beauty services through the app saves them time and allows them to squeeze in self-care and grooming at a time and place that is convenient to them, what Raval & Pal (2019) call the temporality of class affordances. Thus, platforms monetize on the social reproduction needs of the visible socially reproductive workers in society - middle and upper class women - through women gig workers, who are marginally better paid here compared to salons. Overall, this serves to further devalue the essential work of social reproduction by maintaining it as an informal and low-paid activity.

Beauty work generates very particular kinds of risks for women workers, because it has to be carried out in the intimate space of someone else's home. Beauty gig workers are under immense pressure to present themselves as professional and entrepreneurial, a frame that they actively employ and perform to access respectability and dignity of work and to manage unreasonable expectations or demands (Anwar et al 2021; Raval & Pal 2019; Maitra & Maitra 2018; Malik 2022). Various researchers have shown how women beauty workers manage the demands of platformized aesthetic labor regimes by performing embodied consumer cosmopolitanism (what Islam (2022) calls 'body plasticity'), and prioritizing customer satisfaction (Anwar et al 2021; Maitra & Maitra 2018). Extending Raval & Pal's (2019) idea that "not all invisibility is inherently bad" and drawing on Ballakrishnen et al's (2019) theorization of "intentional invisibility", I argue that these remaking practices are a way for gig workers to access the proximate safety of 'castelessness' in customers' homes. Yet, failing at these forms of embodiment makes gig workers vulnerable to "shame, fear and failure to control and discipline the body according to the idealized norms" (Maitra & Maitra 2018). To avoid these failures, women gig workers continuously calibrate their instincts and behaviors carefully while maintaining hypervigilance in customers' homes. This adds a heavy emotional and cognitive workload to the tasks of platformized beauty work.

On the other end, cosmopolitan women customers have their own anxieties about lower-class workers entering their homes, which causes them to fall back on socially-coded (caste, class, gendered) norms to structure their interactions with and expectations of gig workers (Nair 2020; Kain 2022). Given that customer satisfaction is the main precondition for gig workers to

maintain employment, this pressures gig workers to avoid "looking or sounding like low-wage workers, struggling to make a living" (Maitra & Maitra 2018).

"Aap sanitize kar rahe ho kya?" (are you sanitizing yourself?): Body work and caste practices inside the home

The vast majority of gig workers I spoke to reported positive experiences with the vast majority of customers. In a group discussion with 37 gig workers, the consensus seemed to be that most clients are good, but many are disrespectful. There were some pervasive issues that nearly all gig workers had experienced. The first of these, was casteist and degrading behaviors from customers. In the group discussion, women collectively insisted and asked me, "please write about toilets". Gig workers narrated how some customers make them work from the bathroom or balcony, not allowing them into any other rooms, and noted that BeautiCare actually teaches them how to work from bathrooms as part of the training. In addition, it is quite difficult for gig workers to use the toilet when out at work. One gig worker said, "I use the bathroom only at home. If it is absolutely urgent I request the customer - but they are very weird about it. Once I asked, and she let me use the washroom, but then wrote in my feedback that I am unhygienic." Another gig worker erupted, "We also have Western toilets at home, what do they think, we don't know how to use the toilet? Their servant toilets are so filthy. They don't let us use their own toilets." Months later, in a private conversation, Sheetal told me, "I don't use the bathroom on the job, I wait to come home. You can tell whether a customer is nice or terrible by the way they first talk to you. If they are smiling and polite, I feel comfortable. If they are angry or rude or silent or condescending, I wouldn't even think of asking for a glass of water there. And so many customers don't even think of offering that glass of water, even seeing how we travel for hours in the heat to come to their homes."

Hesitations around sharing water or toilets, confining workers to bathrooms and balconies, these are classically casteist behaviors rooted in norms around untouchability and purity. These instances tell us about the flexible, mutable nature of caste and its intrinsic connection with occupation, because dominant-caste gig workers too experience these caste norms as a result of their occupational role. Anwar et al (2022) describe how platforms' hygiene requirements, intersecting with the caste and class norms followed by customers, adversely affected women gig workers during the Covid-19 pandemic. This marks a gendered imposition of caste norms by women customers on women gig workers. In addition, many Muslim gig workers I spoke to hesitatingly revealed how customers sometimes physically turn away from them or cancel the booking when they find out they are Muslim. Saba, who lives in an area that is home to a large number of Muslims, told me that she has to say she is from another locality, otherwise it is hard for her to get jobs. Muslim gig workers too, face the same casteist degradations from customers. This speaks to the ability of platform work to extend caste-based logics to new groups of workers.

During the pandemic, these casteist behaviors were masked under "hygiene" requirements. In the group discussion, one gig worker remembered how customers would keep asking her to sanitize herself. Another gig worker talked about how a customer snapped at her when she smoothed down her hair, saying "why are you touching your hair, you're dirty again". Gig workers shared how they would be asked to sanitize their bags, products, and selves, to the extent of being asked to spray themselves repeatedly. "Aap sanitize kar rahe ho kya [are you sanitizing anything?]?" a gig worker asked. "We are also coming to your house, we can also get Covid from you". She

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narrated an incident where a customer was extremely rude and punitive to her about not being sanitized enough, and when she went in, "It was the filthiest house I have ever seen. There was a cat and you could smell cat shit everywhere. I started waxing the lady, but she was very rude and demanded a free service saying that I had done a horrible job, and that she didn't want to give me a rating. I called the gig worker helpline and said this customer doesn't like my service, so I am going to leave. The platform helpline apologized to me but took no action against the customer". Drawing herself upright with dignity, she said: "They are calling us home and the work involves them being touched, but they treat us like untouchables and ask us to not touch anything and scold us. Why call us to your home during the pandemic if you don't want us to touch anything?"

One of the ways in which caste patriarchy perpetuates itself, is through its ability to adapt and transform continuously to fit within new, emerging social structures and forms of labor (Amrute 2016; Deshpande 2023; Mosse 2015; Malik 2022; Subramanian 2015). In the context of gig work, this can be seen in the way platforms ascribe the managerial class of platform workers with dominant caste markers, and the gig workforce with lowered caste markers. These two identities are marked differently: "upper caste identity is such that it can be completely overwritten by modern professional identities of choice, whereas lower caste identity is so indelibly engraved that it overwrites all other identities" (Deshpande 2013). This ascription is adopted instinctively and reinforced by the customer base. This explains, for instance, why gig workers who are proud dominant caste Hindus also report being treated as untouchable by their customers, despite belonging to similar caste groups as them. From this, we can see that the

platform organization, while appearing to bring in new social mobilities in urban India, in fact facilitates and continues the same caste patriarchy-based social structures but in new ways[27] .

At the same time, gig workers noted that the majority of customers were kind to them. They fondly remembered customers who went out of their way to make them feel comfortable, who insisted that they share the special dishes cooked in the house that day, and were considerate about them being out in the heat for so long without respite. In informal conversations, I was frequently told stories about customers who prepared tea and food for gig workers if they knew they were coming; those who tipped extra; those who made the gig workers laugh and forget about their stresses; those who wouldn't let gig workers "feel anything bad"; those who insisted they hydrate with lemon juice or cold water on hot days; and those who forgave minor mistakes and insisted on paying the full amount instead of lodging complaints on the app. These are basic kindnesses, but they stood out in a structural and social environment that is quick to penalize gig workers but very slow to offer relief or reward. The number of these instances illustrate that spaces for solidarity are often co-created between women customers and gig workers, and they offer temporary respite to gig workers from the relentless social and economic pressures posed by platform work.

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[27] Komarraju writes about how platforms cause historical injury by bringing back echoes of caste-based occupation: "With platformization, work that is supposed to take place in shops or saloons is being relocated to customers' homes once again, bringing back memories of caste-based oppression. This kind of historical injury is difficult to recover from, even though the workers say that urban India is changing and customers don't discriminate based on caste, the leaders of the Nai association I spoke with feel platformization of the kind that lets customers avail these services at home drags them back by centuries. This caste community does not take kindly to their work being mediated by either platforms or salon owners who are not Nais themselves but hire workers from the Nai community. They claim first right to this work and question why they are being forced to become 'workers' from entrepreneurs running their shops. There is also no love lost between this community and migrants, who they argue, work for less money, contributing to an overall dip in workers' earnings" (Komarraju 2022).

"I don't go inside if no ladies are present": how platforms shape women's risk management practices

I asked a manager, Ankit, how BeautiCare approaches risk and safety for gig workers, and what the key safety problems are. He told me that the main safety issues that come up at the platform are: 1) customers physically abusing gig workers, 2) men sexually harassing gig workers by posing as women customers, and 3) gig workers stealing money or other items from customers' homes. I asked if they have had cases of women customers sexually harassing women gig workers and he said, not really. He told me that, from the platform's side, a lot of thought is put into the processes meant to safeguard gig workers. This platform provides POSH (prevention of sexual harassment) training (mandated by law) to all gig workers, covering what they are to do in emergency situations in customers' homes. There is a trust and safety team and a risk management team solely for the purpose of protecting gig workers. The app has an SOS button that gig workers can press if they feel unsafe. Ankit explained, "They will get a call within 2 minutes of pressing the SOS button, and know the protocol is to get out of the house in such circumstances. Then there is an investigation by the trust & safety and risk management teams". If a customer is established to have violated or harmed a gig worker, they are blocked by the company. If 3 or more gig workers have flagged a customer, or complained about them, such as saying that it's a man posing as a woman, the customer is blocked. And if a customer has a very low rating, the platform might take action against them. Since the platform continuously tracks the gig workers' locations and has a record of customers' addresses, as well as other relevant metrics, they are able to intervene if needed.

However, in practice, nearly all gig workers had experienced unsafe situations at work at least once, and not a single gig worker I spoke to expressed satisfaction with the platform's grievance redressal mechanisms. Across the board, gig workers said that action is never taken against the customers, but that *they* pay for these instances instead, through penalties and low ratings. In cases of conflict between gig workers and customers, they said, the platform always sides with the customer because they can't afford to lose their hard-won customer market. As a result, gig workers had their own ways to assess risk and ensure safety. Numerous gig workers told me, "I don't go inside if there are no ladies present", and "I say no to men's services, why take the risk". They also always share stories with each other about any unsafe customers or instances, call up the platform helpline to report these instances, and encourage and fortify each other to get past the "freeze" response and to speak up loudly in such instances, as one's personal safety is of utmost importance. Through these tactics of collective solidarity, gig workers create safety buffers to protect them in a structural environment that is designed to prioritize customers' safety more than theirs.

Often, gender, caste, class, and religion intersect to create specific forms of violence between women gig workers and women customers, mediated by the platform; but also between gig workers themselves. One of the gig workers I interviewed, Zeenat, told me about a serious issue between her and a customer (I am not sharing details of the incident to protect privacy), which ended with the platform taking strong disciplinary action against her. She said that she was punished for something she didn't do, and was extremely shaken by the experience. Months later, when I was speaking to Sharmila, another gig worker, she narrated the same incident, but in a very different way. She dramatically detailed how the incident was entirely Zeenat's fault

and how she escaped the scene before being caught by the platform, saying, "she anyway used to drape her face so nobody knew what she looked like in the building, not the neighbors, not the security guards, only the customer knew", alluding disapprovingly to Zeenat's hijab. Sharmila's account of the incident relied on negative stereotypes of Muslims and she used them to justify Zeenat's punishment. In addition, she told me about how one of her friends, Kriti, had been assigned to the same customer right after this incident. "Kriti had a very bad experience because of Zeenat as the customer would follow her everywhere like a shadow in the house, and insisted on accompanying her to the bathroom", she said protectively. This account shows how religious divisions challenge solidarities between gig workers, and underscores that gig workers are not a monolithic group. In addition, it highlights how Muslim gig workers face a double burden at work due to their status as women gig workers as well as their status as Muslims, and not just from customers but also from their peers.

Overall, while large beauty platforms have specific processes in place to tackle violence and harassment faced by gig workers, it seems that these processes may be skewed towards protecting customers and the company rather than the gig workers, especially as the platform very rarely takes any action against violent customers or sexual harassers but is quick to penalize gig workers for infractions. In addition, app-mediated interventions are of limited utility in an emergency situation, as the onus remains on the gig workers to extricate themselves and leave the house somehow, exacerbated by the reluctance of the platform to trouble the customer. Compared to freelance apps, where the onus of the work experience is entirely on the gig worker, large beauty platforms claim to provide a better environment than informal and freelance work - but do they? It would be useful for platforms to include gig worker representatives in the teams

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that design and implement safety solutions, so that the interventions can benefit from the practical experience of gig workers who have faced these situations numerous times. Finally, beauty platforms are yet to recognize new forms of gendered violence, such as the sexual harassment faced by gig workers at the hands of women customers, which remain illegible at every level. Komarraju (2023) writes about how women gig workers in Hyderabad use "whisper networks" to collectivize, resist, and exercise agency in their dealings with middle-class female customers, complicating traditional ideas of feminist whisper networks. I find women gig workers using much the same tactics in Mumbai.

"Is my labor worth nothing?": Symbolic capital and bargaining with customers on platform apps

Large beauty platforms like BeautiCare set fixed rates for beauty services, leaving little space for customers to price-bargain with gig workers. However, as I show later in this chapter, customers use the algorithmic structure of gig work to their advantage to make other kinds of bargains with gig workers. In contrast, *app-based platform subscriptions* like Sampark are structured in such a way that competition and bargaining are a crucial part of securing work. Here, gig workers get to set the prices for their services themselves, and advertise their work on the app. They receive a predetermined number of leads from the app, which they must convert into bookings by calling each customer and convincing them to choose them, rather than another beautician on the app. This is very similar to the way informal, freelance beauty workers searched for work prior to platforms. When I shared a platform app subscription on Sampark with Sheetal and Salma, we took turns managing the app and reaching out to customers. Together, we came up with a "rate card" that we converted into an attractive poster and uploaded on the app.

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While Sheetal and Salma spoke only in Hindi and Marathi while reaching out to potential customers, I found that customers were much more likely to stay on the line and ask about our services when I spoke in English. I experimented with language and tone when it was my turn on the app, variously speaking with customers in Hindi, 'regular' English, and then a 'polished, professionalized' English for which I had prepared a script, starting with a formal "Hello ma'am, good afternoon". When I spoke in English, and especially when I adopted a professional tone, customers often assumed that I was the 'business owner' managing multiple beauticians 'under' me. This was especially the case with customers who 'sounded cosmopolitan' themselves. I had zero beauty work experience, but was given importance just because of my tone and language. In all, I spoke to around 20 customers. My experience illustrated the symbolic forms of class and caste capital that provide an invisible leg up when trying to book jobs and make money (Mosse 2020) on algorithmized platform apps.

