

# Platforms, Power, & Politics

PERSPECTIVES FROM  
DOMESTIC & CARE WORK  
IN INDIA

घरेलू काम के लिए ऑनलाइन एजेंसी:  
फायदे और चुनौतियाँ

ಗೃಹ ಕಾರ್ಮಿಕರಿಗಾಗಿ ಆನ್‌ಲೈನ್ ಏಜೆನ್ಸಿಗಳು:  
ಅವಕಾಶಗಳು ಮತ್ತು ಸವಾಲುಗಳು

வீட்டுத் தொழிலாளர்களுக்கான  
ஆன்லைன் நிறுவனங்கள்:  
வாய்ப்புகள் மற்றும் சவால்கள்



The Centre for Internet and Society | India  
in collaboration with the Domestic Workers Rights Union | Bengaluru

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PERSPECTIVES FROM  
DOMESTIC & CARE WORK IN INDIA

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## Introduction

Domestic and care work industries in India have been the site of rapid platformisation over the past decade or so. Order books of digital platforms providing domestic and care work services in India were reported to have been growing by upto 60 percent month-on-month in 2016<sup>1</sup>. At the same time, this growth is concentrated among a few players, as has been the case in the e-commerce, transportation and logistics sectors.<sup>2</sup> It is also important to distinguish paid domestic and care work from these sectors in the platform economies, given the specific intersectionalities of class, caste and gender norms that characterise its organisation.

Broadly, the discourse on digital platforms providing home-based services can be summarised as follows: proponents argue that digitisation will act as a step towards bringing formalisation to the sector, while critics argue that platforms could replicate the exploitation of workers by further disguising the employer-employee relationship. Similar debates around lack of protections and precarity have also taken place in other occupations in gig work such as transportation and food delivery.<sup>3</sup> In fact, the similarity in precarity and the informal nature of this relationship across gig work and domestic work has led to domestic workers being labelled the original gig workers.<sup>4</sup> Domestic workers are particularly vulnerable and unprotected, which makes their work qualitatively different than most other sectors in the gig or sharing economy.

1 Kadakia, P. (2016, February 21). Bai on Call: How home service apps are changing domestic help market. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/more-lifestyle/bai-on-call-how-home-service-apps-changing-the-maids-market/story-s6zz6kmWwlaEamZ1yLxjaL.html>

2 Eyler-Driscoll, S., Schechter, A., & Patiño, C. (2018). Digital Platforms and Concentration. Promarket and University of Chicago Booth School of Business. <https://promarket.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/Digital-Platforms-and-Concentration.pdf>

3 Ticona, J., Mateescu, A., & Rosenblat, A. (2018). Beyond Disruption: How Tech Shapes Labor Across Domestic Work & Ridehailing. Data & Society. [https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Data\\_Society\\_Beyond\\_Disruption\\_FINAL.pdf](https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Data_Society_Beyond_Disruption_FINAL.pdf)

4 Geymonat, G., Marchetti, S., & Kyritsis, P. (2017). Out from the shadows: domestic workers speak in the United States. OpenDemocracy. <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/beyond-trafficking-and-slavery/out-from-shadows-domestic-workers-speak-in-united-states/>

Domestic and care work in India is characterised by a long history of informality and exclusion from right-according labour frameworks. The occupational history and demographic composition of domestic and care work also sets it apart from other sectors (such as transportation and logistics) which have been sites for 'disruption' by digital labour platforms. Women, particularly those with intersectional marginalities, including that of caste and class, are overrepresented in the informal economy globally and in India. Domestic work in particular has been stratified along the lines of caste and gender. Further, class has become more salient in producing stratifications in labour relations following urbanisation. In India, as in many southern contexts, domestic labour continues to be an undervalued and feminised occupation. Undervaluation stems not only from the kind of work performed, but also emerges from the positionalities of workers engaged in domestic work. Workers performing domestic and care work are predominantly Dalit and Adivasi women, who have migrated from rural areas to cities in search of work. Much like other occupations in the informal sector, domestic work has been delegated to 'unskilled' work in the hierarchy of labour in the neoliberal economy. At the heart of these dynamics is the "head versus hand hierarchy... encoded in caste with mental labour assigned to dominant castes and physical labour to oppressed ones".<sup>5</sup>

These intersections have shaped employment relations in the sector in different ways, which range from feudal to contractual models. Digital platforms are increasingly becoming intermediaries in this space, mediating between so called 'semi-skilled' or 'low-skilled' workers from historically marginalised classes and castes, and millions of middle and upper class employers across urban regions in India. Domestic work has had a strong presence of recruitment intermediaries. Recruitment has taken place through two primary routes in India—through informal kinship networks and word-of-mouth referrals, or through placement agencies.<sup>6</sup> In the former case, negotiation of the terms of work is entirely dependent on the worker, while in the latter the agency facilitates placement and negotiates on behalf of workers. Very little literature exists about placement agencies. Due to lack of regulation or even registration, there is almost no data about how many such agencies operate nationally. N. Neetha's work, which remains one of the most reliable studies on placement agencies in North India, finds that they commonly charge exploitative commissions from workers, withhold wages, and are even complicit in facilitating bonded labour and human trafficking.<sup>7</sup> Gajjala describes this as a context in which displaced bodies are absorbed into a consumer base and also made available for various deskilled (and underpaid) forms of labour, while their forced mobility is characterized as progress.<sup>8</sup>

Assessing digital platforms as an alternative to placement agencies and word-of-mouth placement becomes important as employment trends indicate that domestic and care work is set to be an expanding source of work for women in the coming years.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Basole, A. (2018, January 1). The Skilled and the Schooled: India's struggles over what counts as knowledge. The Caravan. <https://caravanmagazine.in/reviews-essays/india-struggle-knowledge>

<sup>6</sup> ILO Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour. (2015). Indispensable yet unprotected: Working conditions of Indian Domestic Workers at Home and Abroad [Report]. [http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/publications/WCMS\\_378058/lang-en/index.html](http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/forced-labour/publications/WCMS_378058/lang-en/index.html)

<sup>7</sup> Neetha, N. (2008). Regulating Domestic Work. Economic and Political Weekly, 43(37), 7–8. <https://www.epw.in/journal/2008/37/commentary/regulating-domestic-work.html>

<sup>8</sup> Gajjala, R. (2017, February 23). The problem of value for "women's work" [Blog]. GenderIT.Org. <https://www.genderit.org/editorial/editorial-problem-value-%E2%80%9Cwomen%E2%80%99s-work%E2%80%9D>

<sup>9</sup> KPMG Advisory Services. (2013). Human Resources and Skill Requirements in the Domestic Help Sector. Government of India, Ministry of Skill Development and Entrepreneurship.



When we conceptualised this work in 2018, platformisation in domestic and care work/ers had received relatively less public and research attention than other sectors of the platform economy.<sup>10</sup> Since then, there several worker-first research works have sought to plug this gap globally, as well as in India. These have taken the form of comparative sector-specific approaches in some cases<sup>11</sup>, a case study based platform-specific approach in others<sup>12</sup>, and a focus on women's work in the platform economy at large in one case<sup>13</sup>. It is within these macro-approaches towards amplifying platform workers' voices and experiences that we situate this report. The strength of this report lies in being one of the first to grapple almost exclusively with the organisation of platformed domestic and care work in India, but most importantly in the methodological approach. We employ participatory, non-extractive feminist principles and tools throughout the project: from conception to design and dissemination. We expect that our methodological approach and reflections can lead to further work on technology research that seeks to engage with marginalised communities as more than target communities of research interest.

As our fieldwork was conducted between June to November 2019, we are unable to capture the impact of covid-19 on this sector. As has been documented through the past year, workers in the platform and informal economies are facing deep and long-term impact. In the afterword to this report and through other publications in this project, we reflect on the pandemic's impact on workers and the role played by companies.



**10** FIRN: Feminist Internet Research Network. (2018, November 15). Association for Progressive Communications. <https://www.apc.org/en/project/firn-feminist-internet-research-network>

**11** Ticona, J., Mateescu, A., & Rosenblat, A. (2018). Beyond Disruption: How Tech Shapes Labor Across Domestic Work & Ridehailing. Data & Society. [https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Data\\_Society\\_Beyond\\_Disruption\\_FINAL.pdf](https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Data_Society_Beyond_Disruption_FINAL.pdf); Hunt, A., & Samman, E. (2019). Women in the gig economy: paid work, care and flexibility in Kenya and South Africa. Overseas Development Institute. <https://odi.org/en/publications/women-in-the-gig-economy-paid-work-care-and-flexibility-in-kenya-and-south-africa/>

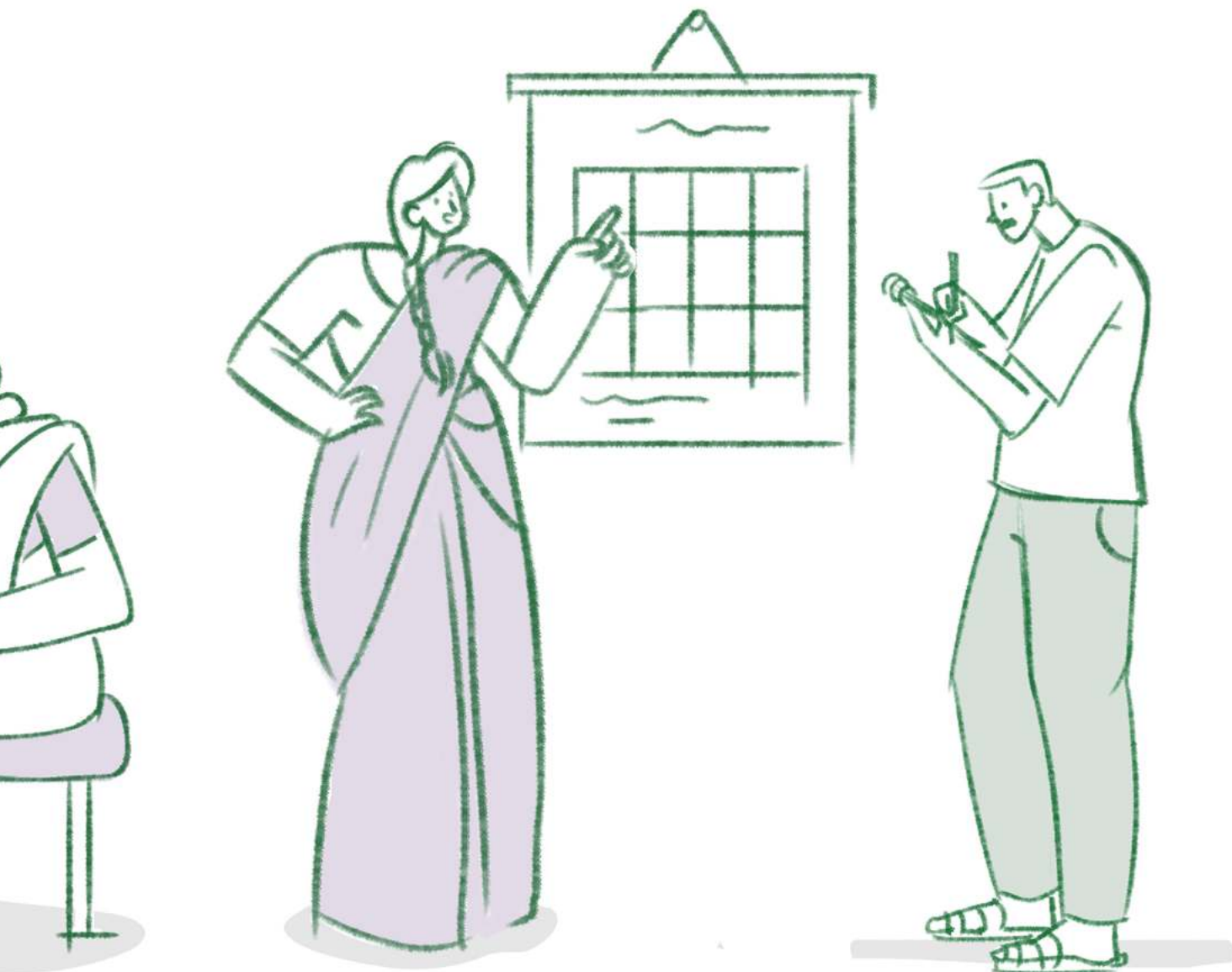
Blanchard, O. (2021). Home care and digital platforms in Spain. Digital Future Society. <https://ddd.uab.cat/pub/estudis/2021/237123/Home-care-and-digital-platforms-in-Spain.pdf>

**12** Aneja, U., & Shridhar, A. (2020). Worker Wellbeing on Digital Work Platforms in India: A Study of OlaCabs and UrbanClap in New Delhi. Tandem Research. <http://tandemresearch.org/publications/worker-wellbeing-on-digital-work-platforms-in-india-a-study-of-olacabs-and-urbanclap-in-new-delhi>

Chaudhary, R. (2020). India's Emerging Gig Economy: The Future of Work for Women Workers. IWWAGE. <https://iwwage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/IWWAGE-Gig-Economy-Report.pdf>

**13** Ghosh, A. (2021). Women Workers in the Gig Economy in India: An Exploratory Study. Institute of Social Studies Trust. [https://www.isstindia.org/publications/1619503999\\_pub\\_GIG\\_Report\\_Final\\_-\\_Low\\_Res\\_compressed.pdf](https://www.isstindia.org/publications/1619503999_pub_GIG_Report_Final_-_Low_Res_compressed.pdf)





## Methodology

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We used a feminist ethnographic approach to the data collection. Between June to November 2019, we conducted 65 in-depth semi-structured interviews with multiple stakeholder groups primarily in New Delhi and Bengaluru (see Table). We also did two focus groups with domestic workers in New Delhi.

