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FUTURES OF WORKERS

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Understanding the platform economy

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, technology has disrupted the functioning of the labour industry, helping to reorganize work, promising to increase efficiency and transparency in services and expanding opportunities for both workers and consumers. Technologically-mediated work has been framed by corporations and the media as the “democratization” of technology; enabling workers to become entrepreneurs. At the macro-economic level, the provision of entrepreneurial opportunities provides possibilities of reducing unemployment, improving labour force participation through greater inclusion and improving productivity of the economy as a whole (Irani 2015; McKinsey, 2016). At the individual level, technologically-mediated work aims to transform the lives of workers by instilling an entrepreneurial spirit and as a consequence, improving their incomes and working conditions.

The report studies the platform economy, an integral and flourishing dimension of technologically-mediated work. Ride-sharing platforms such as Uber, Ola Cabs, GoJek and Lyft and on-demand service applications such as TaskRabbit, Amazon Home Services and UrbanClap use functionally designed apps and powerful algorithms to enable a seamless interaction between consumers of services and workers. The distinguishing feature of these platforms is that while technology is utilized for the allocation of work, the services are delivered offline. Therefore, the manner in which work is performed remains unaltered.

The report undertakes a comparative analysis of two leading ride-hailing applications in India with one of India’s most prominent on-demand personal services app to understand the lived experiences of workers in the platform economy. The comparative method enabled us to highlight the varied dimensions of the platform economy and the differentiated risks, opportunities and outcomes faced by workers on the platforms. By including the on-demand personal services app, we aim to expand the current discourse which focuses primarily on the “uberisation” of the platform economy.

Through our work, we also acknowledge that economic activity is deeply intertwined with gender, class and caste. In doing so, we move away from research findings conducted in the global North; research which has come to dominate the narrative on these new forms of work. Thus, the report hopes to highlight the previously invisibilised experiences of workers, particularly women.

During the course of the research and in this report, we endeavour to address the following questions – how has technologically-mediated work changed labour organisation and processes? What are the differentiated risks faced by research participants in the platform economy? How does the identity of workers intersect with cultural practices to impact labour outcomes? What appropriate policy and community actions can enable risk alleviation for workers?

The report brings forth the contestations and particularities underlying these questions by understanding the platform economy through the perspective of workers. In doing so, we aim to study how similarly structured, technologically-mediated work results in differentiated experiences for workers along varied axes. Through this we endeavour to add to the growing public discourse on the platform economy by highlighting understudied areas of embodied positionalities, particularly, gender, caste and class and cultural specificity of technologically-mediated work in India. We hope for our future research to build on the findings of this report by understanding the perspective of platforms. This will provide a more comprehensive analysis of the working of the platform economy in India; a previously under-researched domain.

The research was funded by Microsoft Research India and was undertaken in collaboration with Dr Joyojeet Pal. We are immensely grateful to MSR India for their support during the research and Dr. Pal for his valuable insights throughout the project.

METHODOLOGY



The findings of this report are based on in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 20 drivers on two ride-hailing platforms and 20 beauticians and makeup artists working on an on-demand personal services app in New Delhi between June and July 2019. The platforms were chosen as they all meet three essential characteristics of organisations in the platform economy – engagement with workers is based on short-term contracts, the work promises flexibility and autonomy, and payment is made per task (Sundararajan 2016; McKinsey, 2016). Most importantly, work is performed offline (Prassl 2018).

While the on-demand services app under study provides a range of services, beauty and makeup were selected as the work is performed exclusively by women, for women. This stands in contrast to ride-hailing platforms in which the majority of drivers are men. Further, personal services are performed within the domestic spaces of clients' houses. The spatial reconfiguration of work also helps to highlight the specificity of women's experiences in the platform economy.

Initial contact with workers on the on-demand services app was established through two personal contacts of the researcher, following which, snowballing was used to contact subsequent participants. While a few interviews were conducted in person at public spaces, most interviews were conducted over the phone. The method of conducting the interview was based solely on the preference of participants.

In the case of drivers on the ride-hailing app, two CNG pumps in Delhi were frequented to establish contact with potential participants. Individuals approached were then interviewed during their personal time-off.

Consent was sought for all interviews and audio recordings, if any. Data was recorded and transcribed keeping in mind the privacy and confidentiality of participants' identity and personally identifiable information. All names in this report have been changed to protect confidentiality.