Initially, it was Salma's turn to manage the app. She reached out to a 'lead' who did not pick up her calls. Eventually, the customer picked up, and said she was looking for a wedding package as she was getting married. Salma offered her beauty services for the wedding day for Rs. 7,000 (~$84). The customer wanted to stretch this money to cover beauty services for 2 days plus a free trial, and the bargaining process began. For makeup and hair for one "sider" (the sisters, mothers, other women around the bride), Salma said it would cost Rs. 1500 (~$18), and the customer bargained this down to Rs. 1300 (~$15.5). After three days of continuous bargaining, once Salma agreed to the customer's demands, she changed her mind and said she didn't want the service.

This was a very typical experience on the beauty subscription platform. We would often spend days speaking to a customer and bargaining with them, only for the customers to change their minds at the last second. Given the vast number of beauticians on the app, it was a customer's market where it was extremely difficult to lock down a lead, and beauticians were often forced to agree to unviable pricing. Customers frequently expected to be charged only the approximate cost of the materials, meaning that they were not ready to pay for labor costs, transport, or beauticians' time. In such a market, gig workers had to be creative with their skills and marketing, going above and beyond to secure the bookings they had paid the app for.

One afternoon in March, Sheetal, her friend Maya, and I were waiting for a bus after chasing down a customer who had refused to pay the full amount for a wedding booking. Sheetal pointed to a complex of buildings behind us and started talking about a regular customer of hers who lives there. Sheetal said:

> "One day, she asked me for a VLCC gold facial, and I said it would cost Rs 850 (~$10). She bargained and asked me to make it Rs. 750 (~$9), saying, "I call you all the time, reduce it for me". I said ok. But when I went to her house, she saw the VLCC gold facial box I took out, which was marked at MRP (maximum retail price) Rs. 350 (~$4.2). And she said, "why are you charging so much?" I asked her, is my hard work and labor worth nothing? The customer wanted it at an even lower cost, and I said that's not possible. She never called me again and I didn't message her again. This lady is a teacher, her husband is a doctor, her son is a high-earning engineer, and her daughter is studying to be a doctor. Look at how huge their house is. And yet she was skimping on a facial". Maya shook her head, saying, "These types of people are the cheapest ones". Sheetal looked back at the building. "If they had booked me through BeautiCare, they would have paid that amount in an instant without batting an eyelid".

Sheetal's story strikes at a key point – middle-class and upwardly mobile women consumers typically bargain the most with informal service providers who have no visible symbolic capital or clout and offer extremely low pricing, while paying formal service providers full price without asking the same questions, assuming that formal services can be trusted more.

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At the same time, many women customers were supportive of gig workers and went out of their way to help them get more jobs, tip them, and encourage them. Customers who liked the service would often book the same person and refer them to others in their networks as well. Sometimes, customers would also inform gig workers about new beauty platforms they had heard of which seemed to be offering better rates and more autonomy than the large and well-known platforms operating in the city. For instance, one of the customers we booked through the subscription platform liked Sheetal's work so much that they began chatting and she offered to help her get a job at a new beauty platform. Once again, we see that these brief moments of connection between customers and gig workers served as the buffers that aided gig workers in navigating the uncertainties of platform work, even as it could not make any big dents in the structural inequalities posed by platforms.

Finally, working in large platforms like BeautiCare also offered new kinds of social and symbolic capital to gig workers which they made full use of. Since the work involves "English and smartphones" (markers of upward mobility and cultural capital), pays well, and since gig workers appear to be working for themselves through the app with no obvious "boss" to answer to, their families come to treat this work with respect (Komarraju 2022). Komarraju (2022) argues that this allows women gig workers to resist and reshape the "servant catering to a mistress" view of beauty work, with them and their families newly associating this work with respect, independence, and dignity. Women gig workers strategically employ this frame to craft new gendered subjectivities and expand the ambit of their physical and social mobilities. For instance, they invest their newly-earned money into buying new clothes, purchasing two-wheeler

vehicles, and getting up-to-date smartphones, purchases that are ostensibly in the service of their work, but which significantly stretch the gendered restrictions that constrict their time, pleasure, and leisure. They also use the frame of work demands to travel across the city, hang out with their peers, enjoy eating out, and explore different parts of the city (Islam 2023; Kamran 2022). In this way, women gig workers are able to use platform work to refashion gendered restrictions at home.

Summary

Beauty platforms operate in the service sector, which seeks to commodify socially reproductive work, and cater to middle-class and upper-class women who are themselves outsourcing the socially reproductive care work they need, to gig workers through the app. Beauty work is inherently body work, regulated by caste norms around cleanliness, hygiene, touch, and purity, but also involves several forms of cognitive and relational labor. It is "oiled" by workers' symbolic capital, which greases and smoothens their access to platform work as well as their experience of it. As Raval & Pal (2019) note, beauty platforms use vulnerable gig workers to offer convenience, comfort, and hygiene (the hallmarks of professionalism) to upwardly mobile Indian customers, while "holding the asymmetry of power in balance".

While platforms might shape the mechanisms through which gig workers and customers find and connect to each other, they do not fundamentally alter or interfere with the sociocultural and moral norms that structure and underlie the physical experience of gig work; in fact, as I have shown, they socially reproduce these norms, and even extend them. It is a two-way relationship, as these underlying social hierarchies in turn help the platform to control and discipline the gig workforce (Nair 2022). On their part, women gig workers use the visibility of platform work and

the respect associated with it, to negotiate and expand their identities, sense of agency, and the

bounds of familial restrictions (Anwar et al 2022). These negotiations, along with their

interactions with well-meaning customers, provide temporary buffers to gig workers as they

navigate the unrelenting structural pressures and uncertainties posed by the new world of

platform work.

Finally, the findings also speak to longstanding debates over whether entry into entrepreneurial

and private capital provide faster routes to eliminating caste inequalities in India than state-led

affirmative action interventions (Prasad 2008). Platform work is one of the new, low-barrier,

privatized forms of work that offer such opportunities, and my findings suggest that it does not

seem to fulfill the promise of eliminating caste-based inequalities.

Part 2: How Platforms Transform Work: Algorithmic Management and the Restructuring of the Work Experience

In the second half of this chapter, I turn to discussing the aspects of beauty work that have been

transformed by digital platforms.

"Free services in exchange for 5-star ratings": algorithmic metrics, surveillance, and the ratings system

Platform companies use a host of algorithmic metrics to surveil, control, and manage gig workers

(Anwar et al 2021; Rosenblat et al 2014; Jarrahi et al 2021; Kellogg et al 2020). During

fieldwork, I observed that women gig workers were constantly subjected to surveillance through

various means – uploading selfies at customers' homes, agreeing to constant location tracking,

scanning QR codes on their kit to prove they are using company-approved materials, being rated

for every job, and so on. Gig workers typically do not have any way to opt out from any of these

forms of surveillance if they want to stay employed. Although platforms promise autonomy and

control to workers, it uses these compulsory algorithmic metrics to nudge workers towards

specific behavioral patterns through the app, in the service of the company's ultimate goals of

market capture and profit maximization. Gig workers failing to comply with these nudges are

penalized in various ways.

The best example of such a metric and by far the most influential one is customer ratings (Anwar

et al 2021; Kellogg et al 2020). When I started my fieldwork, BeautiCare required gig workers to

maintain an average customer rating of 4.5 out of 5, calculated as the average of the last 100

ratings received by a gig worker. If the rating slipped below 4.5, they would be given 3 chances

to retrain with the company and 20 jobs to pull up the rating, failing which they would be

permanently blocked from work. How do platform companies come up with these metrics? In

the case of ratings, the platform has found that the average customer rating is highly correlated

with the Net Promoter Score (NPS), which is a measure of how likely a customer is to continue

using the platform's services. The NPS is considered a reliable predictor of customer retention,

so in order to maintain their customer base, the platform sets the minimum average customer

rating in relation to the Net Promoter Score. This average customer rating cutoff places great

pressure on gig workers, as they can be laid off if they slip below this cutoff. This also means

they can be at the mercy of customers who realize that the gig worker's job depends on the

customer's ratings. And in fact, gig workers frequently reported that women customers often use

ratings to blackmail them for free services or to get away with bad behavior, and there are few

effective redressal mechanisms they can use in such situations. One gig worker, Mrinal, told me about a customer who wouldn't confirm her booking even after being called 3 times:

> "Mrinal had to travel a very long way to go to the customer's house, but did so without confirmation. She called her 10-12 times without a response. The customer didn't seem to be in, so Mrinal waited outside the customer's building and asked the security guard to tell her if she came back. The lady eventually returned home, saw Mrinal waiting at the gate in her uniform, and went up to her house, without saying anything. Mrinal went up shortly after. The customer yelled at her saying she didn't want the service and lied that she didn't get Mrinal's calls. Her husband came out and asked her why she lied and why she can't just cancel the service, and she yelled at him for taking Mrinal's side. Mrinal said, "she started talking to him in English thinking I can't understand her". Eventually, Mrinal requested the customer to cancel the appointment so she could leave, but she refused. Finally, she said "fine, come inside and do it then". After the service was completed, the customer said she had a problem with Mrinal's work. Mrinal called the platform helpline and explained the situation. They asked the customer why she lied and didn't cancel. She got angrier and gave Mrinal a 1-star rating. Fed up, Mrinal gave her 1 star as well, and requested that the company strike down her rating as it was clearly given in spite. But the platform never struck the review down and it brought down Mrinal's average customer ratings by a lot".

This detailed instance illustrates how the ratings system places gig workers at the mercy of both the customers and the platform, and how, even when they have not done anything wrong, gig workers are often the ones receiving systemic penalties. Through the ratings system, the platform also offloads the continuous and important work of evaluating workers, to the customers. This adds to the feminization of work by distributing what should be the responsibilities of the employer – quality checking, fair worker evaluation, bearing production costs, ensuring fair wages, and so on – to either the gig worker or the customer.

In practice, it is extremely difficult for gig workers to do anything about customers who hold the ratings above their heads. In a group discussion with 3 gig workers, Arti, Anshula, and Greeshma, the topic turned to the ratings system. Arti was a model gig worker lauded by the

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platform and held up as an example to other gig workers. She initially presented a positive view

of her experience at the platform, however this view began to crumble as she was confronted by

Anshula and Greeshma:

> "Arti, a model gig worker, shared a recent experience with a difficult client. She said the client ordered a few small, cheap body bleach services and then tried to make her do a full body bleach instead of paying for the full thing in the first place. In addition, the client demanded that she throw in a massage for free. Arti, who instantly struck me as a no-nonsense person, said she was very firm and let the client know what was and wasn't possible. The customer then called her "an idiot who doesn't know anything" and who's paid to do what she asks for. Arti said matter-of-factly, "I always feel it's better to just do the little extra they ask, rather than confront them or fully refuse, because they can revoke our ratings. We have the power and control, too, we can call the company immediately and let them know". I asked, if you complain about a customer ASAP, will that rating be counted, or will it get thrown out? Arti said it won't be counted. But Anshula and Greeshma immediately disagreed, saying no, they count all the ratings, even these contested ones. After some time, Arti changed her stance and said, "Okay, yes, they don't always throw out those ratings". Then the three of them started talking about how if 3 gig workers give a customer a 1-star rating, then that customer is blocked by the platform. They also said that if you give a customer a low rating then you'll never be assigned to them again. However, on both these counts, they were not sure how true this was in practice, and couldn't think of any examples where they had seen it happen."

"Just doing the little extra they ask" is one way that gig workers try to buffer the punitive

consequences of platform work, at a cost to themselves (Ballakrishnen et al 2019). I heard this

story over and over from different gig workers: customers blackmailing them for extra services

or trying to get away with unacceptable behavior in exchange for a 5-star rating, knowing that

they hold power over them. When customers take advantage of gig workers in this way, the gig

workers get cheated from both ends - the customers can cost them their ratings, wages, and even

their job, and the platform rarely takes action against customers even if they are repeat offenders.

Anwar et al (2022) note how the grievance redressal mechanisms offered by beauty platforms

often failed during the Covid-19 pandemic and since then. I found the same, with gig workers

across the board reporting the various ways in which platforms' official grievance redressal mechanisms failed them at crucial junctures.

When a customer sneaks out of paying, it is the gig worker that ultimately pays. This ratings-blackmail problem is pervasive across all sectors of platform work (Wood et al 2019; Chan 2019; Rosenblat et al 2017). In that sense, it is not a gendered story. However, I did find it notable that so many women customers frequently placed class and caste considerations over any notion of gendered solidarity. Gig workers had their own stereotypes about customers - they tended to look down on poorer customers who might be students living as PGs (paying guests) or homemakers living in chawls, feeling that this class of customers was the most likely to try to scam them for free services, and generally strongly preferring upper-class customers to lower-class and middle-class customers, especially single women living alone, or "foreign" women, who were more likely to tip better and to pay them without bargaining. As I have noted earlier, though, some gig workers described experiencing sexual harassment from middle-class and upper-class customers, which is a new type of violence that has neither been categorized and registered by the platform, nor by gig workers as a whole, yet.

While gig workers took major issue with the ratings system, they did not particularly mind the other forms of constant surveillance imposed by the platform, such as the location tracking or being required to upload selfies upon reaching the customer location. Anwar et al (2021) show how many women gig workers viewed the constant (automated or active, human) surveillance as a 1) safety mechanism that made them feel more confident and empowered, and which also 2) convinced their families that the platform will take care of them at all times by knowing their

whereabouts and details. I echo this finding. I use their idea of "participatory surveillance" to propose that platform surveillance enables women gig workers to strategically escape more pressing forms of surveillance imposed by their families, which block their physical, economic, and social mobilities. Women gig workers tactically use platform surveillance to challenge familial constraints on their physical mobility and gradually expand their spaces of movement beyond the home.

"Kahin se toh katna padta hai na?" (we have to take money from somewhere): Platform wages and financial opacity

The financial system followed by the platform is confusing and opaque at best to gig workers, though platform managers try to be transparent through the app. The finances of platform work are quite difficult to track as a researcher, but crucial to understand and lay out in clear and factual terms. On numerous occasions, I was shown the financial accounts of gig workers on the platform app - the list of gross earnings, net earnings, loan deductions with interest, commissions, subscription fees, penalties, cancellation fees and so on. Even after spending a lot of time trying to parse these calculations, I found it very difficult to follow the basic financial transactions enacted between the platform and the gig worker. I spoke to many gig workers in detail about the finances of gig work and will outline some basic findings here.

The platform company fixes the rates for different beauty services based on market trends and inflation rates, aiming to provide the highest quality at the lowest rates so that they maintain their consumer market. A manager told me, "The marketing team keeps a tab on our competitors [aka, beauty salons] and their prices - when the gap becomes too high, we update our rates." In addition, new services are added or removed based on the latest in-demand trends. Gig workers

therefore do not get a say in how much they make, but their wages are significantly higher than what they would make at a beauty salon. Some platform companies divide gig workers into separate categories of work - such as basic, intermediate, and luxury services - with the most skilled and professional beauticians being hired in the 'luxury' tier. The prices for services vary from tier to tier - with the 'basic' category gig workers making the least amount of money per service, therefore needing to work continuously to make ends meet, and the 'luxury' category gig workers making in a single job what a 'basic' gig worker would make in a week's worth of jobs, therefore being able to work less if they wish.