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**We picked Delhi and Bengaluru as the field sites as:**

- a) both cities are key nodes in the placement networks of domestic workers in the country, and**
- b) high concentration of digital platforms in this sector nationally are operational in these cities.**

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We interviewed workers, both on and off platforms, platform companies, unions, and government stakeholders. Of the workers we interviewed, a majority were women, but men were included as well (see Appendix). We did not specifically target members of specific caste groups as respondents. Instead, we worked with the understanding that Dalit and Adivasi women are over-represented among domestic workers. Respondents in our sample set included Dalit, Bahujan and Savarna<sup>14</sup> workers, and were largely from low-income families.

Interviews in New Delhi were undertaken by the authors, while interviews with workers in Bengaluru were undertaken by grassroots activists in Bengaluru, affiliated with the Domestic Workers Rights Union (DWRU). They were first-time researchers, and were given basic training in conducting interviews. Their participation was critical to ensure that we were able to design the data collection and analysis in a way that would be useful and accountable to unions and workers collectives. They used existing networks with members to identify domestic workers on platforms, and brought rich experience and knowledge about workers' conditions and challenges of collectivisation to the project.

Workers across both field sites were interviewed in spaces familiar to them. Most often, this would be their homes. The interviews were in several languages, such as Hindi, Kannada, and Tamil.

We reached out to companies based in other cities in addition to our field sites, including Kolkata and Mumbai. As will be discussed in later sections, the presence of digital platforms providing domestic services is largely restricted to major metropolitan cities. We expect our findings to be consistent across Tier-I cities in India, but expect greater variations if platforms grow in Tier-II cities and beyond. We also expect our work to be useful for other contexts in the global south due to similarity in the type of domestic work (regular, continuous employment) as opposed to 'gigs' or hourly-based tasks as in northern contexts.

In implementing the data collection approach, we employed feminist methodological principles of intersectionality, self-reflexivity, and participation. The methodology draws on standpoint theory, which encourages knowledge production that centres the lived experiences of marginalised groups. We were acutely aware of our own positionality as high income, Savarna researchers studying a sector dominated by Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi women from low income groups. This power differential was softened partially by involving DWRU at the outset of the project, from planning to implementation.

Nevertheless, we undertook the authorship of the final report which impacted the manner in which the findings and respondents' voices are narrativised. Separately, in response to several respondents having had experiences of feeling abandoned by researchers after opening up to them with their personal histories, we are also integrating a feedback loop with workers and unions to discuss research findings.

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**Interviews were conducted with diverse stakeholders, with the aim of bringing out conflicts and convergence in their narratives. At the same time, we make the feminist politics of the project explicit by placing workers' narratives at the centre of the study.<sup>15</sup>**

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<sup>14</sup> We define Savarna as those who benefit from caste privilege. Dalit-Bahujan groups include those at the bottom of caste hierarchies, as well as others who are disadvantaged by their caste such as peasant communities who are included in the Other Backward Classes in Indian law. See Karunakaran, V. (2016, July 14). The Dalit-Bahujan Guide to Understanding Caste in Hindu Scripture | by Valliammal Karunakaran | Medium [Blog]. Medium. [https://medium.com/@Bahujan\\_Power/the-dalit-bahujan-guide-to-understanding-caste-in-hindu-scripture-417db027fce6](https://medium.com/@Bahujan_Power/the-dalit-bahujan-guide-to-understanding-caste-in-hindu-scripture-417db027fce6)

<sup>15</sup> Rathi, A. and Tandon, A. (2019). Doing Standpoint Theory. GenderIT. <https://www.genderit.org/articles/doing-standpoint-theory>

## LIST OF STAKEHOLDERS

	DELHI	BANGALORE
<b>Workers on platforms<sup>16</sup></b>	12	17
<b>Workers not on platforms</b>	6	6
<b>Unions</b>	2	2
<b>Companies</b>	9	8
<b>Government</b>	3	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>33</b>

<sup>16</sup> 'Workers on platforms' refers to workers who have ever registered on a digital platform. They may not have received work through the platform, and may not have been active on the platform at the point of the interview.

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Identifying workers on platforms was expected to be a challenge due to the dispersion of domestic and gig workers.

We employed a four-pronged approach to locate workers:

- a) through unions,
- b) by asking platforms to connect us with workers on their platforms for the research,
- c) snowballing through other workers, and
- d) hiring workers or paying to view their profiles on platforms.

Finding workers through unions was successful only in Bengaluru. DWRU was able to probe their membership to identify the placement routes through which they had secured work. While much of their membership was unaware of digital platforms, some had heard of domestic workers in their networks securing work online. In New Delhi, none of the unions we approached were aware of digital platforms either, as much of their work was focused on securing post-recruitment security.

The second prong, of asking platform managers and representatives to connect us with workers, resulted in more success with locating workers. This success was somewhat unanticipated by us. However, only two such companies sought consent of workers before sharing their information with us. In these interviews, in addition to our positions as upper-class researchers, we were also mindful of the implications of being introduced by platform representatives, as they were often managers of workers being interviewed. In fewer instances, we were able to approach workers visiting platforms' offices. This was rare. Most platform companies did not have office spaces which were visited by, or designed for workers.

Relatedly, snowballing was not very effective either. Workers on platforms are usually disconnected from other platform workers due to the lack of shared workspaces. The fourth prong, directly hiring workers, was done to locate workers on some of the platforms that we were unable to secure interviews with. This approach was fraught with distinct ethical challenges. We subscribed to services offered by platforms to then be "matched" with a worker/workers who we may be able to interview. In doing so, we were actively contributing to the structures of platformisation being studied, and also occupying the high-power and disingenuous positions as customers/employers.

# Findings

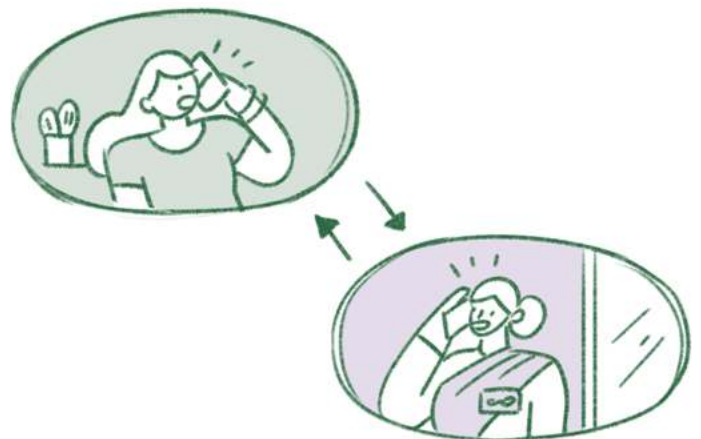
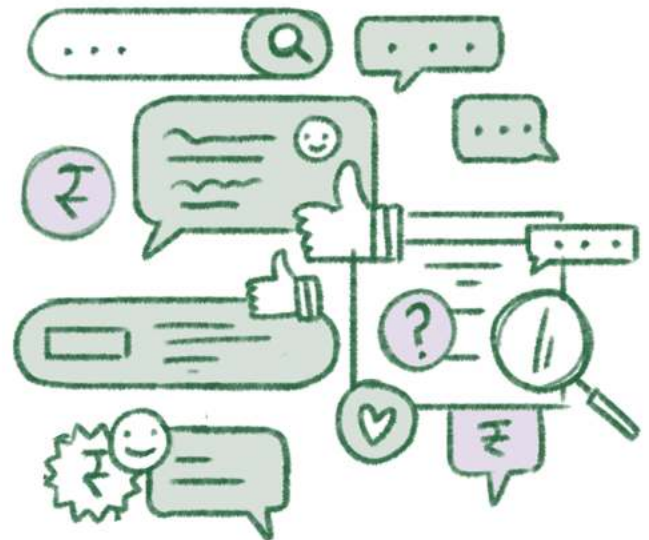
## Modelling Labour Relationships

Literature on platformisation of domestic work refers to two kinds of platforms— "marketplace" and "on-demand".<sup>17</sup>

**Marketplace platforms** are virtual job boards. They target the hiring process, and rely on sharing worker profiles with potential customers. The process of match-making is usually algorithmic, although we also found examples of this being done manually as well. Marketplace platforms control the visibility of workers' profiles. Customers can sort and filter through these profiles, and workers on marketplace platforms are also given a rating by these platforms and/or customers.

**On-demand platforms** place workers in very short-term gigs, which are quite unlike the historical nature of paid domestic and care work relationships. These platforms resemble the familiar 'Uber model' of digital labour platforms. In the on-demand model, workers are algorithmically matched to customers, with the terms of service, including wages, set by the platforms. Workers are forced to accept a standard contract with no room for negotiation. Apart from wages, companies also determine the tasks to be performed, and the duration in which to complete tasks. Some also provide uniforms and trainings to workers. Most on-demand platforms have extensive systems to collect feedback from customers and monitor workers as they perform tasks.

From among the domestic work categories we have identified, cleaning work is the most popular service offering of on-demand platforms. UrbanCompany, the only company that ventured into offering other domestic services, such as cooking and care services on an on-demand model, A representative of Urban Company, one of the most popular on-demand platforms, told us that services such as cooking and cleaning were unprofitable and did not receive much uptake. This was because customers largely require full-time regular placements rather than short-term gig workers for those tasks.



<sup>17</sup> Ticona, J., Mateescu, A., & Rosenblat, A. (2018). Beyond Disruption: How Tech Shapes Labor Across Domestic Work & Ridehailing. Data & Society. [https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Data\\_Society\\_Beyond\\_Disruption\\_FINAL.pdf](https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Data_Society_Beyond_Disruption_FINAL.pdf)





## TYPE OF COMPANIES <sup>18</sup>

MARKETPLACE	ON-DEMAND	DIGITAL PLACEMENT AGENCY
Helper4u	UrbanCompany	Domestic for you
Helpers Near Me	Housejoy	Housmaid
Babajob by Quikr	Cleanpro	Homedruid
Rozgar Khoj	Mr. Right	Kaamwalibais
	CrewOnJobs	Gharelu Help
	Unplango	
	Broomberg	
	Quikr	
	Cleansly	

<sup>18</sup> Several of the companies we surveyed have since closed operations, particularly in light of the economic crisis triggered by Covid-19. This market, like other sectors in the platform economy, is increasingly becoming dominated by two to three large companies.

## COMPARING PLATFORM MODELS

	MARKETPLACE	ON-DEMAND	DIGITAL PLACEMENT AGENCY
<b>Form of Employment</b>	Place workers in both kinds of employment - short-term 'gigs', and regular (part- or full-time) employment across all tasks.	Only offer short-term cleaning gigs.	Offer regular (part- or full- time) employment across all tasks.
<b>Recruitment</b>	Workers are algorithmically shortlisted on the basis of the requirements of employers. Employers then contact shortlisted workers to interview and hire.	Workers are algorithmically matched with employers depending upon their requirements, and workers have the option to digitally accept or decline jobs.	Workers are algorithmically or, more often, manually, shortlisted on the basis of the requirements of employers. Selected workers could be sent to employers for interviews or directly be placed.
<b>Price/Wage Setting</b>	Workers set and list their wage expectations, although some platforms have integrated nudges such as mandating a minimum wage or suggesting competitive wage expectations.	The pricing mechanism is controlled entirely by the platform.	The pricing mechanism is controlled entirely by the platform. Wages tend to be in line with prevailing market rates in this sector.
<b>Dispatch</b>	Platforms play no role in dispatch.	Workers are assigned locations for which they will be receiving requests from employers. They can accept or deny these requests.	Workers are assigned specific employers. Transportation support may be provided to workers.
<b>Task Composition</b>	Workers can be hired for one or combinations of, occupations preferred among: cleaning, cooking, babysitting etc.	Workers enlist to perform one or multiple tasks. Platforms categorise tasks, and can also bundle them together. For example, a cleaner may get a gig for bathroom/ kitchen/ full house cleaning. Full house cleaning may then be further disaggregated by room, balconies etc.	Workers can be hired for one, or combinations of occupations preferred among: cleaning, cooking, babysitting etc.

<b>Platform Revenue</b>	Employers pay a fee according to the number of workers that are shortlisted for them. The one time fee is typically in the range of ₹ 100-500. Registration is free-of-cost to workers.	Platforms charge a commission, typically of 20-30% or more, out of the fee paid by employers for each 'gig'. Platforms may also charge on-boarding fees, costs for mandatory work related equipment, or hold a security deposit from workers.	Employers pay a large fee, ranging from ₹ 5000 - 10,000 for their value-added services. This could be in the form of a one-time fee before placement, or a recurring monthly fee. Registration is free-of-cost for workers.
<b>Cancellation Fees</b>	Workers do not face any costs for failing to respond to or accepting jobs.	Workers face punitive penalties for cancellation.	Platforms may retain workers' salary for the month if they terminate employment without notice.
<b>Ratings</b>	One-way rating system with workers rated by the platform and employers.	One-way rating system with workers rated by employers.	One-way rating system with workers rated by employers.
<b>Contractual Arrangements</b>	No contracts exist between workers, platforms, and employers.	Platform treats both customers and workers as customers of technological services from the platform. Both parties have to agree to a standard terms of service before transacting with platforms.	Platforms can have contractual arrangements with both workers and employers. These enlist terms of employment, with the stipulated period usually being one year. The employer is guaranteed upto 3 replacement workers in this period. Workers can freely terminate their job, although they are not guaranteed another job thereafter.
<b>Payment Method</b>	Platforms do not manage workers' payments.	Invoicing and payments are managed entirely by platforms.	Platforms tend to not manage workers' payments.