DIFFERENTIATION BETWEEN PLATFORMS AND PARTICIPANTS



FIGURE 1

KEY FINDINGS

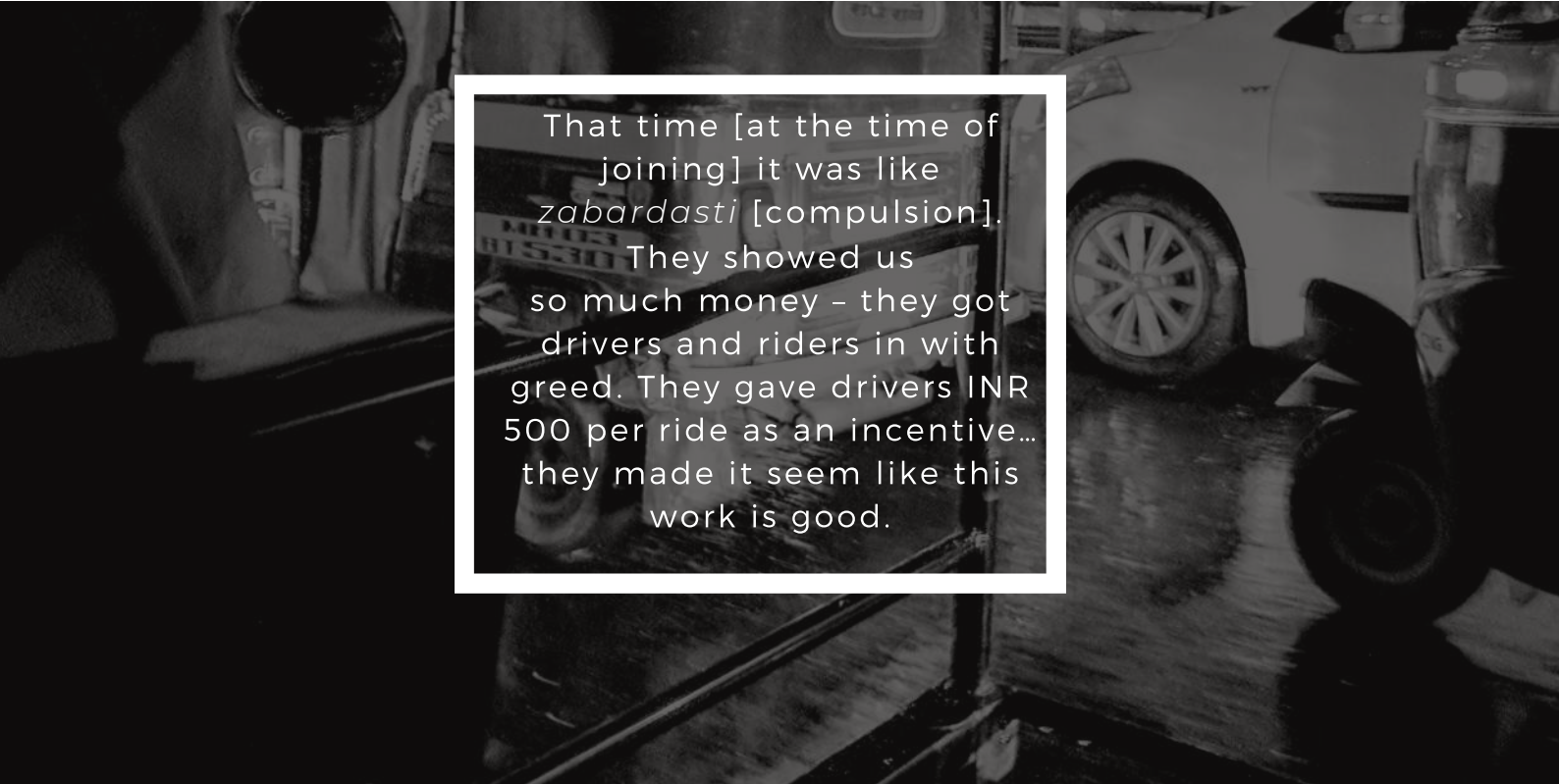
1. SETTING THE CONTEXT

The first section of the report begins by providing insights into the reasons participants joined the platform economy. We found that the motivations to join are differentiated by gender. Women's professional choices are driven by gendered expectations, not only in the labour market but also within the household. Women participants prefer flexible work arrangements to balance professional work and domestic responsibilities.