The first fees gig workers have to pay to start working are the *training fee* (for the compulsory training course) and the *kit fee* (for the beauty kit and the materials), which together cost around Rs. 45,000 (~$542). These payments may vary depending on the tier and vertical that a gig worker is hired into. The platform loans them this amount if they cannot afford to pay it. If they take this loan, a daily *loan repayment charge* is automatically deducted from their daily earnings, along with a *penalty* if they miss making the loan payment. Apart from this, gig workers have to "charge" their accounts with *credit* in order to accept job leads. This means that they are essentially paying a small fee to the platform for every job that is assigned to them. Each job "costs" several credits depending on the type of job, and each credit costs Rs. 10 (~$0.12). If their credit falls below the minimum level required by the platform, a *penalty* is deducted from their wages. On each job, the platform also levies a *commission*, which ranges from 20-40% of the wages for that job. On average, the commission percentage reported by gig workers was around 25%. Gig workers are expected to mark themselves as available for work for a minimum of 220 hours per month, and to accept a minimum of 70% of the leads they are given by the app.

If they cancel more than 3 jobs a month, they are levied another *penalty* and can be temporarily blocked from the app. In the middle of my fieldwork, the platform introduced a new system of subscriptions. Now, gig workers are forced to pay a *subscription fee* every month to take a package of 30 or 60 jobs per month. The subscription costs Rs. 1500-2000 (~$18-24) and guarantees them a fixed number of leads (30, or 60). If they complete all 30 (or 60) jobs, they get the entire subscription fee back, otherwise they lose part of the subscription fee for each incomplete job. So, this subscription model basically works to tie down gig workers to predefined amounts of work irrespective of their preferences. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many gig workers are not even being assigned the 60 jobs they paid for by the app in the first place, or they are assigned to jobs that are extremely far away, making it impossible to achieve this target even if they wish (Krijger 2023; Bansal 2024). In addition, gig workers also pay all of their transportation expenses out of pocket, and are required to purchase material refills from the platform also out of pocket (if they try to purchase refills from other sources, they are penalized as this breaks the quality check rules of the platform). Finally, customers can give gig workers tips (a typical tip is Rs. 50-100, or ~$0.6-1.2), but since there are so many systems in place for platforms to automatically deduct gig workers' wages, gig workers strongly prefer to be given cash tips that are not recorded on the platform app. Saba, a gig worker who has raised her voice often against the platform's financial systems, told me that two of her colleagues fought against the platform's rule of deducting penalties, commissions, and fees from their tips and not just their wages, and were told "kahin se toh katna padta hai na" (we have to take the money from somewhere). Apart from this, if gig workers are temporarily blocked by the platform for any reason, they have to pay Rs. 245 (~$3) as retraining fees, failing which they are charged Rs. 1500 (~$18) as a penalty.

Even from this short description, it is easy to understand why the financial system followed by the platform appears to be extremely confusing, opaque, and exploitative. At the drop of a hat, gig workers are auto-deducted money for various penalties, fees, and charges (Anwar et al 2022). Gig workers repeatedly expressed their inability to understand how and why money was being deducted from their earnings, especially as the rules keep changing and new systems keep getting introduced (such as the subscription system) without consultation or representation from gig workers. Van Doorn (2020) writes about the gamification of gig workers' wages:

> "Under capitalism, the wage has always functioned as an incentive to work. We sell our labour power in exchange for money – paid per unit of time or product/service – so we can survive. In large parts of the gig economy, however, this incentivizing role of the wage has been both amplified and reconfigured: the wage is no longer just an incentive but also becomes an object of prediction and experimentation; a constantly changing figure and shifting target appearing on a gig worker's phone as a peculiar form of clickbait" (Van Doorn 2020).

This opaque and constantly changing system makes it extremely difficult for gig workers to plan their finances beyond a short-term basis. From its end, the beauty platform attempts to create simple explainers for gig workers on all of these payment processes through videos in English and Hindi, tutorials, and explanations on the platform app, as well as explanations from recruiters and managers on the phone and in person. However, gig workers consistently reported to me that when they called the platform helpline or went to the office, nobody explained things to them.

Anwar et al (2022) argue that platforms offer crucial financial infrastructure and aid to women, which lets them secure work - for instance, offering loans to gig workers so that they can afford the joining fees and enter the platform. Women beauticians are able to easily get financial loans

from (private) platforms, loans that they cannot get at (public) banks or within their families, facilitating their access to financial capital despite patriarchal and social barriers. This "faux infrastructure" may be replacing public infrastructure and even social safety nets that should be available to women workers (Anwar et al 2022).

With some gig workers, I sat down and worked out a monthly accounting estimate to understand the net wages, gross wages, expenses, and fees in a typical month[28]. Most gig workers used the app to calculate these amounts. One interlocutor, Salma, used Excel sheets to maintain detailed financial accounts, especially as she was juggling multiple streams of work. For ease of understanding, I am providing the composite monthly financial breakdown for a typical gig worker in an "intermediate" category of gig work.

Table 6.1. Monthly Earnings Breakdown for a Typical Gig Worker

Gross earnings (50 jobs)	+ Rs. 30,000 ($361.45)
Commission fees (25%)	- Rs. 7,500 ($90.36)
Subscription fees	- Rs. 2,000 ($24.09)
Credit fees	- Rs. 2,000 ($24.09)
Travel expenses	- Rs. 3,500 ($42.17)
Loan repayment charges	- Rs. 4,300 ($51.81)

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[28] This approach was inspired by Balram Vishwakarma's Instagram series of interviews with informal workers in Mumbai.

Net earnings (takeaway)	= Rs. 10,200 ($122.89)

This means that a gig worker who completes 50 jobs a month, without any penalties or cancellations, without needing any material recharges the whole month, traveling only using buses and trains (not spending more than Rs. 100, or ~$1.2, per day), would still take home only around Rs. 10,000 (~$121) per month despite earning Rs. 30,000 (~$361) in gross wages. Even if she did not take a loan from the platform, she would be taking home less than Rs. 15,000 (~$181) a month. In other words, more than two thirds of the money a gig worker makes is deducted by the platform by way of these numerous fees and charges. The medium of the app helps to maintain financial opacity. Meanwhile, gig workers do not get any basic employee protections from the platform on a consistent basis, not even health or accident insurance, except in exceptional or severe cases.

Some gig workers are able to keep up with this system and find it to be more than fair. Arti, the model gig worker I mentioned previously, used to work at a high-end beauty salon and found these platform expectations to be very comfortable:

> "Arti said she didn't lose any money to the platform subscription model because she completed her target of 60 jobs for the month already. She seemed very on top of things and a high performer. She said the company expects us to be available for work 7-8 hours per day and to mark that on our calendars. She feels working here is better than working at a salon or alone because you are guaranteed at least one job lead a day. She has been in the salon business for 12 years, and was doing freelance home beauty services before joining the platform. She said that she likes working at the platform and they have been good to her. She says the platform makes back money on the commissions which she considers fair".

So, one larger point arising from these findings is that platforms are still highly preferred to beauty salons for women who require flexible work; aside from the time flexibility, the salons

pay less money to beauticians working even greater hours. This raises questions about the larger employment environment that women find themselves in, where irrespective of the formal or informal sector, the employment options are all extremely precarious, feminized, and low-paid, and the situation does not seem to be improving.

"Giving the leads is their job, converting them is ours": digital platforms and new ways of feminizing work

In January, it was my turn to manage the subscription platform app, Sampark, for a few weeks. I downloaded the app, and logged in using an OTP (One Time Password) from Salma, in whose name we had taken the subscription. We had decided together that our "business" would be called 'Premium Beauty', and this is the name that was listed in the app. We had paid around Rs. 9800 (~$118) for the subscription, and this had bought us 9800 credits. Each lead the platform gave us 'cost' around 80 credits. The subscription would end once the credits went down to zero.

The app interface had three tabs. The first tab, 'Leads'[29], had a running list of each lead served to us by the platform, tagged as 'new', 'missed' (we failed to contact the customer), 'spoken' (we spoke to the customer but did not get the booking), or 'hired' (we successfully converted the lead into a booking). The app notified me whenever it gave me a new lead. I was expected to call the customer immediately, sell them our business, negotiate rates, and 'convert' the lead into a job. Salma told me 'Giving us the leads is in their hands, but conversion is in our hands. Once they

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[29] The second tab on the app interface was 'Campaign'. It listed the credit we had spent, the amount of credit we had left in the subscription, and the amount of money we had made so far on the bookings. The third tab was 'Profile', which listed our services, rates, localities in the city that we were servicing, photos and videos of our work, contact details, and so on.

give us leads, successfully converting is up to us and our skill level. Just talk to them nicely and come to an arrangement".

In practice, I found that taking more than 15 minutes (after getting the lead notification) to reach out to the customer often cost me the job. After reaching out to the customer, I had to manually tag each lead as 'fake', 'not responding', 'negotiating', 'not converted', or 'converted'. For each 'not converted' lead, I had to select the reason for non-conversion from a drop-down menu: 'lead was looking for job', 'couldn't reach lead', 'fake lead', etc. In addition, there was a way to mark a lead as 'scrap lead', if the lead was bad. This would theoretically return the credits we lost for that lead, however in practice we rarely got any credits replenished. Failing to mark 'scrap lead' within a few minutes of calling the customer would result in an auto-deduction of the credit with no refund.

The work of verifying leads, evaluating customer quality, converting the lead, marking leads as high or low quality, and providing detailed feedback on leads (helping the app improve their system), is thus completely off-loaded to the client of the subscription platform, that is, the gig worker. Similarly, in large platform apps, the customers do the work of evaluating and quality-checking gig workers through the ratings system, while the gig workers have a provision to similarly evaluate customers and provide feedback on them, though this is of less importance to the platform. Platforms collect immense amounts of data from both customers and gig workers through continuous forms of surveillance and feedback, allowing them to carry out algorithmic data analyses and adjust and optimize the structure of the platform in accordance with their priority goals (what Kellogg et al (2020) call 'algorithmic recording'). In addition, I have noted

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in the previous chapter how platforms also feminize gig workers' affective and social labor by using their peer networks and customer rosters to supplement their customer and employee databases. Anwar et al (2022) would call this an example of 'articulation work,' the constant background labor carried out for free by workers to resolve breakdowns and keep the platform running. Fox et al (2023) frame it as 'patchwork': the human labor that occurs in the space between what AI purports to do and what it actually accomplishes. These instances illustrate how platforms feminize the work of customers and gig workers in multiple ways by offloading many platform responsibilities to them, while also avoiding many of the traditional responsibilities of an employer by refusing to categorize gig workers as 'employees', instead referring to them as 'contract workers' (Anwar et al 2022, Dubal 2017). This is reflected, for instance, in BeautiCare's policy of referring to gig workers only as 'partners' and never as workers or employees.

Around 10 weeks into our Sampark subscription, the credit ran out. We had spent Rs. 9800 (~$118) on the subscription and had made around Rs. 9000 (~$108) in earnings - not even enough to offset the cost of the subscription. Sampark and BeautiCare illustrate how platform apps are structured in such a way that work is gamified and immense time pressure is placed on the gig worker at every step. At Sampark, it felt like freelancers are set up to fail by the app, especially as fake leads made up at least 50% of the leads we got, and could be wrong numbers, disinterested customers, men pretending to be women customers, freelance beauticians posing as customers to assess the subscription platform, etc. Though the platform failed to provide the quality leads we were paying for, the onus of converting these leads into jobs was still ours, despite each lead getting snapped up within minutes of being posted. In addition, failing to reach

out to each lead within one hour would result in our business being downvoted by the algorithm, while businesses that are quickest to respond get bumped on the app as vendors, thereby getting better quality jobs and leads (what Kellogg et al 2020 call 'algorithmic rewarding'). Each business is assigned a 'Sampark Score', an aggregate measure based on the attractiveness of its business profile, lead conversion rate, response time, and average customer reviews, which determines the quality of the leads it is assigned by the app. The algorithmization of job-search platforms such as Sampark shows how despite paying for guaranteed work, workers are pushed into a gamified lottery system where they may or may not receive the work they are paying for.

"Leads will go to the people who are serious": Algorithmic Competition on Freelance Apps

Compared to large beauty platforms, gig workers have a lot more control over their work experience when using platform subscriptions like Sampark. They can decide their prices, where they are willing to go and not go in the city for work, and which jobs and customers to accept. However, unlike in large beauty platforms, bookings are not guaranteed, there are no safety nets or grievance redressal mechanisms, and each job is hard won. The onus of converting low-quality leads into bookings is entirely on the gig workers, with few real redressal mechanisms to combat the high number of fake leads. Overall, platform subscriptions heavily increase the precarity of the work experience because the quality of leads keeps changing in unpredictable ways, with the subscription working great one month and making you no money the next (what Kellogg et al (2020) call 'algorithmic restriction'). I spoke to one freelancer who works as a makeup artist for TV serials and Bollywood shoots, but has also tried platform subscriptions on the side to supplement her income. She told me how, when she is in the middle of a shoot, it is impossible to respond to new leads immediately, as mobile phones are not allowed on the shoot

sets. "Calling late means losing the job. Leads come, but they will stop coming to you - they will go to the people who are serious", she said simply.

Both large beauty platforms and beauty platform subscription apps use peer competition as one way to incentivize gig workers' performance and work hours. Nair (2022) argues that the severe competition experienced by gig workers is due to the large surplus of available workers in India. Platform models rely on a foundation of surplus informal workers, and use competition as a disciplining tool on workers. I have shown above how Sampark created a digital environment that is extremely competitive and fast paced, causing you to lose the job you have paid for if you do not act within a few minutes. In such an environment, gig workers who are the most financially precarious, with the least social resources and symbolic capital, are pushed to unreasonably undercut themselves just to get jobs. Additionally, these gig workers are often living in poverty-stricken localities where the local customers can't afford to pay a lot. Afreen is a middle-class gig worker living with her husband and toddler in a low-income area. When she got laid off from the large beauty platform, she took a platform subscription from Sampark. She considered it rational and sensible to set lower prices than everyone else so that she can get *some* job, and was okay with making less money. Her friend Chhaya, who is a poor single mother, told her off for setting low rates. She pointed out, "This kind of undercutting hurts everyone, because it sets the tone for the market, and none of us will get compensated fairly for our time, skills, effort or materials. It is selfish to undercut the market rate - it is our job collectively to set fair rates". The platform work market functions to maximize utility for customers, even if it is at the expense of beauty workers. When precarious and desperate gig workers undercut themselves to make ends meet, this paradoxically makes it even harder for the average beautician to make a

living. There is no mechanism for workers to collectively set a price for fair wages, and the market does not optimize for social welfare. Meanwhile as Lakshita Malik's work shows, higher end beauticians have cultivated a whole other set of affective and aesthetic skills to set themselves apart in this market, and cultivate a niche market for themselves, which justifies the higher prices they set (Malik 2022). So, there are multiple levels of services, pricing, skills, all coded by caste, class, language, etc. (Malik 2022; Banerjee 2023; Maitra & Maitra 2018).