Most on-demand platforms classify workers as independent contractors. The treatment of workers as contractors precludes workers from accessing rights and protections associated with an employment status. In the sample for this project, there were two notable exceptions: Cleanpro and Broomberg. Both these companies have formal employment contracts with workers. This includes a fixed monthly salary independent of the vagaries of customer demand, and contributions to social security protections such as health insurance, and a provident fund. Other on-demand platforms provide none of these protections, even though the workers we interviewed were largely working full-time for one platform.

One on-demand platform, Quikr, identifies as being in the business of 'lead generation'. Quikr sub-contracts work to only staffing agencies, instead of directly onboarding workers. In doing so, they offload their labour responsibilities and liabilities to staffing agencies, by creating an additional layer of legal distance between themselves and workers (in comparison with the independent contractor model adopted by other on-demand platforms). This model of gig work is also being adopted by digital platforms in the global north in response to legal and regulatory demands for platforms to adopt employment standards.<sup>19</sup>

Domestic and care work in India has had a long, problematic history of staffing and placement agencies notorious for exploitation of varying degrees. Representatives of Quikr claimed to be aware of these histories and realities of staffing agencies in India and asserted that the company policy was to only work with other agencies that practice 'good' employment practices. Quikr only hires agencies that employ salaried workers as opposed to contracted labour.

The final category we identify, **digital placement agencies**, is possibly unique to care and domestic work in the global south. The business model of a digital placement agency is identical to traditional placement agencies, except that their operations are digitally mediated. They create a database of workers, through which workers are manually or algorithmically matched with employers based on their requirements. Workers are placed in long-term live-in or live-out work, as has been the norm historically in the sector.

Digital placement agencies charge a one-time fee for fulfilling employers' demands. They actively determine workers' wages and tasks to be performed. After placement, monthly salaries are paid in full by employers, directly to workers. Digital placement agencies also adopt a very hands-on approach, by guaranteeing a number of temporary or permanent replacements if a worker is on leave or seeks to quit employment.

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**The digitisation of placement agencies makes a significant difference to their functioning. They have to be registered companies due to the visibility of the digital space, while offline placement agencies can choose to 'fly under the radar' with less scrutiny.**

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Digital placement agencies tend to not charge any registration fee from workers. This is a significant shift as fees from workers formed an integral part of the business model of offline placement agencies. Further, offline agencies operate by sourcing workers from rural areas - at which point the worker could have very little knowledge about the destination - and bringing them to urban areas to find work. Workers in this situation have been found to be extremely vulnerable and dependent on agents. In contrast, digital placement agencies place workers already looking for work in urban areas, who tend to be less vulnerable to exploitation due to reduced reliance on agents or intermediaries for securing their livelihoods.

<sup>19</sup> Butler, S. (2021, April 21). Just Eat to offer 1,500 Liverpool couriers minimum hourly rate and sick pay. The Guardian. <http://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/apr/21/just-eat-to-offer-1500-liverpool-couriers-minimum-hourly-rate-and-sick-pay>  
Kozłowska, H. (2019, October 17). A Web of 'Partner' Companies Keeps Uber Out of Trouble in Poland | Heinrich Böll Stiftung | Washington, DC Office - USA, Canada, Global Dialogue. OneZero. <https://onezero.medium.com/a-web-of-partner-companies-keeps-uber-out-of-trouble-in-poland-ee8a82ffcd2>

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**The following sections discuss the implications of these operational models of digital platforms for securing and protecting workers' rights.**

# Accessing Work

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## Workers' Strategies to seek Employment

The entry of digital platforms has had a varied impact on recruitment strategies for domestic workers. We find that domestic workers with prior experience in labour markets see digital platforms as a contingency route to seek jobs. They continue to rely on kinship networks and word-of-mouth placement as primary routes into employment.

This is because experienced domestic workers have very little information about and trust in 'newer' online platforms, when compared to traditional kinship networks. In some cases this distrust was reinforced after they did not find work through digital platforms for months after registering with them. Distrust was also amplified due to the history of extractive intermediaries operating in domestic labour markets.

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**None of the typical characteristics of 'gig work' that have come to exemplify ride-sharing models such as seeking flexibility or entrepreneurship are articulated by domestic workers as the motivation for registering on platforms.**

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Digital platforms play a stronger role in job seeking strategies for women entering domestic work for the first time. In our sample, these women were stay-at-home mothers who tended to be better educated and have higher levels of digital access than existing domestic workers. Opting for domestic work was distress-driven in the absence of other paid work for these women. Most such respondents had unsuccessfully leveraged informal social networks before turning to digital platforms to find work. Being first generation domestic workers, they had weak social networks, making digital platforms a much more reliable option.

Digital platforms are thus able to extend opportunities to those who do not have existing networks to find domestic work. However, such isolation from workers' networks has several associated risks.

First-generation workers did not know any other domestic workers, on the platform or otherwise, and therefore had little knowledge of standard wages or negotiating strategies. This isolation from workers' networks is then inherent to and is amplified in digitally mediated labour.

**Reema:** My husband and I separated recently, and my daughter had an accident and needs surgery.

I have been looking for work through my friends for months, but I didn't find anything. My son's friend told me one day to search on Google for domestic work. I kept looking through other sources, but eventually gave in and started searching. I know broken English so I was able to register myself.

**Interviewer:** Did you also find out about any health schemes or other benefits being offered by the platform?

**Reema:** No I don't know anything about this. All I know is, I got a call one day and went to work.

**Interview with woman worker registered on marketplace platform, New Delhi**



## Platforms’ Recruitment Strategies

Despite the greater reliance of first-time domestic workers on digital platforms, we find that platforms tend to focus their recruitment strategies on communities and networks of experienced domestic workers. As compared to the profile of first-generation workers described above, these workers tend to belong to even lower income backgrounds, have low levels of education, and have very little digital access. Such communities and networks represented a ready pool of workers to populate platforms’ databases—a metric that platforms hold key.

We find that platforms adopt multiple approaches to identify workers to be recruited. These are adopted across all three platform models:

**‘Onboarding’ camps** –information and onboarding ‘camps’ are organised by platforms after identifying areas, typically urban slums, where a large number of domestic workers are already residing. These camps typically involve representatives of companies visiting residential areas to solicit workers to be onboarded. They manually input their data and identity documents onto the platforms. In some cases, they also ask workers about the problems they currently face in their work and offer placement through the company as a route out of exploitative work.

**Mamta:** One madam approached lots of people in the neighbourhood one day for different kinds of blue-collar work. They told us that they are a service for domestic help and security guards. They didn’t give any other information. They said they will get work for everyone - that one day we will get a call offering work. They asked everyone for photocopies of their Aadhaar card. Some people refused, because they didn’t trust that woman. I gave it. She spoke to me nicely, asked me about my problems in finding work as a domestic worker.

Interview with woman worker on a marketplace platform, New Delhi





Two strategies that platforms use in addition to onboarding camps include a **referral process**—this is either in the form of referrals from existing workers on the platform or employers; and **self-registration**— where workers can register themselves on platforms by filling out forms available online. This is promoted through offline and online advertising campaigns. However, some platforms don't provide this option at all, instead relying on more 'trusted' methods such as referrals and 'onboarding' camps.

Another adjacent approach to onboard workers is one in which traditional placement agencies are onboarded to provide a ready supply of workers, while platforms only engage in generating leads for work to be performed.



Companies usually use a mix of these strategies. However, a preference for a particular strategy can be inferred from the platform type matrix:

RECRUITMENT STRATEGIES OF PLATFORM COMPANIES			
STRATEGIES	MARKETPLACE	ON-DEMAND	DIGITAL PLACEMENT AGENCY
Information & Onboarding Camps	👍		👍
Referral Process		👍	
Self-Registration	👍	👍	👍

# Digital Access & Physical Mobility

It is evident that stratifications in education and digital access impact and inform workers' access to and imagination of work that is digitally mediated. Irrespective of experience in labour markets, women domestic workers tend to belong to marginalised socio-economic and geographical positions with low levels of digital access and literacy. Less evident is the affordances that digital platforms make to contend with these realities.

Each of the three types of platforms we identify approach these challenges of digital access in different ways.

Marketplace platforms and digital placement agencies provide livelihood opportunities to workers who are not digitally connected, through the recruitment strategies identified above. This is possible because both types of platforms only require workers to have access to a basic phone to be placed through them.

Marketplace platforms further incorporate elements that include, to a limited degree, workers across the spectrum of digital access. Workers with higher levels of digital access and literacy can self-register, which most marketplace platforms allow. For workers with lower levels of digital access, onboarding camps are useful as platform representatives complete the onboarding and verification procedures. However, this route is only available to workers who live in localities that are recognised by platforms as relevant and large enough to expend labour and capital resources on.

**Kavita:** These online companies are not made for workers like us. We can only find work through word-of-mouth - how can we just upload a document and find work?

**Interview with workers on marketplace platform, New Delhi**

We found that workers who are not digitally connected most often stumble across digital platforms through their traditional word-of-mouth networks. Many domestic workers we spoke to did not think of the internet as a medium through which work in this sector can be found, and had little information about platforms. Knowing a worker who works with a platform is then one of the primary routes into platform-mediated domestic work.

Access to work through on-demand platforms is entirely digitally mediated. Workers need to have constant access to smartphones to be able to successfully find work through on-demand platforms. Workers also need to have the skills to perform relatively complex tasks on smartphones. This includes using the platform's mobile application for reviewing and responding to task assignments, making digital transactions and tracking payment histories, and using off-app features such as calling and GPS navigation.

This makes cleaning work on on-demand platforms very exclusionary for women domestic workers. Women workers we interviewed spoke about very limited access to phones among women in their communities, with the male members of families having control over the shared family phone. This is also reflected in research on the digital gender gap in India.<sup>20</sup> On-demand companies we spoke to indicated that they received little to no job applications from women for cleaning jobs, while other segments such as beauty work primarily receive applications from women workers. This is because women opting for domestic work tend to belong to low income groups with low levels of digital access, while beauty work tends to be dominated by women from middle income groups.<sup>21</sup> Cleaners are therefore all men on on-demand platforms, despite being a women-dominated task in traditional domestic work. In our sample, only one on-demand platform—CrewOnJobs—onboarded women workers for cleaning jobs. This was possible because in addition to algorithmic management, they also had the option for workers with basic phones to be managed by human managers through calling and SMS.

Another key mediator of finding work through any type of digital platform is the ability to be physically mobile—to travel across the city or even different cities to find work. This acts as a major barrier to placement through platforms for women workers, who most often do not have such mobility.

<sup>20</sup> Barboni, G. (2018). A Tough Call: Understanding barriers to and impacts of women's mobile phone adoption in India. Harvard Kennedy School: Evidence for Policy Design. [https://epod.cid.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/2018-10/A\\_Tough\\_Call.pdf](https://epod.cid.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/2018-10/A_Tough_Call.pdf)

<sup>21</sup> Raval, N., & Pal, J. (2019). Making a "Pro" : 'Professionalism' after Platforms in Beauty-work. Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction, 3(CSCW), 175:1–175:17. <https://doi.org/10.1145/3359277>



Marketplace platforms and digital placement agencies are often unable to meet workers' expectations of placement in the immediate vicinity of their residence. Multiple workers we spoke to had registered on different platforms or tried to work with placement agencies, but could not find work due to the lack of jobs in their vicinity. They expressed a preference for word-of-mouth networks due to their inability to travel for work. For on-demand platforms, physical mobility is even more critical, as workers are asked to travel across the city at all hours of the day, often without full information about the destination. As women workers shoulder the burden of unpaid domestic work at home, are constrained by cultural norms that limit physical mobility, and face barriers to accessing public spaces (such as harassment while using public transport), they are more likely to be excluded from the platform economy due to its reliance on physical mobility.

**Savitri:** You asked me about that company. They do not give a lot of work. If I go to a [offline] placement agency they give me work but charge money. This [online] agency did not charge any money, but they don't give a lot of work. They sent one job in the past 6 months, which was in Bandra, Mumbai.

I can't travel so far, I have children with me. And the pay was also not high enough for me to travel all the way. In fact the company itself told me to not take below ₹ 21,000 for this job.

Interview with worker on marketplace platform, Bengaluru

Since proximity is one of the biggest factors while looking for long-term placements, workers find that referrals through local informal networks continue to be the most effective way of finding suitable work in their vicinity.





## Conditions of Work

### Wages

The ability of workers to negotiate wages and the quantum of wages varies across all three platform models.

Most marketplace platforms inform wage-setting through indicators and 'nudges'. Some platforms indicate the standard rate being offered by other employers in the employer's geographic vicinity. Others incorporate legislatively mandated minimum wages standards in their platform design, by not offering employers a choice to enter wages below the minimum wage.<sup>22</sup> It is important to note that domestic workers have historically been legislatively excluded from minimum wage standards in most parts of India.<sup>23</sup>

Further, in parts of India where domestic workers are guaranteed a minimum wage, enforcement is extremely poor, resulting in the wages of a majority of workers remaining below the minimum wage levels. Irrespective of the choice of nudge or indicator, marketplace platforms tend to be unaware of employers' compliance with wage floors and indicators set out on the platform. While these moves may play a part in reducing the risk of the 'race to the bottom' that characterises several gig work platforms,<sup>24</sup> the marketplace model is characterised by a lack of engagement of the platform with the conditions of work that domestic workers are placed in. In summary, workers placed through marketplace platforms tend to earn the same, and face similar challenges in negotiating wages, as those placed through more 'traditional' pathways.

<sup>22</sup> Minimum wages in India are calculated by state governments, according to indicative figures provided by the Central government for specified occupational categories.

<sup>23</sup> Neetha, N. (2015). Minimum wage setting practices in domestic work: an inter-state analysis. International Labour Organization. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed\\_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms\\_423600.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_423600.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> Semuels, A. (2018, August 21). The Online Gig Economy's 'Race to the Bottom.' The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2018/08/fiverr-online-gig-economy/569083/>



There are considerable variations in the earnings of workers on on-demand platforms. Two platforms stand out. Broomberg and CleanPro are on-demand platforms that have employment contracts with workers, as opposed to the independent contractor model of hiring workers that all other on-demand platforms use. Workers on these platforms receive a starting salary in the range of ₹ 12-14,000. Workers on these platforms are also entitled to employer contributions to social security schemes and annual wage increments.

All other on-demand platforms define workers as self-employed (i.e. not employed with the platform) and pay workers on a piece-rate basis. Being self-employed, workers are required to channel significant capital costs and indirect expenses towards joining the platform (such as 'security deposits') and equipment required to perform work (such as costs of procuring cleaning supplies and transportation). These platforms also articulate and advertise workers' earnings in terms of hourly earnings. Workers on on-demand platforms tend to earn higher hourly wages than domestic workers who have secured employment through other routes.<sup>25</sup> Higher hourly wages can be a result of the perception of one-time on-demand cleaning services (labelled deep cleaning) as specialised and higher skilled than day-to-day cleaning work performed by traditional domestic workers. Workers in the on-demand sector are overwhelmingly men, which has the potential to exacerbate the gender wage gap in the gig economy. Potential reasons for this are discussed in the following sections. However, net earnings are much lower than those advertised by platforms—in the range of ₹ 30,000 per month, as capital investments and indirect expenses are not factored in calculations of hourly earnings.

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**On-demand platforms appropriate workers' wages by charging disproportionately high rates of commission - anywhere between 20 to 70 percent. Thus even though such services charge a premium from consumers for 'professionalised' cleaning, very little of this amount directly reaches workers.**

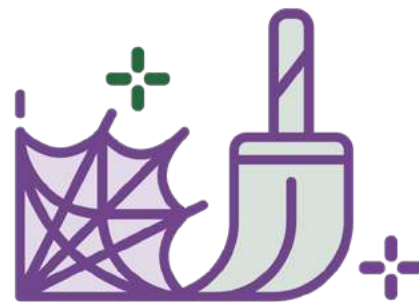
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**Rahul:** Everyday, I work so much, I work so hard. There is very little payment for such a high workload. If I get paid more anywhere else I'll leave this work immediately. I can continue doing similar work but I need proportionate pay. Right now I am just working for other people's profit, not my own. Customers pay a lot of money, but I receive very less.

Interview with worker on on-demand platform in Bengaluru



MOPPING  
OF FLOOR



REMOVAL  
OF COBWEBS

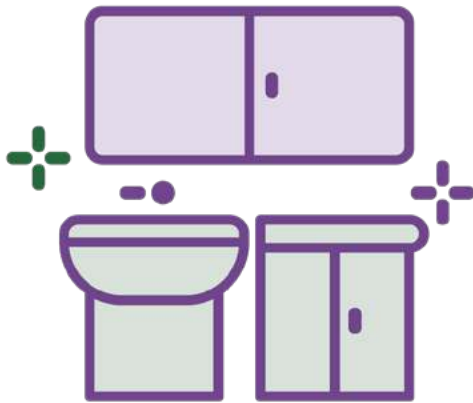
DISAGGREGATION OF TASKS ON  
AN ON-DEMAND PLATFORM

<sup>25</sup> Mewa, T. (2020). Platformisation of Domestic Work in India: A report from a multistakeholder consultation [Event report]. The Centre for Internet and Society. <https://cis-india.org/raw/platformisation-of-domestic-work-in-india-report-february-2020/>



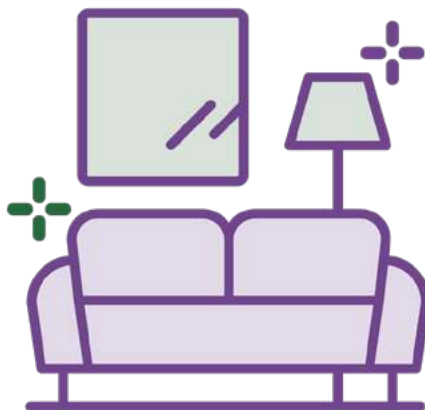
### BATHROOM CLEANING

(includes tiles, floors, mirrors,  
and bathroom fittings)



### CLEANING OF KITCHEN CABINETS & WARDROBES

(only externally)



### CLEANING OF LIVING ROOM & BEDROOMS

(includes cleaning of floors, the  
dusting of windows, furniture,  
fan, switches)

On-demand companies also demand a high security deposit as a one-time fee paid upon joining, apart from a high commission rate. This can go upto ₹ 4500-5000, which is at least one-third of monthly wages for most workers. Some workers spoke about continuing to remain tied to the company because it was not possible to get their security deposit back unless workers exit on the company's terms. This reflects a new form of bonded labour in the gig economy.

There were, however, some upsides for workers as well, given the poor work conditions in the sector traditionally.

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**Domestic workers occupy a relative position of powerlessness, as most workers are come from low income and Dalit communities, seeking work in upper caste households. Concerns around low wages, disproportionate burden of tasks, and unfair conditions of work point to the lack of bargaining power, especially among workers who are not part of unions or collectives. In this context, workers as well as domestic workers' organisations expressed that the presence of a third party (including platforms) could help achieve recognition of domestic work as work.**

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A number of platforms help workers open bank accounts, which could then possibly be used to receive the payment for work. This was perceived to be a helpful record of payments made and could even act as proof of employment and wages received. However, none of the workers we spoke to had increased access to credit as a result of this.

**Sister Kalai:** If the proof is there that every month the balance in the bank account increases then we can see it in the [bank] passbook. Even if it is deducted we can question them [employers]. But in cash we can't, sometimes they will say she took the money [monthly salary] when she is saying I haven't. They say all of these things, this will not happen with a bank account. Otherwise there is no other proof, agreement whatsoever.

Interview with Sister Kalai, National Domestic Workers Welfare Trust, New Delhi

**Manjula:** Our problem is we do not have any proof for the work we do. Somebody says you have not worked for 6 months, you have worked for only 3 months. None of us have any proof of how long we have worked.

Interview with Manjula, Birds union, Bengaluru

In the case of on-demand platforms, workers also stated that the disaggregation of tasks undertaken by the platform helped them demand additional pay for additional work. In the absence of a collective bargaining platform, the strict price set by platforms for tasks allows workers to defer to an external authoritative source when asked to perform additional tasks without pay. However, this is only possible with companies where managers are readily contactable by workers in case intervention is required, which tended to be smaller companies with operations in limited cities in our sample.

**Interviewer:** When you go to a customer's home does the company tell you which tasks you are to complete?

**Prabhu:** Yes this is what happens.

**Interviewer:** What if they ask you to do extra tasks?

**Prabhu:** If they tell us to do extra tasks then we ask the company what to do.

**Interviewer:** So you call the company and tell them that they customer is asking you to do additional work without pay?

**Prabhu:** Yes we can tell them that. We only do as much work as is told to us by the company when we leave their office.

Interview with a worker on on-demand platform, Bengaluru

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**As opposed to on-demand platforms, where workers are paid per 'gig', in the case of marketplace platforms and digital placement agencies, tasks are not disaggregated beyond the primary level of cleaning, cooking, etc.**

**As workers are placed long-term with a single employer, they are often asked to do additional work without compensation.**

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# Outsourcing Costs to ‘Contractors’

Workers on both on-demand and marketplace platforms (those that managed to secure work) continuously absorb economic costs at various stages.

In the case of marketplace platforms, a major indirect cost is visiting the homes of potential employers for interviews before finalising the work arrangement. Workers often have to make several such visits before being placed.

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**We found that the burden of bearing indirect costs is often more detrimental for women workers from low income families. High indirect costs can result in them dropping off platforms completely, as opposed to men who are able to make relatively higher investments in finding work.**

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**Sushma:** My friend and I went to some madam’s house when she got the call for work. It was so far, and they were offering so little. My friend refused, it turned out to be a big waste of time. She was so upset. The company also doesn’t reimburse these costs to us, we have to make the expenditure out of our own pocket so when it doesn’t work out, it is money lost for us.

**Interview with worker on a digital placement agency, New Delhi**

Such indirect costs are compounded further for workers on on-demand platforms, who routinely incur traveling costs when moving between ‘gigs’. Indirect costs also include hours and days spent seeking jobs without any remuneration, as well as time spent undertaking lengthy training sessions for ‘professionalisation’.

Moreover, some companies mandate the purchase of expensive equipment from the company itself as a form of quality control. Workers repeatedly complained about having to pay a premium because of inflated prices at which equipment was sold to them. When workers are unable to pay for the equipment, especially at the time of joining, the platform provides an interest-free loan, automatically deducting the monthly repayment amount from workers’ earnings.

**Manish:** (showing the worker-side application) See for yourself, how much I have earned this week. It’s as good as nothing! I have been coming here (to the office), travelling for hours, for the last 3 days for mandatory training even though I have been doing this for 3 years now. They threatened that my account will be deactivated if I don’t come. They don’t even compensate us for our time, or even provide us food when we have to be here all day.

**Interview with a worker an on-demand platform, New Delhi**

Passing on these costs to workers is also emblematic of the nature of the arrangement between workers and platforms—one premised on deeming workers as entrepreneurs or ‘independent contractors’. This takes the shape of designating workers with glossy terms like ‘partners’, ‘professionals’ etc. The debate in scholarly and legislative spaces has been occupied with the appropriate legal classification of workers as employees or independent contractors, where the former accords greater legal protections and comprehensive welfare protections. In our interviews, the argument used by workers was phrased differently. In one focus group discussion, workers challenged the notion of being a ‘partner’ using the commonly understood meaning of the term—as having bargaining power in their interactions with the company. Workers expressed that receiving employment benefits was not a demand they were articulating while struggling with even more basic issues such as high commission rates, reduced pay, and increasing workload.



**Aditya:** They call us partners, but that is just a misnomer. Eventually, they do what they want to do and we have no option but to obey. Is that what a partner is?

**Focus group discussion with workers on an on-demand platform, New Delhi**

We also find that platforms and unions both emphasised on professionalisation as critical in formalising the domestic work sector. However, there was no shared understanding of what professionalisation or formalisation would entail. Another source of enforcing standardisation through additional labour by workers is through rating systems. All three types of platforms generate ratings for workers. These systems take the form of ratings, reviews and rankings that utilise client-generated data to assign a reputational score to workers. Several on-demand platforms take pride in their rating systems. Company representatives we spoke to explained that these ratings are determined through workers' years of experience and demographic details such as proximity to employers, apart from employer feedback.

Ticona et al. (2018) find that gig work platforms incentivise workers to invest in self-branding through individualised worker profiles with extensive personal details.<sup>26</sup> Some platforms in India even expand such self-branding to include video testimonials from workers, to account for illiteracy and low levels of digital skills. Notably, one of the largest on-demand platforms in India—UrbanCompany, explicitly guarantees that all workers hired through the platform are "4+ star rated professionals".<sup>27</sup>

For workers, job security and future economic opportunities are heavily dependent upon these client ratings, while clients in turn were not subject to any such ratings. The only instance we found of a platform that also collected feedback on employers from workers is Quikr, an on-demand platform which incorporates a call-in feedback mechanism that allows workers to raise their concerns with the same team that deals with customer complaints.

However, ratings do impact customers' ability to use platforms in the same way that workers' publicly visible monthly ratings affect their ability to receive work—the consequences of negative feedback are much harsher for workers.

Rating systems also place undue pressure on workers to complete additional tasks assigned by clients in limited durations and increase in the intensity of work. This could be seen as placing workers in a state of permanent probation, leading to greater precarity.

The design of feedback systems mandates high-quality performance of emotional labour by gig workers as a critical component of their work. While the performance of emotional labour is not alien to domestic workers, or even the service sector broadly, its commodification is. Rating systems concretely reward and utilise emotional labour as critical in performance evaluation. This can be understood as the actualisation of an 'economy of feelings'<sup>28</sup>. What was earlier at least in part voluntary emotional labour then turns into conformist labour in the platform economy.

**Santhosh:** We are told by the company that under no circumstances should we get less than 4 stars. If that happens, our account will be deactivated. You will not believe the inhuman behaviour we have had to endure so that we will get at least 4 stars. Often, we are made to do additional tasks. If we don't do it, we are threatened with lower ratings by customers.

**Focus group discussion with workers on an on-demand platform, New Delhi**

<sup>26</sup> Ticona, J., Mateescu, A., & Rosenblat, A. (2018). Beyond Disruption: How Tech Shapes Labor Across Domestic Work & Ridehailing. Data & Society. [https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Data\\_Society\\_Beyond\\_Disruption\\_FINAL.pdf](https://datasociety.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Data_Society_Beyond_Disruption_FINAL.pdf)

<sup>27</sup> Best Home Deep Cleaning Services in Noida | Mechanized Cleaning. (n.d.). Urban Company. <https://www.urbancompany.com/delhi-ncr-professional-home-cleaning-noida>

<sup>28</sup> Vincent, S. (2011). The emotional labour process: An essay on the economy of feelings. Human Relations, 64(10), 1369–1392. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711415131>

# Training & Professionalisation

Platforms display a strong impulse to standardise tasks performed by domestic workers, pushing a narrative of efficiency which equals seamless customer servicing. The standardisation project enables the push towards the so-called ‘professionalisation’ of domestic work, where the paying professional class’ expectations of good service are met.

Many platforms market their workers as trained professionals— Bookmybai, a digital placement agency, for instance guarantees that only skilled maids are registered with them. By explicitly according the status of skilled work to domestic labour, this discourse moves towards disrupting the historical classification of domestic work as unskilled labour. However, it also implies that other domestic workers who do not have access to the platform economy are not adequately skilled, therefore creating a new skill hierarchy between workers with and without technological access.