As I argued in the previous chapter, gig workers are forced to constantly undertake risks by investing in and trying out different platforms and apps to secure work. This process allows women workers fleeting moments of ownership, control, and confidence, as well as the ability to access different kinds of spaces and social relationships (Islam 2020; Kidra 2023).

"If you complain alone, people think you are crazy": platformized alienation and the erosion of community ties

Early on in the fieldwork, I was very surprised to know that there is no way for gig workers to connect to others in the same geographical hub through the app. It seemed like it should be an easy and desirable thing for a large beauty platform to do, as it would help gig workers form a community and strengthen their work experience. However, as I developed the fieldwork, I found that platform apps view gig workers as isolated or atomized units, who are not encouraged to connect with the customer beyond one-time jobs or with other gig workers (Qadri 2020). Thus, workers' natural agency, as well as their entrepreneurial tendency to gather customer networks, is stripped and strictly curtailed by the platform, even as platforms celebrate women gig workers as entrepreneurs. Platforms' business model is especially threatened by 'disintermediation' - where gig workers make off-platform arrangements with customers to

secure a long-term relationship with them as private customers. Likewise, gig workers

collectivizing against the platform is seen as a threat as well. Probably for these reasons,

platforms prefer to alienate workers from each other and from their customers. Kellogg et al

(2020) argue that platforms employ algorithms to extract capital from workers while obscuring

the mechanisms through which they do so, which helps them prevent worker contestation or

collectivization. Thus, "information asymmetries are not random: instead, they are deliberately

created by employers to constrain workers' choices and control workers' ability to contest the

distribution of surplus value" (Kellogg et al 2020). This explains beauty platforms' tendencies to

isolate workers from each other and to avoid explaining how the platform arrives at crucial

decisions that affect their livelihoods.

Gig workers working at large beauty platforms meet each other during the initial training

sessions, and form groups and friendships almost immediately. Every gig worker is part of

numerous WhatsApp groups with overlapping sets of gig workers. However, this is mediated

privately and off-platform given the platform's disapproval towards worker collectivization.

Officially, every gig worker is on a WhatsApp group with just themselves and their platform

manager; as well as official platform groups where they can send messages and receive

important notifications. But unofficially, they are in dozens of WhatsApp groups with

overlapping networks of beauty workers who use these groups to share stories, warnings, news,

gossip, idle chatter, memes and videos, advice, arguments, business offers, and even fights

(echoing what Komarraju (2022) finds in Hyderabad). When I carried out a group discussion

with 37 gig workers in the BeautiCare office, there was great interest in having an in-person

gathering outside the office. I was astonished to know that these gig workers had never met each

other in person (as a group) even once, outside of the platform office, though they considered each other close friends and were in many active online groups together.

From conversations I overheard between managers in the platform office, I sensed an apprehension of gig workers gathering, and some strategic discussions about how to prevent them from meeting up, and especially from protesting against the platform. Large beauty platforms project that they have every need for gig worker redressal worked out - there is a helpline, an SOS number, managers available on the phone, a risk and safety team, ways for gig workers to offer feedback - therefore, nothing more is needed. However, gig workers say that most of these redressal mechanisms do not work well and that they are not able to provide meaningful feedback or make demands collectively from the platform. This strategy by the company is meant to foreclose and prevent any discussion of gig workers collectivizing.

The platform app does not have provisions for gig workers to connect with each other in any way. Despite this, gig workers of course find their own way to connect and to fight the alienation imposed by the platforms. Once, I was walking with Saba from a train station just after she had completed a platform gig. She was wearing her platform company uniform and carrying the beauty kit. We passed another gig worker wearing the same uniform and kit, and they both immediately waved to each other, saying "Hi, partner!". Saba explained that though she doesn't know the other gig workers who operate in her locality, there is a habit among gig workers to always greet each other with a "Hi, partner!", and to exchange news, comfort, commiserations briefly. She said, each "Hi, partner!" makes her feel a warm glow - seen, happy, and less alone. "We are working alone, but we know there are so many more of us out there".

Saba said, unlike Delhi and Gujarat, in Mumbai all the gig workers are too scared to collectivize openly against the platform. "We are not able to force them to accept our demands, because none of us work together. It is extremely difficult to shout alone, fight alone - that is why you don't see gig workers doing it. You become a pariah, and it's very hard to keep it up complaining alone, people treat you like you are crazy". Over the months of my fieldwork, as platform leads dried up and algorithmic metrics and penalties became more constricting, I saw gig workers slowly moving from individual-level modes of resistance to some attempts at collectivizing and challenging the system - doing what they could in a space for fighting back that has become extremely small and confined. Crucially, the catalyst for the collectivization was the rumor that a young woman had died by suicide after being unfairly laid off by the large beauty platform. This echoes Nair's (2022) finding that the iconic protest by women beauty gig workers in Delhi was partly motivated by how the commission rates compelled them to work later in the night, compromising their safety in urgent ways. Since my fieldwork ended, women gig workers' collectivization movement has developed and ripened into a full-blown movement, which I do not have the space to track or analyze here, but which I will be exploring in future work.

Gig workers variously told me about how they screamed at managers, helped each other through advice and strategy and brainstorming, subverted the ratings system by flooding the platform with negative Google reviews, disintermediated, subverted platform surveillance through various methods, and helped laid off gig workers find jobs through their peer networks. This is in line with Cameron & Rahman's (2023) work on algorithmic management and control, showing that despite platform managers' and customers' attempts to control gig workers; gig workers'

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everyday interactions with customers and platform apps can influence and manipulate algorithms in ways that platforms cannot always observe or control (also Ticona 2019; Kellogg et al 2020). However, the efficacy of these strategies was limited and did not result in any systemic changes within the platform, as gig workers do not have enough bargaining power against the platform. At best, gig workers could secure temporary relief on a case-by-case basis.

Overall, beauty platforms create new modes of alienation. The structuring of gig work through algorithmic management centers the transactional quality of beauty work and systematically isolates women gig workers from their customers, community, and each other through the means of the app. In accessing beauty work through the app, you may never be assigned the same beauty worker twice; similarly, gig workers are penalized for trying to form longer-term relationships with clients outside of the app. The relational intimacy that was inherent to beauty work earlier - women might frequent the same beauty parlor for many years; beauticians would be able to rely on a trusted and steady roster of clients - has been somewhat eroded by platforms in the name of increasing market efficiency and capturing the market by preventing gig workers from 'stealing' platform customers or standing up against the platform. In the face of platformized alienation, however, women gig workers continue to create, maintain, and expand multiple informal networks of support and solidarity which come to their aid during adverse work events and create a safety net between workers. As Medappa (2023) points out, these kinds of informal mutual aid systems between gig workers become their own form of reproductive labor in the service of productive capital.

Summary

Platforms attempt to formalize and capture the informal beauty markets constructed between women beauticians and women customers. This process relies on the algorithmization of beauty work by the platform, involving metrics, incentives, and financial systems that are weighted against gig workers and towards the customers, heavily shaping and changing gig workers' experience of work. Algorithmized beauty work produces new structural pressures, uncertainties, and modes of alienation that are experienced and weathered primarily by gig workers, though these affect customers as well. Though platforms obstruct worker collectivization, gig workers navigate these algorithmic stresses by creating short-term buffers individually, with each other, and sometimes with customers. Women gig workers find themselves caught between multiple modes of socially reproductive labor which conflict with each other - extracted by platforms and customers.

Platform Work Over Time: A Gendered Analysis of Platform Disruption

During fieldwork, I noticed that gig workers' experiences of work were changing over time. Initially, gig workers experienced a positive work environment, high wages, and a reliable supply of jobs. After some time, gig workers experienced and reported falling earnings and a lack of enough job leads. In addition, hundreds of gig workers were suddenly laid off without warning in the middle of my fieldwork, and these mass layoffs repeated again and again.

As I investigated the reasons for these changes, I found that BeautiCare was in the process of changing its economic and organizational model. Platforms like Beauticare start as lean

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businesses funded by venture capital (Howson et al 2020). They try to externalize all their costs and initially exhibit little physical infrastructure or assets. During the initial period, these platforms prioritize steep growth rather than profit, relying on network effects of scale, the creation of market value through cross-subsidization of supply and demand, and heavy investment in marketing and PR (Howson et al 2020). During this time, gig workers experience an upswing in their work experiences and earnings. Even as they keep making losses, the platforms focus on aggressive growth and market capture. In this initial phase, platform startups in unsettled markets "typically struggle to secure scarce resources including customers, capital, and employees", and pursue a strategy of "opportunistic adaptation" which involves coming up with ad-hoc solutions to unexpected problems and experimenting with different organizational formats and decisions (Shestakofsky 2017).

A high-level manager I spoke to, Kartik, confirmed this trajectory and explained that venture capital funding had allowed them to pursue aggressive growth till now without worrying about being profitable, but that BeautiCare now needed to pursue steady growth, a challenging task requiring an organizational rehaul. As a result, the platform wants to move away from the flexible work mode now and start setting fixed work hours instead - "this is better for both the gig workers and customers, as well as the company, in the long run". Kartik also said that moving to a more fixed pattern will enable them to match demand and supply better and to stop losing their customer base. Also, he said, the gig workers could make more money.

This pivot in the company's organizational and economic strategy leads to top-level decisions that adversely affect hundreds of gig workers, decisions that they get no say in, and which

explains their changing experience of work over time. As the platform pursues the new goal of steady growth and fixed patterns, it will experiment with various organizational decisions until it reaches this goal, decisions that could have disastrous consequences for gig workers. Speaking to managers, it felt like these new goalposts were really taxing them as well. Matching supply and demand in a predictable way was a very difficult problem to crack for the beauty platform, particularly as there is so much cultural and contextual variability within and across different cities. Managers at BeautiCare told me that they use an automated model that handles demand-supply matching. For example, in Tier II cities, most people live in joint families, so they can't really hire any home services, because they don't have extra empty rooms. In contrast, in Tier I cities (like Mumbai), more people live in nuclear families or alone and have the space to book home services. One manager speculated that perhaps cosmopolitan women customers in Tier I cities have started to get bored of booking home services, and are starting to prefer getting out of the house and going to salons to get pampered, changing the demand calculations. Through many such examples, managers described how it is very difficult to capture specific market segments, pin down a strong customer base of repeat customers, and maintain it. This phase of startup growth has been described by Shestakofsky (2017) as 'human lag', where managers struggle to convert user growth into stable revenue growth due to customers' reluctance, dissatisfaction, and shifting preferences.

One manager offered a gendered explanation for the difficulty of this problem, focusing it on the fact that the beauty market is a female-dominated market with mostly women on both the supply and demand ends. He pointed to the flighty nature of women customers and the unpredictability of their changing preferences and habits, saying "working women prefer home services as they

don't have the time, but there are so few of them, that pivoting to them is a bad idea"; but on the other hand "homemakers have the time to go the salon, and might prefer to go there rather than stay at home". Whether working women or homemakers, the central conundrum was that "women don't want to keep using the same service forever", making it incredibly difficult to "pin down" a repeat customer market with predictability and precision. On the supply end, managers were frustrated that women gig workers could also not commit to fixed patterns of working, partly due to their domestic and care work at home. Overall, the beauty platform's difficulty of pursuing steady growth was linked by at least one manager to this being a "women's market" whose patterns defied being modeled and predicted.

This struck me as extremely interesting, as it challenges dominant ideas of 'disruption'. Typically, 'disruption' is associated with male-led tech startups and their ability to upend traditional markets by offering accelerated market efficiencies. Tech startups changed the meaning of disruption from a negative to a positive one. Today, disruption is associated with the act of creating new markets and displacing established ones. It is striking that these ideas of disruption do not extend to women, India's favorite entrepreneurial subjects. Women beauty workers have always had to do the difficult, continuous work of creating new consumer markets and market value in the face of changing economic and aesthetic landscapes (Bhallamudi & Malik 2023). But in the context of beauty platform work today, women's market-disruptive behaviors are seen as deeply undesirable because they interfere with the fixed patterns of work that the platform is now trying to impose on them in order to survive. Platform managers may therefore attribute platform difficulties to the flightiness of women's preferences and

commitments rather than questioning the viability of the platform's underlying models and the places where it fails to account for women's needs.

Further complicating gendered ideas of disruption, researchers like Nair (2022) have pointed out how entrepreneurship and disruption is usually celebrated in contexts where unemployment is rising. In the last decade, India has seen heavy investments into startup culture, E-cells and the rise of technological solutions to social problems (David et al 2021). In this context, the entry of gig work has been celebrated both by state and private capital as an alternative to formal employment, with estimates that platforms will create up to 90 million new gig jobs in the next 10 years (BCG 2021). Anwar et al (2022) point out that platforms have already started mediating private access to social services like health insurance and financial aid, and argue that the emergence of such "faux infrastructure" is deeply connected to India's disinvestment in public infrastructure and services. Today, platforms operate in a largely feminized and unregulated terrain, one that is marked by a severe lack of labor protections for informal workers, allowing them near total authority over gig workers' conditions of work. Given that the majority of the Indian population is employed in the informal sector, platforms are able to achieve legitimacy and approval from the state despite this "for simply creating jobs", and workers cannot expect their demands to be taken seriously by the state (Nair 2022). Algorithmic tools and interfaces allow platforms to extend the conditions of informality and feminization while obscuring the mechanisms through which they are imposed on workers. The pandemic exacerbated this situation as traditional sectors of informal work took a big hit while platforms survived. This explains why gig work is celebrated as a disruption of work in India by both state and private

capital even though the conditions of work offered by platforms are so precarious (van Doorn 2017; Rodríguez-Modroño 2024).

Finally, my analysis here is in line with what Qadri (2021) suggests, calling for shifting discussions of disruptions from the technology to its underlying social and infrastructural relations. She writes, "by centering the local forms of relations that persist within the technological, we can instead see that people are not "disrupted" but rather domesticate and shape technology in heterogeneous ways. This shift will help make visible the varied infrastructures—human, relational, social—that underlie promises of disruption" (Qadri 2021).