Several companies, especially on-demand platforms and digital placement agencies, routinely engage workers in skilling and training programmes. This is in the form of in-house training at the time of joining and/or at periodic intervals, remotely through videos, or by recruiting workers enrolled in government-run skilling programmes. One of the key objectives of such training is to gentrify workers to align with the lifestyle of clients. Lessons on ‘soft skills’ include maintaining a ‘good attitude’ with clients, and appropriate hygiene and ways of dressing. Workers revealed that companies emphasised learning soft skills as a necessary requirement to getting good feedback ratings. Class and caste dynamics strongly undergird this discourse. Platforms aim at enabling workers to perform class upgradation in the bargain to appear skilled. In fact, workers often expressed the futility of most training programs insofar as the pedagogic focus on ‘hard skills’ was concerned. Some workers did find some value in being taught the performance of gentrified behaviour, to better appease dominant class employers. Most workers however, did not ascribe any value to certification as it was often not deemed valuable by employers.

**Ananto:** I already know how to cook. The trainer they bring in to teach us cooking is not very useful because he works in a big restaurant, and we often do not have the equipment or time to do these things at the houses we go to. What is useful is when they teach us to greet employers and practice ‘high-class’ hygiene.

## Interview with worker on digital placement agency, Bengaluru

The professionalisation of domestic workers is accompanied with aesthetics that erase caste and class-based identity markers, particularly on marketplace platforms. Bookmybai’s website, for instance, features a smiling upper class Hindu woman, identifiable through her mangalsutra and sindoor—traditional markers of marriagehood among Savarna Hindu females.<sup>29</sup> Given the working class and Dalit identities of workers involved in cleaning tasks, this can be seen as the discursive erasure of workers from these groups. Read alongside the marketing of these workers as ‘skilled’ and ‘professionalised’, such erasure can imply that only workers from upper castes and middle or high income groups qualify as skilled.

<sup>29</sup> Bhattacharya, R. (2004). *Behind Closed Doors: Domestic Violence in India*. SAGE Publications India.



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**Standardisation and professionalisation discourses indicate the replication of social hierarchies in the platform economy. The aspirations of the professional class are serviced by the service workers, who continue to occupy oppressed class and caste identities.**

# Rhetorics of Platformisation

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## Platform Transparency & Information Asymmetry

There are large information asymmetries between workers and platforms. Platform operations are opaque and even completely illegible to workers. Workers' low levels of digital literacy and high atomisation also act to perpetuate these information asymmetries. Workers on marketplace platforms and digital placement agencies often do not have any information about the name or nature of the platform they are giving information to, or its functioning. Often, workers securing work through these platforms communicate with a single point of contact for finding work, and have little conception of a platform or company that their point of contact is affiliated with. Workers' isolation from each other also compounds this asymmetry, as traditional forms of information sharing through kinship networks cannot develop. Kinship networks have been useful in countering platform opacity in other sectors in the gig economy.<sup>30</sup>

Companies fail to adequately inform workers about their functioning, particularly in ways that account for low levels of digital access and literacy among workers. In this context, workers also raise privacy concerns as they provide sensitive personal information about themselves to companies, including Aadhaar details and mobile phone numbers, with little to no information about the platform.

**Simra:** One day a woman came to our residential camp. They said they will give us jobs, and registered over 100 workers, men and women. They said we will get work by getting a call, so most people registered. I don't remember her name, or anything else about the company. I didn't even remember them till you called... These people come and ask us questions and take photocopies of our Aadhaar cards. I am illiterate. I can easily be fooled by anyone who comes and pretends to register workers but is going to misuse my documents and personal information. My husband keeps telling me to not give my information to anyone who comes to our locality.

**Interview with workers on marketplace platform, New Delhi**

Such opacity is also prevalent among workers placed through offline, traditional placement agencies. Similar to digital platforms, the only information many workers placed through traditional placement agencies have is the name and phone number of a single point of contact. They often do not have any further information about the name of the company, the location of its offices, or the exact nature of work. One consequence of this is that workers are unable to follow up with agencies in cases of non-payment of wages or other work-related issues.

<sup>30</sup> Lalvani, S. (2019, July 4). Workers' fictive kinship relations in Mumbai app-based food delivery | Platypus [Blog]. Castac. <https://web.archive.org/web/20191019031017/http://blog.castac.org/2019/07/workers-fictive-kinship-relations-in-mumbai-app-based-food-delivery/>

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The information vacuum gets exaggerated in the case of digital platforms, which makes it difficult for workers to trust them. Many workers on marketplace platforms and digital placement agencies only know the name of one point of contact at the company, and have very little information about the company's work. Visibility and transparency in the digital space makes the platform and its workers visible to customers, but this is a one-way information flow.

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**The lack of information also impacts workers in gendered ways. Women workers felt themselves to be more vulnerable than their husbands to being fooled by strangers who asked for their personal information, due to low levels of education and digital literacy.**

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On the other hand, the digital presence of companies brings visibility to their operations to customers and the larger public, which can be beneficial. This visibility helps to ensure to a certain extent that platforms act as more responsible intermediaries as compared to offline agencies, given the notorious history of the latter. For instance, all of the platforms we interviewed were registered as companies—unlike traditional placement agencies, which often operate without any visibility to the state. Registration as companies brings platforms under some form of regulation and legal liability. We also find that unlike traditional placement agencies, there is no evidence of digital platforms participating in illegal activities such as human trafficking. However, heightened responsibility only functions in this limited fashion for most platforms, and does not help build trust with workers.

Contradictions emerge when comparing workers' strategies to register on platforms with the onboarding strategies used by companies. We find that there is no demarcation of registration modalities adopted by workers. Routes into registration vary significantly and are often mediated by another layer of intermediation. Most workers (a) have the registration process completed by a proximate man, either a family member or others in the neighborhood; (b) provide personal information, along with many others in the locality to company representatives who come to visit them, with no further information; (c) do not know how their information came to be registered on the platform, (d) have been registered by a traditional agent or placement agency that they have been in contact with in the past, or (e) have self-registered on the platform.

**Prabhu:** My relation showed me how to do it [register on an online platform] and downloaded the app for me. He made some women join work as well, and I saw him do that so I asked him too. He helped me join.

Interview with worker on digital placement agency, Bengaluru

**Alka:** I had registered on Babajob. They just wanted workers to send them a photo and ID, so I asked my daughter to send it to them. I don't have a big [smart] phone, so I told her to send it. I don't know how to do these things myself. [Note: We found her details on another platform, so we assume that there was data sharing between platforms without her knowledge.]

Interview with worker on marketplace platform, Bengaluru

What is common across many of these modalities is that workers may not be exercising their choice in registering on platforms. We even find some cases of companies sharing workers' information with other organisations and individuals without notifying workers. In many ways, 'transparency' associated with digital presence also comes with a unique opacity emerging from the abstraction of digital platforms.

The information gap between platforms and workers also extends to feedback mechanisms. None of the workers across platform types in our sample have any information regarding the metrics through which their ratings are determined, including the impact of customer feedback. In the case of marketplaces, where workers have very little information about the functioning of the platform, workers can be completely unaware that a rating is being generated for them algorithmically. Workers on on-demand platforms were also unsure of the effect ratings have on their work. Ratings can significantly impact on the kinds of jobs workers get, and in some cases whether they are allowed to function on the platform at all. Workers, during onboarding trainings, are informed about being suspended from the platform in the event of their rating falling below a certain level (typically around the 80% mark on the rating scale).

In the case of on-demand platforms, workers are often unaware of the manner in which pricing is determined. Workers complain about periodic revisions in the commission taken by the company, reducing workers' income arbitrarily. Workers also complain about companies introducing additional tasks to be performed without prior intimation and reduced pay per task. Workers' responses to such developments are also contingent on their income levels, caste, and gender. For instance, in one case, a large on-demand company branched out into bathroom deep cleaning and tasked existing workers in the cleaning segment with taking this on as well. The introduction of bathroom cleaning was a cause for alarm among some workers as they considered this demeaning work to be performed only by workers of a lower caste status. The arbitrary decision-making regarding workers' wages and tasks to be performed can bring out such faultlines and constrain workers' abilities to exercise their agency.

The informational asymmetry also extends to prior information that workers receive about (potential) jobs, including details about customers such as location, etc. Workers receive little advance information, making it much harder for them to gauge risk and ensure safety before accepting a job. Several women workers told us that they ask companions to accompany them when they travel to homes of potential employers for the first time, due to concerns around safety.

**Rahul:** When we had signed up for the deep cleaning category, we were only expected to clean the living rooms, bed rooms etc. Now, they have started also including kitchen cleaning and bathroom cleaning within their deep cleaning category. We did not sign up for this, we are not domestic workers. But we will do this anyway as we have no choice.

**Interview with worker on an on-demand platform, New Delhi**



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The information asymmetry also speaks to the manufacturing of trust that platforms offering care work engage in. To trust was a privilege only of customers. The onus of being trustworthy was placed exclusively on workers. Companies did not take any steps to address workers' concerns around their safety, or their general lack of trust in companies.

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**Jyoti:** There was only one woman among the 200 who registered who got a call back. She was asked to go to the employers' home, so she asked me to come with her. It was so far, how could she have gone by herself? We don't usually travel more than a few kilometers for work.

Interview with worker on a marketplace platform, New Delhi

For workers on on-demand platforms—all men—lack of information about customers manifests differently. Workers express anxiety about not knowing whether their employer will be available at their homes. To ensure that their labour and time would be compensated for, they often call and reconfirm the work to be done and the employer's availability at the scheduled time. However, platforms ask workers not to do so, as employers may not want to be bothered and might give a lower rating. This is part of the 'seamless' experience promised to customers in the platform economy, due to which unscheduled calls from workers are treated as 'friction' that is undesirable and sought to be eliminated. The facilitation of trust has differential implications in the context of on-demand platforms, placing encumbrances on workers including loss of income.

**Tarun:** I don't know what to do. On one hand, we have been told to not call the customer. On the other, we stand the risk of no-response from the customer when we reach their address. Since that loss will be much more, a lot of us call customers beforehand anyway so we can find out the seriousness of the customer.

Focus group discussion with workers on an on-demand platform, New Delhi

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**The seamless experience promised to customers in the platform economy can have high costs for workers, including loss of income.**



## Trust & Efficiency

Lack of trust in platforms is exacerbated by varying experiences of efficiency for workers while searching for work, where efficiency is understood as speed of placement and suitability of tasks assigned. Low efficiency is particularly a concern with marketplace platforms. In our sample, some workers were only offered one or two jobs in a space of months, while others were able to find work in a matter of days through the same platform. This could be for a variety of reasons: workers could have different levels of experience and skill, reflecting in different ratings; demand might be higher for certain tasks over others, or in certain geographical areas over others.

Another factor that could impact placement is the supply-demand mismatch. Marketplace platforms function by creating large databases with workers' information, a small percentage of whom receive job offers that they would be interested in taking up. Platforms also differ in the sort of matching they undertake (manual or algorithmic), and variables they use to match customers with workers, which can both have an impact on its efficiency.

However, the workers we spoke to were given the impression that they will be able to find work soon after registering on the platform, which created false expectations. Many workers express disappointment, to the extent that they have stopped responding when approached by anyone claiming to be from an agency. A number of workers on marketplace platforms critique the one-way information flow between platforms and workers, which deprives them of agency.

**Gayatri:** They come here asking so many questions, and we answer them like we are answering yours (the researchers'). They promise us jobs, but we do not get anything in return. It is a waste of time, we could have done some housework in that period instead.

Interview with worker on a marketplace platform, New Delhi

Relatedly, platform companies also express that they have a surplus of workers. Only the quantum of surplus varies, as it is proportionally correlated to the size (or customer base) of the platform.

Relatedly, every platform company expressed that they had a surplus of workers—it was only the quantum of surplus that varied across different platforms as was proportionally correlated to the size (in terms of customer base) of the platform.

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**Our findings challenge the notion of 'efficiency' in very interesting ways. The rhetoric of 'efficient' optimisation of demand and supply that has come to characterise gig work does not hold true for workers. The generation of surplus caters to the imperative of fulfilling customers' expectations of tailored services and workers at any cost, typical to the gig economy. The surplus of workers is designed to satisfy the desired quality and quantity of demand, while retaining high commission rates and low wages.**

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In this instance, and in gig work globally, the rhetoric of efficiency translates into the absorption of costs—emotional and economic—by workers. For instance, several workers, especially on marketplace platforms, affirm that they have not received any work through the platform and neither has anybody else in the neighborhood. For them, this is yet another instance of 'outsiders' masquerading as social do-gooders with promises of a better life that remain unfulfilled. Indeed, a similar accusation was levied at us (the interviewers) more than once. The articulation was that of helplessness at being repeatedly used for their data with no benefits accruing back to them or their communities.

# Platform Paternalism

## Segregation & Discrimination

Digital platforms by and large replicate existing forms of gendered and caste-based occupational segregation in traditional labour markets, including those in the domestic work sector.

**Across company branding, tasks within domestic work are segregated along traditionally gendered lines. Women workers are more likely to be found in advertisements for cleaning and cooking services, while men are shown performing roles such as security guards and gardeners, which are traditionally considered 'masculine' jobs.**

In the platform economy as well, women are concentrated in care jobs that are considered 'feminine' such as child care (as nannies and babysitters) and elderly care. Lower paying work, such as cleaning and washing, is also dominated by women belonging to caste oppressed communities, mirroring and reinforcing historical caste segregations. Full-time and part-time domestic work jobs that mirror traditional (and more unstructured and exploitative) placements, are also dominated by women workers.

Conversely, on-demand cleaning work is almost entirely dominated by men. There could be a number of reasons for this. On-demand cleaners perform deep cleaning, a term that has gained widespread traction among on-demand platforms. The service category of deep cleaning is regarded as a specialised and mechanised form of cleaning, and crucially, is supposed to indicate distinctiveness from regular cleaning work. Deep cleaning work carries with it strong connotations of professionalisation, requiring the use of dedicated cleaning machinery and chemicals.

These characteristics contribute to the conception of deep cleaning as masculine work. Some workers we spoke to who perform deep cleaning work also explicitly distanced themselves from domestic workers, simultaneously also making their caste and gender positions clear. That mechanisation and professionalisation of work leads to its masculinisation has been observed in other sectors as well, for instance in the field of programming.<sup>31</sup>

On-demand work also requires more physical mobility and digital access and skills, which are not readily available for women domestic workers. In addition, on-demand workers travel to the homes of several employers, which some platform managers perceive to be posing a safety risk for women workers, as discussed in previous sections.

LOCATION	Old Madras Road
RELIGION	Muslim
NO. OF HOURS I CAN WORK	12
EXPERIENCE	6 years
LANGUAGES	Hindi, Kannada
DOCUMENTS	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Electricity Bill <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Pan-card
AGE	33 years
LIVE-IN	Yes
NATIVE PLACE	Bangalore

INSIGHTS FROM A PROFILE OF A WORKER  
ON BOOKMYBAI, OCTOBER 2019

<sup>31</sup> Thompson, C. (2019, February 13). The Secret History of Women in Coding - The New York Times. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/13/magazine/women-coding-computer-programming.html>



#### INSIGHTS FROM BOOKING A SERVICE ON BOOKMYHOUSEMAIDS, OCTOBER 2019

**Manoj:** All our workers are completely safe. If they face any problem at the customers', they can just leave their homes quickly.

**Interviewer:** What about women workers?

**Manoj:** We can't guarantee their safety as they go into so many people's houses. So we don't hire any women cleaners.

Interview with Category Manager  
on-demand platform, New Delhi

Another mechanism through which demographic characteristics including caste and gender determine task constitution is through filtering tools provided on platforms' mobile applications and websites.<sup>32</sup> These tools are most commonly found on marketplace platforms and digital placement agencies. Most platforms in these two categories allow customers to filter workers by gender, age, language, religion and/or the region/state that they belong to. One platform, Bookmyhousemaids, also includes caste as a filtering characteristic.

<sup>32</sup> Jain, M. (2015, November 3). This online company provides maids – and lets you pick them by religion and region. Scroll.In. <http://scroll.in/article/766490/this-online-company-provides-maids-and-lets-you-pick-them-by-religion-and-region>

Most, if not all of these personal characteristics of workers are unrelated to the quality of the services they provide. Filtering tools codify the valuation of these personal characteristics in domestic labour markets, leading to discriminatory differentiation of workers. Platform managers of marketplace platform platforms did not view these as discriminatory, instead deferring it to (customer and employer) demand. While some platform managers were explicit about not including caste and religion as filtering characteristics despite customer requests, they felt that adding other personal characteristics is one of the biggest value additions that marketplace platforms provide. For instance, several of the search terms in a list of top searches on a prominent digital placement agency's website included the term 'Hindu', which could indicate the limited opportunities available to minority religions workers - especially in locales where their identity is stigmatised.

Some platforms, such as Housmaid, further explained that they find it hard to place workers given the specifications of gender, region, religion and caste demanded by customers. Some, like Domestic For You (a platform started by a former labour rights activist), refused such customisation outright. Age was also a determinant of the ease of placement—several companies spoke of the ease of placing younger and unmarried women, who had more mobility and were also in greater demand than older and/or married women. Discrimination on the grounds of caste, migration status and age has historically been practiced in this sector, in particular for tasks such as cooking that are considered better skilled and have better pay.<sup>33</sup> Discrimination in cooking is also attached to Brahmanical notions of purity that consider caste oppressed workers impure and unworthy of cooking in Savarna households.<sup>34</sup>

The risk of discrimination persists beyond the stage of recruitment. As described above, rating systems are a common feature of platforms across the gig economy, and in the domestic work sector. These can be an avenue for employers' biases to impact the quantum and type of opportunities offered to workers. Rating systems also put workers at risk of receiving ratings based on personal characteristics, which could have a significant impact on their labour market outcomes through the platform. This has also been evidenced in Northern contexts, such as in the United States, where ratings on gig work platforms have been shown to be strongly correlated with gender and race.<sup>35</sup> Most platforms market their ability to provide trusted and verified workers, in what is emblematic of the caste privileged gaze of employers of domestic workers in India.

**33** Persisting Servitude and Gradual Shifts Towards Recognition and Dignity of Labour: A Study of Employers of Domestic Workers in Delhi and Mumbai. (2017). International Labour Organisation. [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-new\\_delhi/documents/publication/wcms\\_622812.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---asia/---ro-bangkok/---sro-new_delhi/documents/publication/wcms_622812.pdf)

**34** Sonagra, V., & Kulkarni, N. (2017). The 'Non-Brahmin' Cook from Pune and the Myth of the 'Caste-less' Middle Class. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 52(45), 7–8. <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/punes-%E2%80%98non-brahmin%E2%80%99-cook-and-myth-%E2%80%98caste-less%E2%80%99-middle-class>

**35** Hannák, A., Wagner, C., Garcia, D., Mislove, A., Strohmaier, M., & Wilson, C. (2017). Bias in Online Freelance Marketplaces: Evidence from TaskRabbit and Fiverr. *Proceedings of the 2017 ACM Conference on Computer Supported Cooperative Work and Social Computing*, 1914–1933. <https://doi.org/10.1145/2998181.2998327>

# Surveillance

Domestic work in India has had a long history of surveillance by state institutions and Savarna employers. Internalising and perpetrating the criminalisation of caste and class identities that domestic workers tend to hold, the state, and employers have sought to exercise intense control over domestic workers through registration requirements, police verification<sup>36</sup> and increasingly the placement of cameras at the workplace<sup>37</sup>. Domestic work digital platforms also plug into these caste and class anxieties, by offering services and platform features that sustain historical forms of surveillance, while also creating multiple additional systems to surveil workers.

Surveillance of domestic workers on digital platforms can be understood along four key modalities: (a) algorithmic surveillance, (b) managerial surveillance, (c) customer surveillance and (d) domestic surveillance.

Intensive **algorithmic surveillance** characterises the operation of on-demand platforms across 'gig' economy sectors.<sup>38</sup> On-demand domestic work platforms largely use computational systems for the management of workers. In doing so, they seek to control and discipline the behaviour of workers. From task allocation to completion, workers are subject to the operational logics and determinations of coded processes. Housejoy and Urban Company, for instance, constantly track workers' geographical location by accessing the GPS-receiver in workers' smartphones, mandate 'before' and 'after' pictures from each cleaner, track the time at which workers reach the customer's home, note the start and end time of each task (mandating workers to manually enter this data), and require workers to ensure that the customer had given them a high rating.

Urban Company prides itself on "technological integrations"<sup>39</sup>, several of which are designed to add to its arsenal of surveillance tools. In an announcement last year, they rolled out facial recognition for the verification of workers on the platform.<sup>40</sup> Urban Company workers are now required to take a selfie before starting a task, and this image is then run through the facial recognition software to verify workers' identity. Urban Company's surveillance extends to predicting the usage of cleaning products and inventory by workers.<sup>41</sup> Depending on the algorithmic prediction, workers promptly receive a call to purchase new inventory, failing which they may be penalised. Several workers hypothesised that this is a way for Urban Company to maximise its product sales, which are sold at marked up rates when compared to similar products available in the open market. We also find evidence of workers' calls being recorded by an on-demand platform based in New Delhi, although the same platform later reported that they had stopped this practice as they didn't have any means to render the collected data usable. Workers on these platforms are acutely cognizant of being surveilled through these technological systems. While they express their discomfort and feelings of dehumanisation with the platforms' intensive surveillant gaze, they also expressed the banality of this surveillance given the broader context of their struggles with productive labouring on on-demand platforms. On-demand platforms have also furthered a narrative of such surveillance being necessary for the delivery of quality services to their customers, and as necessary for their logistical functioning. The pervasive surveillance also plays into the debates and discussions around employment status of workers in the gig economy.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, this form used by the Delhi Police as a part of its "Servant Verification Scheme", <https://www.delhipolice.nic.in/home/servant-f.htm>

<sup>37</sup> Srivastava, S. (2017, July 16). Cheap domestic workers (even Bangladeshi) are fine. The problem is when they protest. Scroll. In. <https://scroll.in/article/843870/what-it-means-to-be-domestic-labour-in-india-maximum-labour-and-minimal-care>

<sup>38</sup> See Anjuma, I., Crawford, K., & Schultz, J. (2017). Limitless Worker Surveillance. California Law Review, 105, 735–776. <https://mronline.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/3Ajunwa-Schultz-Crawford-36.pdf>  
See also Privacy International. (2017, August 30). Case Study: The Gig Economy and Exploitation. Privacy International. <http://privacyinternational.org/case-study/751/case-study-gig-economy-and-exploitation>

<sup>39</sup> UrbanClap Editor. (2019, October 12). Urban Company Signs Up Unicommerce for Faster Service Operations – The Urban Guide. The Urban Guide by Urban Company. <https://www.urbancompany.com/blog/company-updates/urban-company-signs-up-unicommerce-for-faster-service-operations/>

<sup>40</sup> Sharma, B. (2020, February 3). Urban Company strengthens safety protocol using Microsoft Azure Cognitive Services – The Urban Guide. The Urban Guide by Urban Company. <https://www.urbancompany.com/blog/company-updates/urban-company-strengthens-safety-protocol-using-microsoft-azure-cognitive-services/>

<sup>41</sup> Haritas, B. (2019, October 15). How Urbanclap CTO is overcoming challenges of services sector. ETCIO. <https://cio.economicstimes.indiatimes.com/news/strategy-and-management/how-urbanclap-cto-is-overcoming-challenges-of-services-sector/71590177>

An important legal distinction between employment and contractor relationships is the degree of control that is exercised over individuals by employers—employees are subject to greater control than contractors in terms of both the work to be done and the manner in which it is to be done. Among other things, the extensive and intrusive surveillance that workers on on-demand platforms are subject to is evidence of the control that these platforms seek to exercise on the delivery of services, pointing to their disguised employment relationship with workers. Marketplace and digital placement agencies display weaker tendencies to algorithmically manage worker behaviours. However, we did note the use of algorithmic processes to tabulate ratings for workers based on opaque parameters only known to platforms. They sought to replicate the ratings systems of on-demand platforms, but in the absence of frequent customer feedback, used their own black-boxed systems to assign ratings to workers.

Most companies in our sample did not have processes to protect data rights of workers. Companies do not collect informed consent from workers for processing their data, or inform them of the use to which such data would be put and who it will be shared with. Those platforms that informed workers of data collection did not offer any means to refuse or opt out of such collection. Workers were also not offered the opportunity to have access to their data, or allow portability of ratings between platforms. Extensive data extraction from workers threatened workers' privacy and data rights, and the opacity of these systems made it impossible to challenge them.

Alongside, and even in the absence of algorithmic surveillance, we find that domestic work platforms continue to manage workers manually. While much of the work on surveillance in the gig economy has focused on algorithmic surveillance, and often relying on the absence of manual surveillance<sup>42</sup>, we find the coexistence of both in domestic work platforms' surveillance strategies.

Each of the three platform types have 'human' managers. However, their roles and extent of **managerial surveillance** vary. Interventions of managers on on-demand platforms are usually mediated through outcomes of algorithmic surveillance. Workers reported receiving calls from managers to activate their accounts if they had been dormant for some time, reallocating workers to geographies where there may be a surplus of jobs, replenishing workers' inventories of cleaning products, or resolving customer grievances. Consistent assistance, algorithmic or human, is usually unavailable to workers. Digital placement agencies rely on traditional forms of workplace surveillance almost entirely to manage the day-to-day activities of workers. Homedruid, for example, has several managers, each tasked with managing workers placed in specific geographies within the city. Managers have very broad mandates, and manage everything to do with ensuring employers' as well as workers' satisfaction with the employment relationship. Workers securing work through digital placement agencies expressed more comfort with managers, as they were able to form sustained relationships and managers assist with resolving workers' requests and challenges. A minority of on-demand platforms that employ workers and aren't as reliant on technological processes also adopt traditional forms of dyadic workplace surveillance.

Enabling **customer surveillance** is a key feature that digital platforms market. Digital platforms across types offer verified and trusted professionals, and service packages that allow customers to pay platforms for organising police and background checks of prospective worker hires. Domestic work platforms are also obsessively reliant on one-way ratings systems to establish credibility, assuage class anxieties and discipline 'unwanted' behaviours. Interfaces on technology-heavy on-demand platforms (such as Urban Company) also allow customers to track workers' real-time location.

<sup>42</sup> See Jabagi, N., Croteau, A-M., Audebrand, L. K., & Marsan, J. (2019). Gig-workers' motivation: Thinking beyond carrots and sticks. Université Laval. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-06-2018-0255>; Waters, F., & Woodcock, J. (2017, September 20). See also Far From Seamless: a Workers' Inquiry at Deliveroo. Viewpoint Magazine. <https://viewpointmag.com/2017/09/20/far-seamless-workers-inquiry-deliveroo/>

Compounding these multiple modes of surveillance, women domestic workers on digital platforms grapple with surveillance by men in their families. Digital access in India is marked by deep-seated normative barriers precluding women and girls' access to mobile phones.<sup>43</sup> In several Indian households, mobile phones are a shared asset, access to which is controlled by a man in the family. Patriarchal norms of gendered roles and power imbalances result in heightened surveillance of women's use of mobile phones. Such **domestic surveillance** is built into the design of some platforms. Taskbob, for instance, sends an SMS to a woman worker's husband every time she receives a job posting, due to the discomfort of men in the family in not having knowledge of their wives' exact whereabouts.<sup>44</sup> While engaging husbands to increase access to employment opportunities for women may be useful, catering to patriarchal control and surveillance tendencies further entrenches regressive gender norms.