Conclusion: Platforms and the Crisis of Social Reproduction

Beauty platforms have emerged at a time when the world is experiencing a severe crisis of social reproduction. Social reproduction work is the work involved in raising and nurturing workers, regenerating the workforce, and maintaining those who cannot work; this work has traditionally been carried out by women for free or for low pay (Hester & Srnicek 2017). In the last few decades, governments around the world have pulled back state support for social reproduction workers and eroded investments into socially reproductive work. At the same time, the women workers who usually do this work for free are increasingly getting pushed into the informal workforce, as male wage workers are increasingly unable to support their families on a single-earner wage. This has resulted in the crisis of social reproduction. Beauty platforms have emerged in this particular landscape by offering a frictionless "care fix" which brings socially reproductive services into the productive economy (van Doorn 2022). Now, as Hester & Srnicek (2017) write, domestic tasks are increasingly bought through the capitalist market, either directly as goods and services, or indirectly through privatized labor. This represents a new political

economy of social value extraction and cost reduction that is valorized by both state and private capital (van Doorn 2022). Beauty platforms serve this market by offloading the costs of social reproduction onto "underutilized" feminized workers, while monetizing them, organizing them, and integrating them into AI-mediated platform infrastructures.

It is worrying that India's "underutilized" informal workforce is increasingly employed in service-sector jobs[30] that require them to "serve" a privileged minority at a heavy cost to themselves, now via the platform economy (Komarraju 2022), rather than being able to access secure work in a variety of sectors. Rather than bringing in more workers into the platform economy, our focus should instead be on creating secure and meaningful work available to women workers. Women, who have a strong desire to work, but are still deeply struggling to access secure work, are especially prone to joining platform work but only because it allows them to carry out productive work while also fulfilling their social reproduction obligations at home (Nair 2022). In the case of beauty platforms, even this productive work takes the form of socially reproductive services that cater to privileged homemakers and professional working women, placing a double burden of feminized work on women gig workers. Radhakrishnan & Solari (2018) argue that nationalistic and cultural ideas of the Indian family, which emphasize women's roles as unpaid domestic workers and men's roles as paid breadwinners, serve to keep working class women's labor "cheap" and facilitate their entry into global capitalism. Therefore, "women's responsibility for reproductive work [becomes] a structural feature of neoliberalism" (Radhakrishnan & Solari 2018).

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[30] Today, India's service sector contributes over 50% of the national GDP, and employs over 30% of the national workforce (ILO 2024).

In this chapter, I have shown the various ways in which beauty platforms rely on and take advantage of women's productive and reproductive labor; how women are left to "somehow" resolve the fundamental tensions between these two roles in order to access paid work; and how beauty platforms socially reproduce labor hierarchies. The fundamental problems underlying platform work and women's work are rooted in the crisis of social reproduction. As van Doorn (2017) puts it, "How does one value something one cannot and often does not want to see?". In addition, simply commercializing reproductive work will not solve this crisis - platform capitalism thrives on creating a new moral order by fracturing the links between labor, livelihood, family, community, and care – but we need these links to thrive as human beings. Addressing the issues posed by platforms then requires us to create new links between these integral parts of our lives. The central question becomes: how can we value women's work and elevate the essential social reproductive work they do, to the status it deserves, without cheapening and splintering it? As Federici writes, fighting for wage work cannot be the path to liberation for women, because as long as reproductive work is devalued and considered women's work, women will always enter the market with less power and more vulnerability. Therefore, "what is needed is the re-opening of a collective struggle over reproduction aiming to regain control over the material conditions of the production of human beings and create new forms of cooperation around this work that are outside of the logic of capital and the market" (Federici 2020), one that turns reproductive work from a punishing activity to a liberating one. Perhaps this work can involve the application of "algorithmic imaginaries" (Bucher 2017) to redefine the way people relate to each other and to themselves.

Chapter 7: Inside the Beauty Platform Organization: Gendered Management Dynamics Shaping Gig Work

Abstract

The previous chapter discussed various aspects of women's work experiences in beauty platforms using social reproduction theory. First, it showed how platforms *maintain* and even extend the social dynamics that underlie the relationship between gig workers and customers. Second, it showed how platforms *transform* the experience of beauty work by gamifying risk, feminizing work, incentivising competition, and alienating workers. Finally, it ended with a gendered analysis of tech disruption and the long-term implications of platform work for women.

However, the chapter also opened up some new questions. Why and how do beauty platforms structure gig work in this particular manner? What are the gendered aspects to this way of constructing work? This chapter finishes the arc by examining organizational and managerial dynamics within large beauty platforms. It begins by explaining how the organizational hierarchy of beauty platforms is shaped by top-level beliefs about platforms bringing a paradigm shift for labor, which influences the way platforms construct and structure gig work. Then, I identify differences between male and female managers' managerial styles with gig workers, and analyze why women managers are more punitive to women gig workers. Finally, I show how several entities within the platform organization transgress the organizational norms of socialization to assist gig workers under the radar.

One of the distinguishing features of beauty platforms in India is that alongside algorithmic management through the app, gig workers also experience a relatively high level of human management by human trainers, cluster leads, and managers, from the time they first approach the platform for work, until they leave the platform. This opens up new dimensions for the study of platform management, namely the intersection of algorithmic and human management (Vallas et al 2022). This chapter therefore also makes a rich contribution to management literature.

Part 1: How beauty platforms create and codify organizational hierarchies

"A Paradigm Shift for Labor": Beauty Platforms' Top-Level Beliefs about Gig Workers

In a company blog post, the CEO of BeautiCare described how the platform's business model had brought in a paradigm shift for labor, writing, "We believe we have made the industry more transparent, reduced the number of middlemen and given a voice to the hitherto voiceless informal labour".

As I tracked tweets, blog posts, and interviews by beauty platform company CEOs and business heads, I found this view to be repeated frequently. C-suite executives energetically spoke about how beauty platforms revolutionize economic markets by "cleaning up" previously unorganized and informal markets. In addition, they saw beauty platforms as behaving altruistically to marginalized women workers by providing skills training and professionalization at subsidized prices, as well as employment. This is part of a wider trend in contemporary hustle culture to

promote gig and platform work as an economic savior for marginalized populations even though it can be exploitative for them (Hill in Cameron et al, forthcoming).

While beauty platforms do offer low-barrier, respectable, and sought-after employment for large numbers of women gig workers who are struggling to find flexible work, they do not do it for free or out of charity: gig workers pay large amounts of money to the platform to secure work in the first place, and beauty platforms are fundamentally dependent on gig workers' skills (developed and honed for years before joining the platform) to survive and grow. Given this, I argue that the 'economic savior' view employed by the platform organization is a benevolent and potentially caste-patriarchal view employed by the platform organization that also serves to secure funding and the company brand (Majumdar & Arora).

And yet, this top-level belief of beauty platforms creating an empowering paradigm shift for workers was a powerful one that percolated into multiple levels of the beauty platform organization. For instance, when I spoke to Abhishek, a mid-level manager, about the recruitment process for gig workers, he said:

> "Partner onboarding is incredibly expensive for us and we make losses from it. It costs Rs. 50,000 (~$602) to onboard each partner, so we really hate to lose partners, and we want to retain every one. We make this up from the commission, which is 20% on average (lower for cheaper jobs and higher for expensive jobs) and it takes 2.5 years to recover it. The training costs them Rs. 10,000 (~$121) and the kit costs them Rs. 30,000 (~$362) but it is given on a loan, so that is fine".

Abhishek's view of the platform loan is an altruistic one, offered to gig workers so that they can overcome their financial constraints to join the company. In this view, the platform is helping women and genuinely values the experiences and skills of gig workers. However, from the gig workers' point of view, they are not getting anything for free - they cannot leave the company without paying the full costs, as well as additional interest if they renege on loan repayments. In

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addition, since the beauty platform is being funded by venture capital that allows it to pursue aggressive growth even if it makes losses, the decision to offer loans to gig workers is not costing the leadership, but is a calculated business strategy to attract large numbers of gig workers and build a solid employee base.

In speech and writing both, platform leadership expresses an invisible line between "us" (corporate managers) and "them" (gig workers). For instance, in a company blog post, the CEO of Glow Haven, another large beauty platform, reflected on his experience of building and growing the company, and shared a strategic roadmap for success. In this post, he referred to the role of gig workers only twice, for instance: "We place heavy investments into training the supply. This ensures a very high degree of quality control, which is especially important in the services sector". While managers usually refer to gig workers as 'partners', in blog posts such as these and interviews with me, they often simply referred to them as "the supply".

Over the course of fieldwork, I noticed that platform managers often used this term when talking about high-level management decisions that involved a large number of gig workers, not just in conversations with each other or in managerial meetings, but also in the personal conversations I had with them. This reflects the platform organization's oppositional construction of 'unskilled' gig work and 'skilled' managerial work, which is clearly visible, among other places, in beauty platform company blogs and public interviews with C-suite executives. At the organizational level, gig workers are seen as the supply variable that has to be pushed and pulled as needed, according to algorithmized logics, in order to extract market valuation and achieve steady growth. Beauty platform organizations thus seem to view women gig workers primarily as a

reserve labor supply that needs to be professionalized, formalized, and streamlined by platform management.

Further reflecting this perspective, Ankit, a manager I spoke to, described how large beauty platforms design gig work carefully, in accordance with game theoretic principles, but that it is frustrating to get gig workers to adhere to the expectations of the platform. He explained (paraphrased for clarity):

> "If every partner picks up every job they are assigned, all partners will be better off for it. When they start cherry-picking - higher proportions of partners picking lower quality jobs - everyone will be worse off. If each partner completes 40-50 jobs per month, they can comfortably make Rs. 30,000 (~$362). But when they start flaking on jobs, others who are ready to work a lot will also lose out. Penalties and blocks are well designed in accordance with these ideas". He continued, "Partners who work a lot - the system will give them more jobs and also give them preference as they are more reliable. Partners who work less - they may lose out on money and customers because they are unreliable".

This cements the understanding of platform beauty work as largely divided between a corporate class of managerial workers who manage the contract class of gig workers from above. Temtumbde wrote in 'Republic of Caste' that "whereas caste Hindus become entrepreneurs by choice, dalits are entrepreneurs by compulsion" (Teltumbde 2018). This idea is so striking in the context of platform work, where gig workers and managers are associated with very different types of entrepreneurialism. Platform managers and C-suite executives are 'entrepreneurs by choice' disrupting tech landscapes and transforming the world, whereas gig workers are 'entrepreneurs by compulsion' - this is the least precarious job they are able to access given their circumstances, which makes it desirable. The platform organization too strategically constructs and draws upon the ideals of the 'disruptive entrepreneur' and the 'hungry entrepreneur' (as I show below) to set expectations for these two classes of workers.

Overall, the top-level belief that platforms bring a paradigm shift for labor, is a powerful one that structures the beauty platform organization and its categories of work. It is reflected in the view of gig workers as variables in platform models, who would be best served by following the directives of managers. Going forward, I show how this belief trickles down and shapes managerial attitudes to gig workers across the beauty platform organization, and how these attitudes are gendered.

"Getting Our Hands Dirty": How These Top-Level Beliefs Trickle Down to High and Mid-Level Managers

One afternoon, I met Rahul, a beauty platform manager, for an informal conversation. As we chatted about the day-to-day responsibilities and challenges of a beauty platform manager, Rahul said, "What we end up having to learn by ourselves is how to work with supply directly. In other sectors, ride-hailing for instance, supply is easy to come by because they already have driver databases. But we end up having to go on the road a lot to recruit supply".

Most of the platform managers I spoke to, shared the difficulties and frustrations of "supply management", which begins with the recruitment of gig workers. Ankit, another manager, described the various means of recruitment, starting with buying "supply databases" of beauticians from Facebook, Quickr, and other platforms, and figuring out which databases have the highest conversion ratios in order to meet recruitment targets. However, he said that the highest quality "supply" comes not from these databases but from referrals from gig workers, and these are prized the most. Hence, the platform pays gig workers Rs. 1500 (~$18) per successful referral to incentivize them to keep referring their contacts. If both of these sources

don't provide enough "supply", managers find themselves going door-to-door to salons to hire beauticians.

Rahul spoke about how the door-to-door work could be grueling and difficult. It required managers to "go on the road" and "get their hands dirty", recruit gig workers personally and get the business up and running. This kind of work is implicated in the idea of the 'disruptive entrepreneur' who is expected to do what it takes to get the startup off the ground. As Rahul had pointed out, this is a unique aspect to the work of beauty platform managers that differentiates them from managers working in other sectors of platform work - their day-to-day job necessarily involves interacting with large numbers of gig workers, both inside and outside the office. Outside of recruitment, beauty platform managers field personal phone calls from hundreds of gig workers on a daily basis, to address issues ranging from app glitches, to grievances related to gig workers' work experiences, to problems with the recruitment process, and more. This can be very overwhelming. Abhishek, another beauty platform manager I spoke to, said somewhat jokingly, "A lot of managers have actually quit our company soon after joining, after they realized that so much of the work involves directly managing the supply. They were not expecting the job to look like this." This suggests that beauty platform managers implicitly view mass interactions with gig workers as "dirty work" (Mosse 2015; Gopal 2012) that they were not fully prepared for or expected to have to handle.

Beyond recruiting sufficient numbers of gig workers, Ankit also discussed the difficulties of recruiting the *right people,* saying: "We don't want gig workers who are too flexible also, as there will be a finite number of jobs. So we can either have 200 part-timers or 50 full-timers.

During peak demand times, we can't rely on part-timers; we need people who are hungry to earn - like single moms for example - but this can be a double-edged sword". Raval & Pal (2019) find striking parallels speaking to beauty platform managers in Bangalore, who used the exact same phrases like "hungry to earn". They argue that the "hunger analogy" is used to identify the ideal worker as an entrepreneurial one who "goes out and gets" the next customer and is willing to absorb all the risks and tasks that should be the responsibility of the platform. Platform managers use these shorthand "hooks" (single mom, laid off, hungry to earn) to "optimize for reliable workers and eventually build a predictable reserve force of workers". Raval & Pal (2019) argue that this "allows the platform to "govern at a distance" by having instilled the disciplinary logics of accountability and the individualization of risk without having to employ these gig-workers". The platform's construction of managers as "rational economic agents" can thus create systematic discriminations against certain kinds of gig workers who "find themselves devoid of the dispositions tacitly demanded by the economic order" (Mosse 2020). Mosse's (2020) analysis accounts for how caste shapes modern market economies. I extend his argument that intersectionality disadvantaged workers - such as lower caste women - are most affected by these structural norms and resulting discrimination.

A few months later, I interviewed Mala, a female manager. She spoke about her early days in the platform and how one of her assignments was to recruit the first batch of gig workers for a new service that the platform wanted to offer. She said it was really difficult to get the service going at first, reflecting, "It's really difficult to convince a person who knows everything about the industry than a person who … has hard skills, but does not know a lot about the industry, right? So it takes a lot of effort to like, sell, the platform company to these people." Mala seemed to be

wrestling with the tension between the gig worker who is experienced in that sector, but categorized as low-skilled, compared to the manager who is inexperienced in that sector, but identified as the one with "hard skills". This suggests that the platform organization places a particular set of abstracted skills belonging to managers - such as computerized forms of knowledge, consultancy skills, fluency in English, and so on - hierarchically above the direct and contextual skills belonging to gig workers - such as proficiency in beauty work, experience with customers, rich knowledge of the beauty market in Mumbai, and so on. Sareeta Amrute's writing on gig work and caste helps make sense of this (Amrute in Cameron et al, forthcoming). She argues, "Race, caste and tech come together as part of a social and economic formation that establishes distinctions between those who are deemed worthy of participating fully in tech worlds, or not participating fully in them as fully recognized subjects. … race and caste become productive of new economies". She discusses how presumed expertise within gig economies tends to stick to certain categories, here maleness and managerial status, which are associated with particular forms of symbolic capital. These categories differentiate the relatively protected managers from the severely unprotected gig workers within the platform organization.