<sup>43</sup> Barboni, G. (2018). A Tough Call: Understanding barriers to and impacts of women's mobile phone adoption in India. Harvard Kennedy School: Evidence for Policy Design. [https://epod.cid.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/2018-10/A\\_Tough\\_Call.pdf](https://epod.cid.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/2018-10/A_Tough_Call.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> Kadakia, P. (2016, February 21). Bai on Call: How home service apps are changing domestic help market. Hindustan Times. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/more-lifestyle/bai-on-call-how-home-service-apps-changing-the-maids-market/story-s6zz6kmWw1aEamZ1yLxjaL.html>



# Collective Bargaining

The platform economy poses challenges to collectivisation strategies evolved over decades of struggle by domestic workers in India. Organising in this sector tends to happen geographically. In both Delhi and Bengaluru, unions have demarcated zones from which they operate. They also onboard new members through local networks in areas where existing members are concentrated. The lack of information about agencies and platforms among workers implied that unions in our sample were also unsure of the route of placement for their members. In other words, unions in our sample were not aware if any of their members have been placed through digital platforms since they did not necessarily ask them about the process of recruitment, focusing their interventions on conditions of work once workers have already been placed. We also find low levels of awareness among unions regarding the existence and functioning of digital platforms. On the other hand, they are well-versed with placement agencies, and have very low trust in them, which also reflects in their perception of digital platforms.

**Interviewer:** Have you come across any digital platforms offering placement to workers?

**Sister Kalai:** So far no. And even Delhi placement agencies we can't trust...Those placement agencies are not regulated... There are many other things, they become [routes into] bonded labour and trafficking for sexual purposes. So in the name of domestic work there are many other things happening when they [workers] shift from rural areas to cities. We see this happening and victims share really painful stories.

**Interviewer:** So what digital platforms do is they onboard workers in cities and place them in jobs, short or long term.

**Sister Kalai:** So that is a placement agency no? They are not functioning properly first of all in Delhi. Because our workers don't go through agencies they themselves go as part-time workers. Maybe those workers taking care of babies, old people, those who are trained, maybe those can be placed through companies but even then there are problems which we hear about.

**Interview with Sister Kalai, National Domestic Workers Welfare Trust, New Delhi**

Apart from those working with UrbanCompany, Homedroid and Rozgar Khoj, none of the workers we interviewed knew other workers on the same platform, unless they were already acquainted with them before joining. Even with UrbanCompany, workers are able to find each other only because the company has a backend office which deals with the onboarding and training of blue collar workers. Frequent interactions through this process has even led workers to collectively raise grievances with the company.

**Rahul:** The company knows that we will be unhappy with the new policies that are going to be introduced. They also know we are friends. That's why they give us different time slots for training so we can't express our grievances collectively. We know this is what they want, so don't pay heed to their time slots and come together to support each other's grievances.

**Focus group discussion with on-demand platform workers**



Across all other platforms, the lack of any physical or virtual forum to interact with other workers implies complete isolation—a challenge also faced by live-in domestic workers traditionally. This adds to their information vacuum, and makes organic development of collective bargaining structures next to impossible.

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**We also find an acute need for unionisation among workers on platforms, regardless of platform practices. This is a result of most platforms refusing to take responsibility for, or even engage with, the nature of work they place workers into. Most platforms, with the exception of a few<sup>27</sup>, identify workers as independent contractors and are not willing to intervene in conditions of work, including cases of harassment and violence, and non-payment of wages.**

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**Rohan:** The onus has to be on the jobseekers to take care of their employment, their employer and themselves. We are only an aggregator and we do everything we can to help, but at one point we want them to become responsible for themselves.

**Interview with CEO of marketplace platform, New Delhi**

The absence of conditions conducive to collectivisation indicates a need for concerted efforts to collectivise domestic workers in the platform economy, from both traditional domestic workers organisations and emerging gig workers' networks in other sectors.

We also find some evidence of platforms supporting efforts of collectivisation. For instance, Homedruid breaks the pattern of manufactured isolation by holding quarterly meetings with workers to allow them to discuss issues they have been facing, and inform workers of any updates in company policies. A number of platforms, such as Helper4u and Cleansly, also expressed willingness to work with unions to onboard their database of workers in exchange for giving workers a clear route to joining the union. We also find that some unions are willing to partner with platforms, provided that they facilitate clear routes of communication between gig workers and unions. These developments hold potential to support collectivisation efforts to protect basic rights of domestic workers in the gig economy.

# Discussion

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## Platform Interventionism

A primary motivation behind devising a classification of digital platforms is to showcase the direct and indirect consequences of platform choices in shaping employment relations and conditions. We find that platforms operate on a continuum of interventionism. On one end are marketplace platforms, limiting their influence to the recruitment process. On the other end are on-demand platforms which exert control over all aspects of work. Platforms' interventionism tendencies also offer us insight into the contours of biopolitical power sustaining platform economies.

**Most marketplace platforms** prefer being distant intermediaries, positioning themselves as job boards or listing sites. Workers seeking jobs through these platforms can neither hold these platforms to account for not securing them work, not for the nature of work secured. A smaller minority of marketplace platforms negotiate certain aspects of work that are easier to regulate, such as enforcing minimum wage standards and requiring employers to pre-set granulated tasks and hours for workers. In the third category are those marketplace platforms that function as strong intermediaries, with active investment in offering grievance redressal systems to workers—especially for cases of harassment and non-payment of wages, and negotiating wages, hours, and tasks on behalf of workers or offering tips on location-based expectations for wages.

**Annapurnamma:** If we go through agency it is good. If any problem or emergency comes, they will talk to them [employers]. If we go on our own, owners do not listen to us. No support is there for us.

Interview with worker on a digital placement agency, Bengaluru

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**When it comes to dealing with contentious issues such as allegations of theft made against workers, all platforms across types choose to act as 'neutral' arbitrators, which implies that they maintain traditional discourses that construct workers as suspicious intruders into the home.**

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Sean Blagsvedt, founder of Babajob, a marketplace platform, reflects that enabling agency among workers is an essential layer in the theory of change of social entrepreneurship. Borrowing from theories of competitive markets, he argues that after opening up a job exchange platform for workers, easy availability of competitive jobs would provide more negotiating power to workers. In a perfect marketplace, this would allow job seekers to obtain better jobs according to their own preferences - most often being higher salaries, a shorter commute or jobs with higher social status, such as working for a well known company.

The marketplace platforms we assessed were floundering to create such marketplaces that led to labour market gains and agency for workers. The agency to exercise choice through platforms is determined by digital access and literacy. Digital labour markets aren't necessarily empowering; instead, they build on privileges that few workers enjoy. Workers with digital devices and literacy, physical mobility and the resources to bear indirect costs that are outsourced to them are at a significant advantage in finding high-paying jobs. Women workers tend to be disadvantaged on all these counts, thereby limiting their agency and capacity to reap the promised benefits of marketplace platforms.



**Most on-demand platforms** are data-intensive, power-hungry entities. They also seek to attract workers with promises of work flexibility, independence and business partnership. The realities of work on-demand care and domestic work platforms is a far cry from the liberating utopia painted. Through overarching managerial and algorithmic tools, on-demand platforms control granular aspects of work. In a focus group discussion with workers of Urban Company, workers expressed being astutely aware of the ways in which the platform was robbing them of agency in acts evocative of histories of bonded labour. Workers also spoke about the nefarious strategies adopted by the platform to ensure atomisation of workers and preclude their collective voice from emerging. Instead, on-demand platforms refuse to address workers' concerns around poor conditions of work, including harassment, and extraction of unpaid labour and dwindling earnings. Constant feedback collection and worker surveillance further weakens negotiating power, as these place workers in low-power positions vis-a-vis customer interactions and platform penalisation.

**Digital placement agencies**, operating somewhere near the centre of the interventionism spectrum, showcase worker-first operational choices. Digital placement agencies often negotiate workers' contracts, allowing them to directly inform the conditions of work. Workers often prefer this, as they see the platform-customer relationship as less power asymmetrical than the worker-employer relationship. Digital placement agencies do not regulate or surveil workers in their day-to-day tasks, but offer a helpful means to address grievances if they arise. We find instances where platforms are willing to ensure timely payment of wages to workers, and intervene in case unpaid labour was being demanded by customers. Despite the agentic properties of digital placement agencies, they were unable to substantially alter the historically exploitative nature of paid domestic and care work. Conditions of work remain precarious, insecure and lacking basic protections and benefits.



# Platformisation of What?

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## Questioning the Formalisation Rhetoric

### MODALITIES OF PLATFORMISATION

During interviews, platform representatives consistently deferred to an imagination of platforms as solely technological artefacts. The affordances and characteristics of platforms were often regarded as an extension of technological constraints. Workers, on the other hand, referred to platforms as socio-technical systems, and an extension of those developing and managing the processes that impacted worker's material conditions.

Platforms rely on, reconfigure and selectively challenge historical forms of exploitation that have characterised domestic and care work in India. In making sense of platformisation, it is necessary to reject its conceptualisation as a project with universally agreed upon, objective goals. Platforms integrate the paternalism of privileged class and caste groups in their design and operation. Thus, it is imperative to repeatedly check who platformisation works for, and what is being platformed.

What we are witnessing in the global south is the corporatised platformisation of informal economies—driving, logistics or care work—in urban spaces. Platformisation is also often conflated with formalisation, and it is within these vectors, from complete informality to piecemeal formalisation of particular occupations, that platforms thrive. In this transition, formalisation is reconfigured and given specific neo-liberal connotations of welfare and empowerment. One aspect is that of professionalisation as constituting formalisation. This is achieved through the intensive granularization of domestic and care work into commodifiable and transactable tasks, atomisation of workers as independent entrepreneurs, multi-pronged surveillance modalities, and imparting of 'soft skills'- a metaphor for the performance of class and caste upgradation. Another aspect of the neoliberal formalisation project is the financialisation of marginalised populations. Workers participating in labour markets through platforms are often required to have bank accounts, participate in digital transactions and generate commercially viable, transactional data streams. This is often indicated as the enabling role that platforms play in formalisation.



However, this is a limited understanding of formalisation. Contemporary ideas of financial inclusion seek to financialise vulnerable populations. These benefits do not take the form of labour protections that are the central function of formalisation processes. Instead, the so-called benefits are intended to transform domestic workers to participate within the logics of the market.

The effects of the one-way information flow between workers and platforms also have telling implications for formalisation of domestic work in India. A key characteristic of formal employment is that employers surveill workers. Formal employment, in its industrial conceptualisation, mandates the maintenance of elaborate records and giving up of autonomy on the part of employees. In being subject to extensive control by employers, workers gain labour protections in the form of predictable employment, workplace safety, and social security. We find that domestic work platforms do maintain similar formal records in the form of databased information that is processed through algorithmic sorting and filtering. However, barring a few exceptions, none of the platforms accorded any of the associated protections that form an integral part of the trade-off contained in the formal employment contract. While it may be the case that platform companies in the marketplace and digital placement agency categories may not be regarded as employers of domestic workers (and instead are more in the nature of staffing agencies), these platforms do not require employers to accord any protections to workers hired through them. There are some exceptions—Helper4u was one example of a marketplace platform that encouraged a documented contractual relationship between employers and workers. However, even then the onus is placed on workers to facilitate this arrangement.

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**None of the workers we spoke to who found work through any marketplace platform or digital placement agency had a written work arrangement or employment protections. In other words, most platforms fail to play a role in formalising domestic work by mediating the employment relationship.**

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## OCCUPATIONAL HISTORIES & PLATFORMISATION

Platformisation of informal economies is differently operationalised as compared to formal sectors. van Doorn highlights several useful questions to be used in research on platformed labour, which can be used to assess these differences.<sup>45</sup>

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- (a) What is the nature of work performed?**
  - (b) What is the social situation and legal status of the worker?**
  - (c) What is the worker's relationship to/ investment in the work?**
- 

These questions are critical - the history of an occupation determines what shape and form its platformisation will take. The platformisation of domestic and care work takes a very different form than in the transportation and logistics sectors. The scholarly analyses of platformed labour emerging from the 'Uberisation' framing, then, is of limited use in understanding the platformisation of domestic and care work.

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**Moving away from the conception of gig work—of the male experience of driving and engaging with a socio-technical intermediary—is necessary. Platforms are deeply embedded in the very sectors that they seek to 'disrupt'. The multiplicity of prevailing models and the many failures of platforms to 'crack' the sector are possibly indicative of how the strategies of control and care by platforms are designed. This also allows us to nuance the challenges faced by workers, including those of illusory flexibility and worker misclassification.**

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This is best indicated by the typologies of domestic work platforms that have been operationalised in the Indian context. The on-demand model, which is premised on the fungibility of work being platformised, is a far-cry from the way in which paid domestic and care work is historically and currently organised in India. A central characteristic of work arrangements is the familiarity that is required to be built between paid domestic and care workers with their employers. Such familiarity results in these work arrangements existing for months, if not years.

<sup>45</sup> van Doorn, N. (2019, August 6). On the conditions of possibility for worker organizing in platform-based gig economies. Notes From Below. <https://notesfrombelow.org/article/conditions-possibility-worker-organizing-platform>

The reproduction of aspirational lifestyles of the professional class thrive on the standardisation of service work. Standardisation – of tasks, processes and qualifications – is a precondition for outsourcing.<sup>46</sup> These tendencies have been observed for several occupational categories that have serviced the emerging middle class in corporatised and neoliberal India, and includes a vast range of service workers including private security guards, retail workers and gym trainers.<sup>47</sup>

While domestic workers have historically played a critical role in enabling the ‘productive’ lifestyles of the dominant class and caste employers, platforms’ attempts at standardising domestic work reveal tensions in its process. These relate to affective labour that characterises domestic work, and service work generally. Domestic workers expressed how standardisation was a limited framework as their work relied on ambiguous notions of providing emotional and care work that could not be quantified. This is emblematic of domestic work in India, where workers are simultaneously treated as ‘part of the household’ and as outsiders, as per the employers’ convenience. Workers from each of the three models also grappled with the challenge of performing domestic work within the bounds of monetised time.