The organizational construction of low-skilled "them" and high-skilled "us" also translated into common views and stereotypes that managers freely shared with each other within the platform office. Just as gig workers complained about and made fun of managers behind their backs; similarly, managers also looked down on and made jokes about gig workers to each other in the office; the difference being an asymmetrical balance of power that managers held over gig workers, and the one-way implications for gig workers if managers' views were to translate into their behavior with gig workers. Once, I overheard a manager, Rishabh, scolding his junior

report for trying to talk to too many gig workers before making a decision. He said angrily, "Today you are dealing with this many partners, tomorrow when you get promoted, you'll have 15,000 partners to deal with. Will you have the time to talk to them directly? It's not scalable. Always think about the data. Always come up with a data backed logic."

The managerial insistence on data-driven decisions raises questions about the nature and quality of the data being used. Here, the manager is presumably referring to "clean", algorithmic, computerized data, viewed as abstracted numbers on a laptop through the company's interface. Seemingly, attaching a more direct form of data - aka, speaking to human gig workers - to triangulate and validate managerial decisions, pollutes the cleanness of computerized data-backed decisions. This made me wonder: Who is the data taken from? Who is the data for? Who does the data benefit?

"When You're at the Ground Level, You Know What Works": How These Top-Level Beliefs Shape Work Practices of Lower-Level Managers

We have seen how top-level beauty platform executives' beliefs about the role of gig workers and corporate workers has trickled down to shape high-level and mid-level managers' organizational beliefs and practices about gig workers. Let us go down one last layer, to look at the lowest tier of managers who interact most directly and extensively with gig workers. I spoke to Anya, a new manager who reports to Kavya, her business head. Echoing Rishabh's interaction with his junior manager, Anya narrated how she struggles to manage Kavya's expectations with regard to organizational priorities and everyday tasks, because of her (Anya's) proximity to gig workers:

"I'm going to be really candid. …My business head, she came from a consulting background, and she did not have much idea about what actually happens operationally. So when you are at the ground level, you know what will work and what will not work, and when you're planning and organizing, there's a big gap, right? That gap can be filled when you listen to the person who is working at the ground level and actually take feedback, and you know, work on it. But that was not done really well. And that's how certain things went in certain directions which it shouldn't have gone into. Managers like me are the people who are front-facing and handling everything. The people who are in the top management are basically just facing the executives, like the CEOs. [muffled recording] ... So that was like one thing which is frustrating, a pattern."

Anya's experience shows that there are layered inequalities in the platform organization beyond the simple division between managers and gig workers. Managers who are at the lowest levels, with the highest proximity to gig workers, may be the most likely to experience the consequences of the high-level beliefs that structure platform work - namely, that abstracted management skills and data are to be prioritized over ground-level skills and data – after gig workers.

Discussion

Eagly (2005) writes that to achieve organizational success, leaders need the legitimacy to promote a certain set of values on behalf of the organization, and that male leaders are more easily able to achieve the "relational authenticity" required for this than female leaders. In the beauty platform organization, I have identified the high-level beliefs shared and promoted by organizational leaders which shape the structure and internal hierarchy of the platform - namely, the belief that beauty platforms bring a paradigm shift for labor by empowering women workers. This belief shapes the flow of organizational ideas around what work is, who counts as a worker, and what is skilled and unskilled work. These beliefs seem to be serving gig workers, but in actuality they are strategically useful to the beauty platform organization. Through a range of organizational strategies, managers are socialized into the belief that beauty platforms are

transforming the nature of work and empowering marginalized, unskilled women gig workers. These beliefs percolate through the hierarchy of the platform organization, underlying, framing and codifying the interactions between gig workers and managers.

Following Majumdar & Arora (2023), I suggest that the beauty platform organization employs these high-level beliefs to try to invisibilize structural inequalities within, by 1) co-opting a progressive vocabulary (women's empowerment and entrepreneurialism), 2) performing a normalizing function (normalizing the hierarchy of gig workers as low-skilled and managers as high-skilled), 3) creating obfuscation (where gig workers' gender identity is supported and visibilized while other identities, such as caste or religion, are invisibilized), and 4) building a visual facade (pitching the platform as benevolent, liberal, and progressive) (Majumdar & Arora 2023). These mechanisms serve as 'defensive distinctions' which help the platform make claims to ethicality and progressiveness (Anantharaman 2016).

The beauty platform is a gendered organization. It relies on a separation between masculinized managerial work and feminized gig work, where managerial work is valued, well-compensated, and relatively secure, while gig work is exploitative and insecure. This separation explains the structurally antagonistic character of the manager-gig worker relationship, what Spreitzer et al (2017) call "two images of the new world of work - one for high-skill workers who choose alternative work arrangements and the other for low-skill workers who struggle to make a living and are beholden to the needs of the organization". By framing themselves as simply "intermediaries" or "facilitators", platforms are able to categorize gig workers as independent workers, contractors, or entrepreneurs rather than employees (Dubal 2017). In this environment,

algorithmic systems become not just neutral tools to maximize efficiency but "contested instruments of control that carry specific ideological preferences" *(*Kellogg et al 2020). They also help the platform organization avoid accountability in cases where gig workers experience adverse incidents or harms (Anwar et al 2022). Gig workers and managers therefore interact with each other on a 'contested terrain of control', where managers use algorithmic tactics to discipline gig workers, while workers apply individualized 'algoactivist' strategies to push back (Kellogg et al 2020).

Although beauty platform organizations draw on neoliberal discourses of women's empowerment, professionalism, and efficiency; they are also heavily paternalistic in their treatment of workers following from the high-level beliefs that cast gig workers as low-skilled and in need of constant management (Rajan-Rankin 2015). Mathew & Taylor (2015) find that in multinational corporations, religion, caste, and paternalism combine to create a power distance between managers and workers in the Indian context, shaping worker behavior and workplace relationships, and conflicting with the principles of efficient production techniques.

All of this means that the hierarchy of the beauty platform organization can be predicted by workers' relative proximity to gig workers. At the highest level of the platform organization, leaders and workers may not have to interact with gig workers much, and can view them as abstracted variables to be manipulated based on the strategic and economic needs of the company. The higher-level managers may prefer to make "clean" decisions without directly involving gig workers, whereas lower-level managers are "stuck" dealing with gig workers, but are not allowed to use their learnings to make or influence high level decisions beyond a point.

Finally, gig workers are fundamentally removed and separated from the managerial tiers of workers in this organizational hierarchy.

Having established how high-level beliefs shape the organizational structure of the beauty platform, I will spend the rest of this chapter delving into how these beliefs shape gendered interactional dynamics between gig workers and managers.

Part 2: Gender Differences in Platform Organizational Management Practices

A rich history of research on gender and organizations has shown that corporate organizations are often marked by gender inequalities, which shape workers' experiences and outcomes (Acker 1990; Kanter 1975). This research is based on studies of people working together and bound by shared organizational practices. But how does platform work, which fundamentally relies on large groups of workers working independently, outside the physical bounds of the platform organization, and on a contract basis, change theories of gendered organizations? (Caza & Reid in Cameron et al, forthcoming).

In the previous chapter, I argued that beauty platforms ascribe dominant caste markers to corporate managers and lowered caste markers to gig workers, therefore extending caste logics to new groups of 'dirty workers'. Here, I complicate this understanding by applying an intersectional (caste-patriarchal) approach to analyze gendered management practices between managers and gig workers. By caste patriarchy, I refer to the particular form of patriarchy observed in societies organized on the basis of caste (Chakravarti 1993; Gopal 2012; Rege 1998;

Velaskar 2016). In such societies, the position of lowered-caste women as both women and lowered caste, causes their interests and experiences to be frequently marginalized within both groups, as well as in within organizations that are shaped to respond to one or the other affirmatively (Crenshaw 1991; Rege 1998).

"Thrown in the Deep End": Differences between male and female managers' dynamic with gig workers

Observing interactions between gig workers and managers in the beauty platform office, I wondered whether managers are offered any professional protocols or sensitivity training to guide their interactions with gig workers. I asked Prakash, a male senior manager, this question:

> "Prakash kind of skipped the question. His response suggested that managers are thrown in the deep end with gig workers (a term I used to describe this situation and he fully agreed with it), and need to figure out for themselves how to navigate the situation of interacting with so many gig workers, and to decide for themselves what works. This potentially means there are no rules or professional boundaries or protocols established by the company itself".

This suggests that managers have to figure out affective protocols, expectations, and responsibilities by themselves. Since their work involves managing the affective moods of and relationships with hundreds of gig workers, this actually forms a large part of their job. While women gig workers undergo extensive professionalization training to structure their interactions with customers (Raval & Pal 2019), it appears that managers' professionalism is assumed and tied in with their identity (Tumbe 2020). In the absence of a professional script for interaction to use with gig workers in the office, managers find themselves having to create their own terms and rules of engagement with gig workers, which are likely to be tacitly imbued with the (caste, class, gender, religious) norms associated with their social locations. Because of managers' higher position in the platform hierarchy, these unofficial affective formats turn into

organizational norms over time. Gig workers, though they co-constitute these interactions, are

likely to adopt "intentionally invisible" strategies to manage the consequences of these particular

adopted affective formats in the platform office (Ballakrishnen 2022).

Male and female managers seemed to follow different interactional and affective scripts for

engaging with gig workers. The impression I got from speaking to gig workers about their

interactions with managers, and shadowing them in the platform office, was that in general, male

managers acted like good cops, and female managers like bad cops.

When I spoke to male managers, they shared how a large part of their jobs involved emotional

management of gig workers. Initially, Ankit said that he was surprised and alarmed when women

gig workers cried in front of him, shared deeply personal family stories to explain why they

couldn't work, and were emotionally expressive. He said they feel totally unequipped for

handling this but get used to it over time. Pointing to the need for empathy, he said:

> Ankit said that to do this job you must have a high empathy quotient. Everyone here [referring to
> managers] has a high empathy level because you can't do without it when working directly with
> gig workers. He gave an example: "A partner said I can't work in the afternoon because I need to
> go home for one hour to fill water, because that's the only time we can do that. How do you argue
> with that? You can't say anything". He said it is uncomfortable when partners are crying in front
> of them, that he didn't know how to handle it when that happened, and that over time they have
> also learnt to manage partners' emotions and soothe them first before addressing the problem.

These attempts to be empathetic perhaps translate into certain forms of reciprocal intimacy

between male managers and women gig workers. In the office, I observed that male managers

often spoke to women gig workers in informal, intimate, soothing, playful, and humorous tones

of voice. A female manager agreed and added, "In fact, female partners love male managers,

they just love them. I think it's exactly what you said about stereotypes that are present, but actually things work very differently most of the time".

Some women gig workers expressed to me that male managers take advantage of this informal relationship and encourage particular forms of intimacy. Tina, a 35-year-old gig worker, narrated to me how Sudheesh, a male manager, once clapped her on the shoulder while talking to her, which violated her sense of professional boundaries. She said, "I directly told him that I don't like to be touched like that". My field notes provide more examples of "unprofessional" emotional intimacies between male managers and female gig workers:

> Tina and Meera both worked with a manager who got transferred to a different city because of [unspecified] complaints against him, according to them. They separately spoke about how he "emotionally blackmailed" gig workers before leaving, saying, "all I did was try to help you", "what was the need to do this", "if you need me at any time in the future I am there for you", "call me anytime". Tina once called him after his transfer, because he was her main point of contact and she needed an urgent issue resolved. He picked up the call and told her, "I left my meeting for you, do you know that?". Tine says she snapped back at him with "Ok, go back to it then", and he replied, "You are being rude to me. Where is the need to talk to me like this?". Tina says that when she explained her problem of being blocked and asked him to resolve it, he didn't do anything, he just said, go talk to the people in the office and call them for help.

In another conversation, Sheetal emphatically told me that male managers help you more when you talk to them flirtatiously or sweetly, and even expect or ask for it at times:

> Sheetal said, sounding frustrated and angry, that gig workers must always speak to managers and office staff in a sweet and polite tone, otherwise they get penalized for it. She reported that whenever she quarrels with managers or complains about them, they tell her she can't talk to them that way, and start shouting at her or disciplining her. She also said that the male managers expect partners to go "gulu gulu" [referring to a kind of flirtation] with them and they say "mere saath acche se baat karna" [speak to me nicely] and to talk to them for a long time and humor them, "and if we do it, then they get our work done".

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In the absence of professional scripts, therefore, it appeared that male managers and women gig workers co-constituted their norms of interaction in the office, but these norms were deeply shaped by the unequal and gendered power relations between them.

In contrast, I observed that women managers typically used a strict, firm, but reasonable tone with women gig workers, placing an emotional distance between them. Women managers often berated, shouted at, or scolded gig workers; at other times, they would relax this demeanor to coax or cajole gig workers using a more intimate and casual tone of voice.

Why were the interactional scripts of male managers and female managers with gig workers, so different?

"No Men Allowed": Gendered logics governing the employment of women managers

During our conversation, I asked Prakash about the dynamics between male and female managers in the office:

> Prakash said that initially, there were only male managers in the office. He said that was a huge learning for all of them [male managers], working with so many women gig workers. Then they brought in more female managers thinking they [female managers] would be able to handle this better. Now it's a 50-50 gender ratio among the managers. I asked, do you also get tons of calls from gig workers, if you work with them directly? He said he keeps his phone switched off, so he doesn't get "bugged by calls". He also said that there are 2000 partners in the city, so people like Soni (the female manager overseeing them), get completely drowned in them. He shook his head, saying, "I can't handle it. I don't work as directly with partners as her".

This is striking; it suggests that caste-patriarchal logics may have been responsible for the beauty platform to hire women managers in the first place - to offload the "dirty work", that is, the

difficult and complex, affective and emotional labor of platform management, to women managers. This is in line with Ballakrishnen's (2022) work on 'accidental feminisms' which shows how gendered assumptions of work can advance rather than inhibit feminist outcomes, however, these moments of apparent equality follow from strictly patriarchal organizational scripts (Ballakrishnen 2022; Ballakrishnen 2017).