Shifts propelled by platformisation have important ramifications for domestic and care workers as the cultural boundaries within which they have historically operated stand to be reshaped. Platforms, in their attempts to account for these cultural contours, have begun to offer longer term arrangements. These arrangements resemble the archetype of paid domestic work in India, as the presence of digital placement agencies indicate. In offering such arrangements, platform models in the country replicate the existing social order that mediates domestic and care work arrangements. They intervene only at limited points in provisioning labour, raising pressing questions about what actually shifts as a result of digital mediation of work in the sector. Informality, precarity, and poor conditions of work are replicated and amplified by platforms, while also introducing more intrusive forms of surveilling workers.

<sup>46</sup> Huws, U. (2016). Logged labour: a new paradigm of work organisation? *Work Organisation, Labour & Globalisation*, 10(1), 7–26. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/workorglaboglob.10.1.0007>

<sup>47</sup> Maitra, S., & Maitra, S. (2018). Producing the Aesthetic Self: An Analysis of Aesthetic Skill and Labour in the Organized Retail Industries in India. *Journal of South Asian Development*, 13(3), 337–357. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0973174118808129>



## Conclusion

Our typology of platforms mediating domestic work details three types of platforms –

- (i) **Marketplace**, or platforms that list workers' data on their profile, provide certain filters for automated selection of a pool of workers, and charge a fee from customers for access to workers' contact details,
- (ii) **Digital placement agency**, or platforms that provide an end-to-end placement service to customers, identify appropriate workers on the basis of selection criteria, and negotiate conditions of work on behalf of workers, and
- (iii) **On-demand platforms**, or companies that provide services or 'gigs' such as cleaning on an hourly basis, performed by a roster of workers who are characterised as 'independent contractors'. We find that this typology is critical to understand whether a platform acts as a weak or strong intermediary, based on the level of control they exercise over negotiating conditions of work and its performance.

Across the three types of platforms, wages were found to be slightly higher than or matching those of workers off platforms. This is unlike traditional placement agencies, which have been found to be lowering workers' wages. Some marketplace platforms have incorporated features to nudge customers towards setting higher wages, such as enforcing minimum wage standards, or informing customers of expected wages in their locality. Conversely, on-demand platforms charge a high rate of commission from workers, despite refusing to recognise them as employees. This indicates that this is a misclassification of an employment relationship for workers on on-demand platforms, given that workers are unable to set their own conditions or wages for work. Despite the high rates of commission and appropriation of labour by platforms, on-demand workers earn higher wages than workers on other platforms. The relatively high wage is a result of marketing on-demand cleaning as professionalised and more skilled than day-to-day cleaning. Tasks in the sector continue to be distributed along the lines of gender and caste, as has historically been the case. Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi women rather than men are more likely to take up work such as cleaning and washing dishes, while men and women across castes are equally distributed in cooking work. Women dominate tasks such as elderly and childcare, as in the traditional economy. Workers in professionalised tasks such as deep cleaning that requires technical equipment and chemicals are almost entirely men.





We find that workers are primarily onboarded onto platforms by learning about it from other workers, through onboarding camps held by platforms, or offline advertising by platforms. Such in-person onboarding techniques allow workers with little to no digital access or literacy to register themselves on marketplace platforms and digital placement agencies. However, workers working with on-demand platforms require constant access to a smartphone and high levels of digital literacy. We further find that low levels of education and digital literacy continue to impact platformed labour by creating a strong informational asymmetry between workers and platforms. For instance, we find that women workers from low income communities have very little information about how platforms work and are unable to trust them. In addition, women workers' husbands or family members often influence their choice to be onboarded or not on the platform. Across the three types of platforms, systems of placement and ratings add to the information asymmetry, as workers are not aware of the impact of ratings on their ability to find work or charge better wages. Further, rating systems are seen as objective appraisals of trustworthiness by prospective clients, and are also utilised by platforms to enforce the capital-labour relation by exacting control through algorithmic management practices.

As a result of platforms labelling workers as independent contractors, indirect costs are outsourced to workers, including costs of travel to employers' homes, participating mandatory in days-long trainings, costs of premium equipment, etc. Such mandatory training often aims to teach workers to become professionals, which entails the erasure of class and caste markers without any meaningful upskilling. We find that the social inequalities that have historically shaped the sector before the entry of platforms continue to be replicated or even amplified in the platform economy. This happens in part through features such as filtering and rating systems, which allow employers to select workers on the basis of demographic characteristics, and give subjective feedback to workers without a similar avenue for workers to collectively share their feedback about employers. Workers are unable to exercise control over their data, further undermining their agency vis-a-vis platforms and employers. We identify the clear need for collective bargaining structures to emerge within the sector, to address the consequences of the relative lack of agency for women, oppressed castes, and low income workers.



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**Future research must further deepen the understanding of how platforms shape occupational histories, along with understanding temporal changes at scale. Future work must also retain a focus on southern informal economies, as the understudied frontier of gig work with implications for the livelihood of millions of workers. It is also critical to document the manner in which collective bargaining strategies have emerged in other sectors in the gig economy, as well as any models that could be appropriated for the domestic work sector in the platform economy. Producing such knowledge using feminist tools is essential to re-imagining a platform economy that empowers workers while providing adequate labour protections, and ensuring decent conditions of work.**

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## AFTERWORD ON THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

The outbreak of covid-19 in March 2020 caused deep humanitarian and economic crises and devastated the income of vulnerable workers, particularly those in the informal sector and daily wage workers. Migrant and women workers have emerged as a particularly vulnerable group without networks of support or social security. Domestic and gig workers are among those whose livelihoods have been devastated by the pandemic. The entire data collection and most of the writing for this report happened in 2019-20. As a result, we are unable to fully reflect on the continuing and lasting impact that the outbreak of covid-19 has had on domestic and care workers. Research conducted by the Centre for Internet and Society and various other groups during this period has attempted to document the impact of Covid-19 on marginalised workers. We have extensively documented the impact on the livelihoods and wellbeing of domestic workers in West Bengal<sup>48</sup> and Karnataka,<sup>49</sup> gig workers in transportation and logistics across India,<sup>50</sup> and migrant women workers in New Delhi<sup>51</sup>. These works point to the futility of platforms and state welfare in providing a safety net to workers, particularly migrants and women.

The imposition of one of the harshest lockdowns in the world in India in March 2020 had a severe impact on the lives and livelihoods of low-income workers. Among the meagre affordances that were made by the state, certain "essential services" were allowed to operate. Essential services were identified and listed by the government, and among these featured e-commerce and on-demand service companies.

<sup>48</sup> Ghatak, A. (2020). Domestic Workers' Access to Secure Livelihoods in West Bengal. Centre for Internet and Society and Parichiti. [https://www.parichiti.org.in/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Final%20report\\_WDW\\_Lockdown.pdf](https://www.parichiti.org.in/ckfinder/userfiles/files/Final%20report_WDW_Lockdown.pdf)

<sup>49</sup> Domestic Workers Rights Union (DWRU), Bruhat Bangalore Gruhakarmika Sangha (BBGS) & Manegelasa Kaarmikara Union (MKU). (2020). The Covid-19 Pandemic and the Invisible Workers of the Household Economy. Centre for Internet and Society. <https://cis-india.org/raw/files/dwru-bbgs-mku-covid19-invisible-household-workers-report>

<sup>50</sup> Indian Federation of App-based Transportation Workers and International Transport Federation. (2020). Locking Down the Impact of Covid-19: Appraising State and Private Measures for App-based Transport and Delivery Workers. Centre for Internet and Society. <https://cis-india.org/raw/files/ifat-itf-locking-down-the-impact-of-covid-19-report/>

<sup>51</sup> Ghosh, S. (2021). On the Question of Access to Welfare and Health for Women During the Initial Phase of the Pandemic. Economic and Political Weekly Engage. <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/question-access-welfare-and-health-women-during>

Since then, and even just preceding the lockdown, platform companies have displayed tremendous enthusiasm to operate under the garb of public interest. While occupations such as transportation were curtailed to prevent mobility, others, such as logistics, received policy forbearance; they were recognized as performing crucial public function in the absence of state capacity.<sup>52</sup> Domestic work platforms advocated to receive permission to operate because domestic workers performing care functions are "essential" workers.<sup>53</sup> In this zeal, there have been several slippages in platforms' rhetoric carefully crafted over the last few years—that of legal and operational distance between platforms and their works, and the lack of responsibility that platforms have towards workers.

Several platform companies in the business of providing domestic and care services have introduced a slew of measures ostensibly for workers' welfare as they continue to be devoid of the luxury of social isolation. These include offering income support schemes, distributing PPE kits, and organising vaccination camps. While there is a lot of fine print in availing of the woefully inadequate support measures<sup>54</sup>, it is also an admission of the control that these companies exercise in ensuring workers' welfare<sup>55</sup>.

The increased forms of surveillance mandated by digital platforms in response to Covid-19 are also demonstrative of the disguised employment relationship. Workers have been forced to undergo regular temperature checks, mandatorily download contact tracing applications, and even use wearables to record their bodily functions. These point to an intensification of processes we highlight in our report. Workers are being asked to bear costs of continuing work, including health risks while their livelihoods remain precarious. Companies on the other hand are reaping the benefits of disaster capitalism, while extracting higher commissions and data from workers.

Through this period, there have been significant policy developments that seek to regulate platform-mediated work. The Code on Social Security, passed in September 2020, seeks to provide social security to workers in the gig economy, through state-supported schemes with contributions from platforms. Although a positive development for the recognition of gig workers, the Code continues to classify them as unorganised workers rather than employees. Several other concerns with registration and access to social security as imagined in the Code also emerged - most importantly the failure to universalise protections for all gig workers.<sup>56</sup>

There have been various technological responses to the outbreak of covid-19. Digital platforms, too, have seen a rise in use. The integration of transportation, logistics and care work platforms in urban infrastructures has come to the fore. Despite the national lockdowns in 2020, Urban Company reported a doubling of revenue in 2020 (compared to 2019). With the concerns around hygiene and sanitisation, companies offering cleaning services are seeing an enormous surge in demand. It is hard to imagine a future of work not dominated by digital platforms. Through our findings from this report, one thing is clear: digitisation is socially mediated. Empowering workers will require newer imaginations of a collective language and organisation strategies. Only then could any 'new normal' be crafted to empower workers and generate conditions of work that are secure and equitable.

<sup>52</sup> ET Bureau. (2020, May 7). COVID impact: Goyal hears out ecommerce CEOs. The Economic Times. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/services/retail/goyal-hears-out-ecomm-ceos/articleshow/74836223.cms>

<sup>53</sup> Press Trust of India. (2020, May 1). Urban Company seeks relaxation for essential services amid coronavirus crisis. YourStory.Com. <https://yourstory.com/2020/05/coronavirus-lockdown-urban-company-seeks-ecommerce-relaxation-norms/amp>

<sup>54</sup> Fairwork. (2020). The Gig Economy and Covid-19: Looking Ahead. <https://fair.work/en/fw/publications/the-gig-economy-and-covid-19-looking-ahead/>;

Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union. (2021, April 5). Driver eligibility for insurance programmes of OlaCabs. <https://twitter.com/TGPWU/status/1389481190483103744>

<sup>55</sup> Urban Company Desk. (2021). From the CEO's Desk: Urban Company's Protocols to Ensure Your Health & Safety - The Urban Guide. <https://www.urbancompany.com/blog/company-updates/ceo-message-on-safety/>

<sup>56</sup> Singh, D. (2020, November 20). Urban Company's Varun Khaitan on how the pandemic accelerated the company's plans for beauty services. The Financial Express. <https://www.financialexpress.com/brandwagon/urban-companys-varun-khaitan-on-how-the-pandemic-accelerated-the-companys-plans-for-beauty-services/2132498/>

# Appendix

## DISAGGREGATION MATRIX OF WORKER-INTERVIEWEES

GENDER	DELHI	BANGALORE
Women	12	10
Men	6	4
Total	18	14

REGION	DELHI	BANGALORE
Tamil Nadu		2
Karnataka		7
Uttar Pradesh	3	1
New Delhi	6	
Assam		1
Orissa		2
Arunachal Pradesh		1
Haryana	3	
Nepal	1	
Ghaziabad	5	

MIGRATION STATUS	DELHI	BANGALORE
Migrant	12	8
Not Migrant	6	6

LANGUAGE	DELHI	BANGALORE
Hindi	18	5
Kannada		7
Tamil		2

RELIGION		
RELIGION	DELHI	BANGALORE
Hindu	14	10
Muslim	2	
Christian		1
Did not Disclose	2	3
CASTE		
CASTE	DELHI	BANGALORE
Dalit-Bahujan	8	3
Savarna	4	5
Did not Disclose	6	6
TYPE OF WORK		
TYPE OF WORK	DELHI	BANGALORE
Deep Cleaning/Housekeeping	6	4
Cleaning	1	4
Cooking	2	1
Washing (dishes/clothes)		
Care (elderly/child)	1	3
Combination of 2 or more	1	8
TYPE OF PLATFORM		
TYPE OF PLATFORM	DELHI	BANGALORE
Not on Platform	6	4
On-demand	6	5
Marketplace	5	3
Digital Placement Agency	1	2

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