This claim checks out for multiple reasons. For instance: in the platform office, many training rooms are marked "no men", meaning that only female managers can oversee gig worker training sessions and evaluation exams. During these sessions, gig workers are expected to bring their own "models" to practice on. When no model can be found, female managers may volunteer as models, blurring the boundary between employer and customer. These are gendered forms of management labor experienced only by female managers, lending strength to Prakash's account of why the platform decided to hire the first group of women managers.

In effect, the affective and emotional labor of beauty platform management is implicitly offloaded to women managers, without it being recognized as work and without them being compensated for the extra time and labor they spend on it. This is what Goel (2018) would characterize as a 'third generation bias', a combination of older, overt forms of gender bias and newer, subtler forms of gender bias in the workplace. Again, without protocols, training or guidance for this extra work, female managers find themselves having to create their own terms and rules of engagement. The position that women managers are placed in and the gendered labor they are made to do, adds certain types of tensions and strains that male managers do not have to experience.

Observing their interactions, I felt women managers' frustrations with women gig workers often

seemed to come from a deeply personal and gendered place, and seemed to me to reflect the

unfair gendered burdens placed on them. Once, hanging out in the managerial spaces of a

platform office, I was briefly chatting with Sara, a manager who seemed to be having a stressful

day:

> Sara said, sometimes I can't believe how unhinged [the women gig workers'] excuses are [for not working enough hours]. I asked, what's the worst excuse you've heard? She said, well now there's this woman who's like I can't work for the next 3 months because my older child is in 12th standard. Sara said, "is she writing the kid's exam for him or what? What kind of excuse is this?". She said it as if to say, "I would never/never be able to use an excuse such as this as a professional woman.

Sara's outrage at the gig worker's lack of adherence to professional norms makes sense in

context of the gendered norms of respectability that underlie her own entry into a high-tech

managerial position and her expectations of herself. Radhakrishnan (2009) writes about how

work practices within Indian IT firms reflect the norms of middle-class culture in India. This

includes particular ideas of respectable femininity, which map on to the idea of a professional,

feminine, highly competent, working woman. Women who match these norms are rewarded

within the workplace while alternative femininities are sanctioned. This may explain why

women platform managers are especially irritated by women gig workers' shirking of these

norms. Yet, this is particularly striking because the gig worker in the instance above is seen as

unprofessional for prioritizing exactly the kind of concerted cultivation parenting work that

would have enabled women managers like Sara to enter the platform workforce as managers

themselves (Lareau 2003).

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The gendered motivations around the hiring of women managers and the gender-based distribution of tasks in the platform office, sheds light on why male and female managers seem to have such different dynamics with gig workers (Jarvinen & Mik-Myer 2024). Male managers benefit from the gendered emotional labor done by female managers, which saves them time and emotional labor, allowing them to have more easygoing and less strained relationships with gig workers. In contrast, female managers are emotionally overloaded with this work, and distance themselves from women gig workers in an effort to maintain their own status in the masculine corporate culture of the platform organization.

The end result is that male and female managers end up working with each other, effectively codifying class and caste solidarities, and against gig workers, serving to entrench the boundaries between "us" (managers) and "them" (gig workers). In other words, the intersectional effects of caste and gender in caste patriarchy serve to pit women gig workers against women managers to the overall benefit of male managers. Gendered solidarities are not able to cross these lines, and get reduced to ossified narratives of women's empowerment, enacted at the organizational level and used strategically to secure the company. Within this organizational system, the managers with the closest proximity to gig workers - typically lower-level managers and women managers - exhibit the most severe, strained and harsh dynamics towards gig workers, where one may expect the opposite. Studies in other contexts have noted how, once women reach positions of power within an organization, they are experienced by women workers below them as more punitive, kind of closing the door behind them rather than developing pipelines to bring more women in (Maume 2011; Rhoton 2011); this may be due to the additional, gendered and care

work burdens taken on by them which can lead to fatigue and burnout (Jarvinen & Mik-Myer 2024).

"You can't blame the gender": the invisibility of gender in managerial spaces

This leaves one last question about the gendered aspects of platform management. Do women managers show gender solidarity with each other, if not with gig workers?

Unlike gig workers, female managers operate in a relatively neoliberal, cosmopolitan work environment marked by gender equitable social norms and work protections. In a company blog post, a female manager at BeautiCare wrote about how the company made it easy for her to balance motherhood and a fast-paced startup life, sharing,

> "There have been days when I didn't have a babysitter. But instead of getting flustered and making that dreaded choice, I could have her spend the day happily in the office. We had an office off-site and my kid was a part of the board meetings there. She made new friends and the people I work with were amused to entertain. …. It is the small things and initiatives that make all the difference. A little empathy makes it possible for women in BeautiCare to not make a choice. To be a part of the exciting pace of the startup world and lead a multi-faceted life".

However, here, 'women at Beauticare' translates to 'women managers at BeautiCare', because the platform organization is constructed in such a way that these feminist benefits and a supportive work environment are structurally only accessible to women managers (Ballakrishnen 2017), and structurally denied to women gig workers. In fact, as I showed above, gig workers who try to shape work hours around urgent childcare tasks are penalized by female managers for doing so. Contrasting the differential experiences of women managers and women gig workers then suggests that caste patriarchy is systematically encoded into the platform organization.

In the limited data I have collected, interactions between female managers seem to reflect both feelings of competition, and of gendered sisterhood or support. However, in their conversations with me, female managers repeatedly chose *not* to read gender into their interactions with female manager colleagues, compared to their constant ascriptions of gender when talking about gig workers. For instance, during my interview with Anya, a junior manager, she described several negative experiences with female colleagues and superiors, but was conscious about ascribing gender *neutrality* to each of these experiences.

> "By the way, I had like male managers and I had like female managers. I'm going to be really honest here. I still see my male manager, like my first managers … my mentors. They still talk to me on a daily basis. My female managers don't even talk to me at all. They don't even respond. So I don't know that I had a great experience. I'm not saying that it's because of the gender. I don't know, like…my senior manager was taking my credit and not giving me enough credit for the work that I did. I used to spend like 3 to 4 hours on a call with her and that is not productive. You can't be on a phone for 3 hours doing one single thing. And because she was working from home. She used to always do virtual meetings, and I had other things to do in the office. It became difficult to manage more things. So that became really difficult. I did not have to face that when I was working [with a male manager]. One day. I just had a random mental breakdown, because I was like I just can't do this, and my business head was really sweet. She sat down with me, and then she [supported and comforted me]. … So that was very considerate, of course. So yeah, these things … often happen in each and every company".

While drawing a clear line between her everyday experiences with male and female superiors, Anya nevertheless stopped short at drawing gendered conclusions, instead sharing a particular instance of support from a female superior to diffuse the gendered implications of what she said. She added:

> "Once my manager left, I got another. There was a person who … was just heading 3-4 managers. So she was very stubborn about the way she wants to get things done. And one day she just called me and yelled at me on the call, and I was like you can't talk to me like that. You're not able to talk to me like that. And that happened with the female. So usually people also have the mindset that happened with the male. So yeah, these things happen. And I mean I. It was not a big shock or away, because I know that the person is like that, and you can't blame the gender".

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Anya's experiences with women managers seemed to be gendered in specific ways, however, her assertion that "you can't blame the gender" underscores women managers' tendencies to read gender neutrality and gender equality into their own work experiences. It appears that gender becomes invisible in managerial spaces, in contrast to its hypervisibility when it comes to gig workers. This mirrors the invisibility of caste in elite and dominant-caste spaces, in contrast to the hypervisibility of caste when it comes to dalit and lowered-caste individuals. This of course does not mean that caste is not present in elite spaces; just like it does not mean that gendered dynamics are not present between managers. But then what explains this pattern?

I have shown that beauty platforms strategically deploy progressive scripts around women's equality and women's advancement. Patel & Parmentier (2005) in their study of women IT managers write that as technology advances, it adapts to the existing social structure; in the Indian context, the persistence of gender norms continues to prevent women's equal participation in the IT economy and places them on the organizational periphery. This suggests that the organizational structure of beauty platforms places women managers in a situation where there is pressure to eschew gendered needs in order to fit into the male-led organization, even though women managers' entry into the platform is premised on gendered logics. Female managers navigate this tricky terrain by distancing themselves from women gig workers, on one hand, and performing gender neutrality in managerial spaces, on the other.

Discussion

In her groundbreaking paper on gendered organizations, Acker (1990) argued that organizational structure is not gender neutral, but shaped by gendered assumptions about the ideal worker. Further, she argued that the emergence of new technologies leads to reorganization of gendered

divisions of labor which "leave the technology in men's control and maintain the definition of skilled work as men's work and unskilled work as women's work". In this chapter, I have shown how gender and caste norms pervade interactions between gig workers and managers and shape the everyday work practices of the organization as well as its definitions of work.

Following the first part of this chapter which showed how high-level leadership beliefs create oppositional categories of 'desirable' corporate work and 'undesirable' gig work, here, I began by showing how in the absence of professional scripts, male and female managers came up with very different norms of socialization to structure their interactions with female gig workers. Male managers appeared to be more benevolent, friendly, and informal with gig workers, though gig workers felt that they also used this to develop undesirable intimacies with them (Hideg & Ferris 2016). In contrast, female managers kept an emotional distance from gig workers, and appeared to be more strict and severe. This is explained by their position within the platform organization, which only hired women managers in the first place due to gendered logics about their ability to take on the complex affective labor of managing gig workers. This is in line with organizational scholarship on how women are still associated with socially reproductive work within the organization, such as managing interpersonal relationships and human resource functions, which leads them to be preferred for these roles while men are preferred for leadership and strategic roles (Nayak 2015; Patel & Parmentier 2005). At the same time, the platform organization engages in "speculative isomorphism" to signal meritocracy and modernity, including a performance of gender equality and representation (Ballakrishnen 2024). This leads women managers to distance themselves from gig workers using scripts of respectable and professional femininity, which is its own form of symbolic capital, (Radhakrishnan 2009) even as they also

perform gender neutrality in their interactions with other (male and female) managers to maintain their position within the platform organization.

Examining the gender differences in male and female managers' scripts of interaction with gig workers allows us to go beyond the apparent harshness of the women managers by placing a critical eye on who in this equation has the capacity for distance, ease, flirtation, fun, and care - the male managers who are relatively less burdened with gendered emotional work. In this situation, women managers align with male managers by vilifying and penalizing women gig workers, rather than building solidarity with them on the basis of shared gendered experiences. Male managers benefit from their unpaid work, by saving time and emotional labor, and getting to have more easygoing and less strained relationships with gig workers. This analysis allows us to see how gender and caste norms "separate, stratify, and sanctify the many forms of injustice experienced by members of [gendered] groups, but [which] people routinely reimagine and redeploy to their own ends" (Benjamin 2019 cited by Ticona in Cameron et al, forthcoming).

In recent work, Ticona (Cameron et al, forthcoming) frames gender *as* technology, arguing that platform work is the result of gendered social relations, and "seeing gender as a technology of the gig economy means not only being attentive to the ways that gendered logics enter the design of technology but also how gender itself operates as a tool of vision and division". To paraphrase her argument, "looking at gender as a technology of the gig economy draws attention to the ways caste and gender are used together as "flexible capital" in attempts to (re)shape the meaningful boundaries of femininity (Nakamura 2014)". This analysis goes beyond Ridgeway's (2009)

understanding of gender as a background identity that shapes social behavior and organizational structures, infusing meaning into organizational practices.

Part 3: How Individual Actors Transgress Platform Management Norms to Enable Equity

A strong body of research has traced gig workers' resistance and repair strategies against algorithmic control (Ticona 2015; Anwar & Graham 2020; Qadri & D'Ignazio 2022). However, less is known about the ways in which platform managers go against company protocol and use intentionally invisible strategies to help gig workers, even when it is organizationally inappropriate or goes against the hierarchical logics of the platform organization. I often heard about and saw various entities in platform offices, from managers to trainers to recruiters to the security guards, renege on their platform responsibilities in order to lend a helping hand to a gig worker wherever possible. These instances show that the platform office is not a black-and-white space, emphasize that neither gig workers nor managers are monolithic entities, and help to understand the enabling environment and social forces that enable different actors to behave in certain ways.

In this chapter, I have shown how gender and caste intersect within the platform organization to structurally confer certain privileges and forms of power to managers, and to structurally disempower gig workers. I have shown how the platform's construction of workers and work is shaped by a caste patriarchal world view that underlies interactions between different groups of workers in the office. Beauty platform organizations create gendered scripts for socialization, based on top-level beliefs about labor, which codify and percolate into different levels of the

organizational hierarchy, shaping interactions between different types of workers. I will end this chapter by sharing some instances where managers and other entities in the platform office tried to safeguard the interests of gig workers even when not called to do so. Through these examples, I show that the codification of exploitative labor dynamics through organizational norms creates a situation where individual actors who may be sympathetic or well-meaning towards gig workers have to transgress in order to act ethically towards equitable ends.

Talking to gig workers and managers made clear that the platform organization prioritizes customers over gig workers overall, as it is crucial for them to capture and maintain a consistent consumer market. This means, as we have seen in previous chapters, that in cases of conflict between gig workers and managers, the platform typically takes the side of the customer. However, my field notes of the conversation with Prakash record how he often covertly flipped this script to prioritize the gig worker in situations of conflict with customers:

> Prakash spoke a lot about how he empathizes with the gig workers and because he works with them a lot, he often ends up optimizing in the gig worker's favor rather than the customer's, even though for the company, 'customer is king'.

In another instance, Tina, who is a gig worker, spoke to me about a friend of hers who was eventually advised by a manager to not join the company even though it went against his interests:

> "Tina told me a story about her friend, a young woman from the NGO, who lost her husband and had two little girls. She refused her parents' pressure to remarry, so they threw her out of the house. Tina asked her to apply to BeautiCare, and she paid the fees and did the training, and got the certificate. After that, the managers started forcing her to buy the kit, which is significantly more expensive. "Maine use mana kiya" [I told her not to], said Tina. "I told her, ask them to make you go live on the app first, so you have a guarantee of the job before paying such a big amount. But they wouldn't guarantee it". "She wanted to take a loan and get the kit", Tina said, "But I told her no. What if they don't give her the job after that? Finally, one of the 3 managers asking her to pay for the kit, called the girl privately and anonymously and told her not to buy the

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kit. He said, from my position, I can tell you this is a farce that I am a part of, but I don't want to be part of depriving your children from necessities - don't take the loan, if you do, the app will not allow you to earn for the first year, it will take away most of your money for the loan repayment".

The manager's change of heart in this instance reflects the ethical conundrums facing managers and the invisible strategies some managers employ to resolve these internal conflicts.

Next, I note an early instance of unexpected managerial support narrated by Prajakta, a gig worker who has been employed by the beauty company since its inception nearly a decade ago. A few years into joining, she became pregnant, and was prepared to leave the company as they did not offer maternity leave for workers. Prajakta described how her manager tried his best to secure maternity leave:

> Prajakta said that the manager even visited her house personally and told her that they would try to get her maternity leave for 3 months one way or another (she said this with a slight feeling of awe and deference). She told him that 3 months is too less, 6 months is the standard maternity leave. Eventually, they offered her a few months of maternity leave but it was not enough, so she left the company, and rejoined after a few years' gap.

Finally, I want to note that when in the office, gig workers tended to align with other more invisible entities in the platform office, such as the security guards, who knew all about the goings on in the office and could do various kinds of useful brokering tasks if they felt like it. Many gig workers also had their favorite trainers or managers, people who were kinder, more inclined to pick up calls and to help out, or to share important pieces of information. Over the space of a few months, I had been shadowing Sheetal, who had been laid off by the company, and was trying to be re-hired. I often visited the office with her during her recruitment process. During one of these visits, I recorded:

> "The security guard at the entrance, who is very good natured and friendly and helpful, took down her name in the register (he has to take the name, number, location and business of every

person who comes in). We were together so he didn't take mine. They spoke in Marathi, she was narrating her problem and cajoling him for help with a degree of intimacy not possible with the managers or recruiters, but marks a regional and linguistic connection. He asked us to sit and said he'll see what he can do.

…

She went in periodically to talk to the guard and he was helping her out with strategic information, advice and encouragement. He gave her tips on how to get an interview quickly and which manager was most free in the office. Later, she was stuck on getting her police verification done. He said, why don't you do it online? He showed her the correct webpage on his phone and asked her to fill out the online form. She came to sit next to me and we filled out the form together".

I view these actors as 'algorithmic brokers', who do the work of communicating and explaining algorithmic systems to gig workers (Kellogg et al 2020), especially in situations of breakdown, and engage in what Rahman & Valentine (2020) call 'collaborative repair'. However, here, doing this work requires going against the organizational norms of the platform. What is also clear in these instances is that there does not seem to be space for managers to create change at a larger level - their interventions towards gig workers are often limited to case-by-case instances, depending on their mood, inclination, and preferences (this is also true of other entities in the platform office, such as security guards). This points to the informal systems and behind-the-scenes brokering that tends to emerge and settle in organizations, often shaped by pre-existing gender, caste, class, regional norms, in the absence of a system of proper professional norms and redressal. This is in line with Shestakofsky's (2017) analysis of how platform organizations give rise to new complementarities between human beings and software systems. He writes about how "managers continually reconfigured assemblages of software and human helpers, developing new forms of organization with a dynamic relation to technology" (Shestakofsky 2017). Finally, in the case of the security guard, his brokering was facilitated by the intimacy of his regional (Marathi) connection with Sheetal. This echoes Karunakaran's (2016) work on how

low-status individuals in platform organizations are the ones who tend to perform brokering

roles.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

As I wrote this thesis, the world seemed to be going up in flames…again. For the last 12 months straight, the world has breached the 1.5-degree Celsius global warming limit, and India is boiling alive from unprecedented heat waves, which affect outdoor workers (including gig workers) the most. Israel is bombing Gaza relentlessly, creating the largest cohort of child amputees in history and ravaging people and the land with horrific violence. Microsoft, OpenAI, Google, Meta, and a host of others are battling it out in a quest to achieve AGI (Artificial General Intelligence), but what is getting lost in the hype is how quickly generative AI models guzzle up planetary resources, and their potential for wide-ranging and irreversible harms. Overall, the current global moment is marked by drastically rising anxieties over security, inequality, work, and the future, moored by the rise of AI technologies and digital platforms and their insertion into all aspects of our lives, even as these technologies also offer promises of solving these very crises. Institutional, legal, and policy responses to prevent and mitigate these interconnected crises seem unbearably slow, even reluctant. What is missing from the discussion is a deep understanding that social reproduction work – of caring for ourselves and others, of healing those who are ill, of producing nourishing food, of maintaining and taking care of common resources and living spaces – is a crucial part of surviving these crises. This work has always been seen as women's work. And as I have shown in this thesis, we are also undergoing a severe crisis of social reproduction.

It helps to place these events in a historical context. By taking a historical approach to women's work, we can identify recurring patterns with each wave of technological development. For instance, one of these patterns is that the emergence of new technologies has rarely elevated the

essential social reproduction work that societies need to survive or benefited women's status as socially reproductive workers; instead, in each work era, capital and technology have worked together to capture women's productive labor to advance market interests while never really addressing the double burden of care work that holds women back both at home and in the market. In the latest iteration of this history, AI-mediated platforms have emerged in India during a time when there is a deep decline in women's employment and a crisis of social reproduction, offering an "unemployment fix" and a "care fix" by simply bringing this care work into the market, through the underpaid and exploited care services of a reserve labor force of informal women workers.

In an environment marked by widespread informality and precarity, where women have a tremendous desire to work but stable work is hard to find, women are attracted to gig work because it allows them to access work despite their inflexible domestic obligations, and they are celebrated as empowered entrepreneurs as a result. Through digital platforms, social reproduction work is now being offloaded into the platform economy, intensifying the invisibility and feminization of such work, rather than stabilizing and raising its status as essential work. In reality, women are single-handedly compensating for states' disinvestment into social reproduction work, as their entry into the gig workforce not only ties them to underpaid informal work (instead of well-paid formal work) but also further fixes their role as unpaid domestic workers within the home (instead of freeing them from this sexual division of labor or transforming it) (Federici 2020).

Notably, neither the commodification of care work nor technologization of reproductive work have addressed the "exploitation inherent to reproductive work" which maintains its status as

inferior work (Federici 2020). In fact, as states accelerate the de-investment of public services, the amount of unpaid work performed by women is actually increasing, and it is spreading beyond just women workers to slowly affect all workers. As I argue in this thesis, the co-option of social and reproductive labor by platforms, and their feminization and commodification of the non-work aspects of our lives, is a deeply gendered phenomenon that increasingly extends the conditions of socially reproductive work to all workers. And therefore, the only way to address the harms caused by platform capitalism is to address the heart of these inequalities - which lie in the invisible, underpaid, devalued nature of socially reproductive work in society.

These themes are reflected in and substantiated by my empirical chapters, which consider the access, experience, and management of women's gig work in the beauty industry in Mumbai. In Chapter 5, I showed how access to platform work is not a singular, "one-and-done" point of entry for women, but is actually a dynamic and shifting process that I characterize as an *algorithmic maze* with no clear end point. Women have to actively bargain and negotiate with various institutions, including the family, in order to maintain their access to platform work, while algorithmically-mediated recruitment systems create weighted barriers that are designed to keep women workers on their toes even after they access work. This quality of precarity at the point of access itself, I argue, is a key feature of platform work today, and it is accelerated for women workers due to gendered factors. In Chapter 6, I showed how digital platforms socially reproduce the gender, class, caste, and religious social dynamics that underlie beauty work, even as they gamify risk, feminize work, incentivize competition, alienate workers, and erode community ties. This is the new structure of work; workers are able to survive in it by creating informal tactics and strategies that rely greatly on mutual aid, word-of-mouth, storytelling, and community support. In Chapter 7, I showed how the organizational hierarchy of beauty platforms

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is shaped by paternalistic top-level beliefs about platforms bringing a paradigm shift for labor, which influences the way platforms construct and structure gig work. I also identified differences in female managers' and male managers' managerial styles with gig workers and provided explanations for women managers' seemingly punitive dynamics with women gig workers.

The findings in these chapters challenge our ideas of what counts as work, how we should value workers, and how work shapes social order. They also fracture platforms' claims of formalizing informal work and offering security and control to workers. My findings suggest that in order to retain women in the workforce, there is a need to provide stable jobs, to address the precarities imposed by platform work, as well as apply structural solutions to ease the burdens of women's work - simply commercializing reproductive work will not solve the crises we find ourselves in. Platform capitalism thrives on creating a new moral order by fracturing the links between labor, livelihood, family, community, and care – but we need these links to thrive as human beings and maintain our societies. Addressing the issues posed by platforms then requires us to create new links between these integral parts of our lives.

As Federici (2020) argues, fighting for wage work cannot be only the path to liberation for women, because as long as reproductive work is devalued and considered women's work, women will always enter the market with less power and more vulnerability. Therefore, as I noted in Chapter 3, "what is needed is the re-opening of a collective struggle over reproduction aiming to regain control over the material conditions of the production of human beings and create new forms of cooperation around this work that are outside of the logic of capital and the market" (Federici 2020). To interrupt the historical pattern of exploiting women's work for market interests, a pattern that is contributing to widespread ecological destruction in our current

era, we must transform reproductive work from a punishing activity to a liberating one. This is one of the broader theoretical interventions of this thesis and it calls us to invest in imaginative, theoretical, and empirical work to this end. This is not an impossible ask and it has been done before. As I show in Chapter 3, the period between 1920-1970 in Mumbai reflected a time when the state actively took on the task of structurally balancing and supporting women's roles in the productive and reproductive spheres, through legislative and policy support. However, this kind of intervention has to go hand-in-hand with a confrontation of the patriarchal belief systems which collude with rationalist logics of employers to protect the interests of capital over the interests of women and society.

Proposed Orientations Towards Platform Research

I suggest three orientations towards platform research for future researchers, which I have adopted and exemplified in this project.

First, I suggest that generalizing about platforms on a global scale has limited utility. It is necessary to examine and situate platforms in their local contexts, to build a rich and diverse understanding of local factors shaping their operation, and then engage in comparative and cross-cultural work to make connections that scale beyond the local. I have argued earlier that disciplinary orientations of 'Global North vs Global South' approaches to platform work can be limiting rather than useful and can become ends in themselves without meaning (Bhallamudi 2023).

Second, I suggest that treating platform work as new and transformative can be damaging. It is necessary to historicize the emergence of platform work, understand its continuities and differences from earlier waves of tech work, and understand how capital, patriarchy, and

colonialism consistently co-opt new technologies in old ways. One of the interventions I make in my thesis is to locate my findings in the particular spatial and temporal context of Mumbai through a feminist historical analysis.

Third, I suggest that a more detailed discussion of methodology is necessary in platform work studies. 1) There is a high risk of researchers exploiting gig workers' time and experiences or accessing them in risky ways, so it is important to describe, think through and reflect on methodological decisions and dilemmas. 2) There is a need for a more community-oriented and participatory approach to platform research where researchers explicitly work with gig workers and try to ensure their research goes back to the community. 3) Platform work research, especially in venues designed for industry collaboration, may be co-opted by platform companies to hijack worker collectivization and reinforce union-busting strategies. This calls for a broader discussion on platform work research harms and the risks of co-option.

Prologue: Future Work

This thesis was carried out in a post-pandemic world, and I believe the world is yet to process the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, which hit socially reproductive essential workers, such as health care workers and mothers, the hardest. For a sudden, sharp moment, the pandemic clarified who the most important workers in our society are - the sanitation workers, healthcare workers, food workers, supply chain workers, teachers, and mothers, who we literally cannot live without - and we were suspended in a moment of hope that the world can be reordered in a way that is just and right, by elevating their work and de-elevating bullshit work (Graeber 2018). But that did not happen. In fact, the essential workers got hit the hardest and paid the lowest, while execs made record profits. Huge numbers of women, across sectors, across the world, left the

workforce because of the extreme strain of parenting and working from home, for which there was no support. The fog of climate despair lifted briefly and then came back, as nothing really changed. We are yet to really grapple with the death toll of the pandemic, or its public health implications. There is a kind of emotional numbness and willful blindness that a lot of people slipped into in order to keep going. During the Delta wave, in 2021, millions of people died of Covid in India (Banaji & Gupta 2022). The public healthcare system practically collapsed for a brief period. I vividly remember that thousands of people were desperately begging for oxygen cylinders on Twitter, and thousands more were creating a makeshift online volunteering system, plugging in contacts and networks and somehow getting medical supplies, food, transport across to families. And failing. Journalists reported on mass unmarked graves from Covid deaths. The Ganga was dumped full of bodies. Today, you are not allowed to mention any of this. People turn away. It never happened. It was not so bad. You should stop being so pessimistic. However, the undercurrents of grief many are grappling with silently, remembering family members lost, tell a different story.

What does it mean to have a functioning civil society at this moment in time? Born during a time of famine, disease, civil war, and instability, Hobbes famously argued in 1651 that life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" in its natural form (Hobbes 1651). This is why individuals sign a "social contract" with the state, agreeing to abide by a set of common rules, to ensure collective security and prosperity. Today, we understand civil society to mean spaces or organizations where private citizens come together to act for societal good, without interference from state or private business - this includes labor unions, NGOs, women's organizations, civic journalism, and more. But in this age of platform capitalism, where all aspects of our life have

moved partially or fully online, including traditional civic society spaces, the very essence of

civil society is seriously threatened - because digital platforms are fundamentally controlled by

either/both state and private companies, leaving very few spaces where citizens can safely come

together to question the state and create balancing counter-measures without interference

(Bernholz 2018). In addition, the *feeling* of civil society, of having a sense of togetherness and

belonging in a community that we wish to see flourish, is also under threat in the face of

increasing, digitally-mediated social polarization and institutional mistrust. To have a

functioning digital civil society, we need 1) structural spaces and built environments where we

can rebuild community networks and work together without threat, and 2) updated frameworks,

strategies, and toolkits to match the challenges of the digital age. The findings of my thesis very

much reflect a fraying fabric of digital civil society, while also highlighting the many ways in

which community is kept alive with love and care during these times, particularly by women

workers at the margins.

These are themes that I will be exploring more deeply in my post-doctoral work, where I intend

to study the politics of gig work through women gig workers' experiences, using collaborative

methodologies. In this thesis, I have found that women gig workers do not have enough

bargaining power to effectively push for structural changes in their favor. Therefore, cross-

sectoral toolkits and tactics to build workers' bargaining power through collectivization and

unionization are a pressing need in this new age of platform capitalism, which seeks to exploit

workers' socially reproductive capacities to the fullest. Responding to this need, in my future

work, I will be tracing the emergence of gig workers as a new political voting bloc and digital

civil society formation ahead of the 2024 Indian national elections, and examine their ongoing

collectivization and unionization process (shaped by their relationships with media, local

political parties, and national election agendas). This inquiry will be threaded by a focus on AI

explainability dynamics, examining how platform organizations strategically employ AI systems

to avoid accountability when gig workers experience adverse consequences, and how gig

workers engage with proximate sources of political power to access key organizational

explanations and demand redressal mechanisms. It is challenging to try to hold AI-mediated

institutional systems to account, as they are both opaque and constantly changing. Moreover, the

legal, regulatory, and policy landscapes around gig work firmly favor technology corporations.

Ali Alkhatib talks about the difficulty and futility of "rationalizing senseless bureaucracies" and

tracing AI systems at a time like this, when they can so easily render your work irrelevant by

tweaking their approach or data, a prospect he refers to as "AI Kremlinology" (Alkhatib 2024).

However, this is something we are going to have to cut through and deal with, if we are to

address ethical living in platform capitalism (Raval 2020).

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