In our fieldwork, we also found that while all three platforms undertake algorithmic management of workers, technological control varies based on services. The on-demand application exerts direct control, primarily over the hiring process. This contrasts with the ride-hailing services which exercise indirect control over labour processes.

1.1 MOTIVATIONS TO JOIN

Through interviews, we discerned that research participants joined the platform economy for a variety of similar and overlapping reasons. The primary motivation for both men and women to join the platform economy was the prospect of better earnings. Workers are promised incomes and incentives commensurate to their hard work – providing possibilities of high earnings.



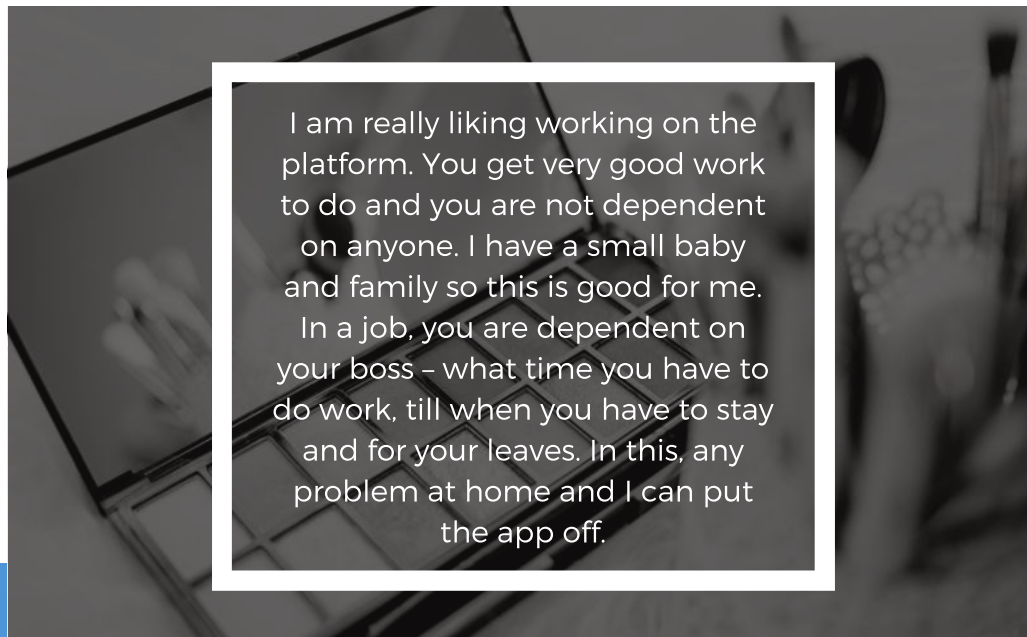
That time [at the time of joining] it was like *zabardasti* [compulsion]. They showed us so much money – they got drivers and riders in with greed. They gave drivers INR 500 per ride as an incentive... they made it seem like this work is good.

Besides higher incomes, research participants, particularly men, stated that they were compelled to join the ride-hailing services to escape less desirable alternatives such as unemployment or a lower paying job with poor working conditions. Approximately, 36 percent of our male research participants joined the platform economy as a consequence of unemployment and poor working conditions. This suggests that unemployment and poor working conditions are frequent occurrences for men engaged in informal work such as driving.

The previous company where I worked closed down. I tried other places to get a job but I didn't get anything. I thought that since I have a car I might as well earn something.

However, women join the platform economy for differentiated reasons. In contrast, many women participants joined the platform economy to benefit from the flexibility it offers in terms of work timings. Full-time work demands physical presence at the workplace for a minimum of eight hours per day which made it difficult for women research participants to engage in household chores.

Research has shown that the motivation to partake in flexible work conditions becomes stronger when women workers have children. Cohen (2019) shows that having a child below the age of four years increases the odds for both men and women to engage in self-employment. The paper indicates that independent and flexible work is used as a strategy to manage childcare, especially for mothers.



DIFFERENTIATED REASONS TO JOIN PLATFORM WORK: BY PLATFORM AND GENDER

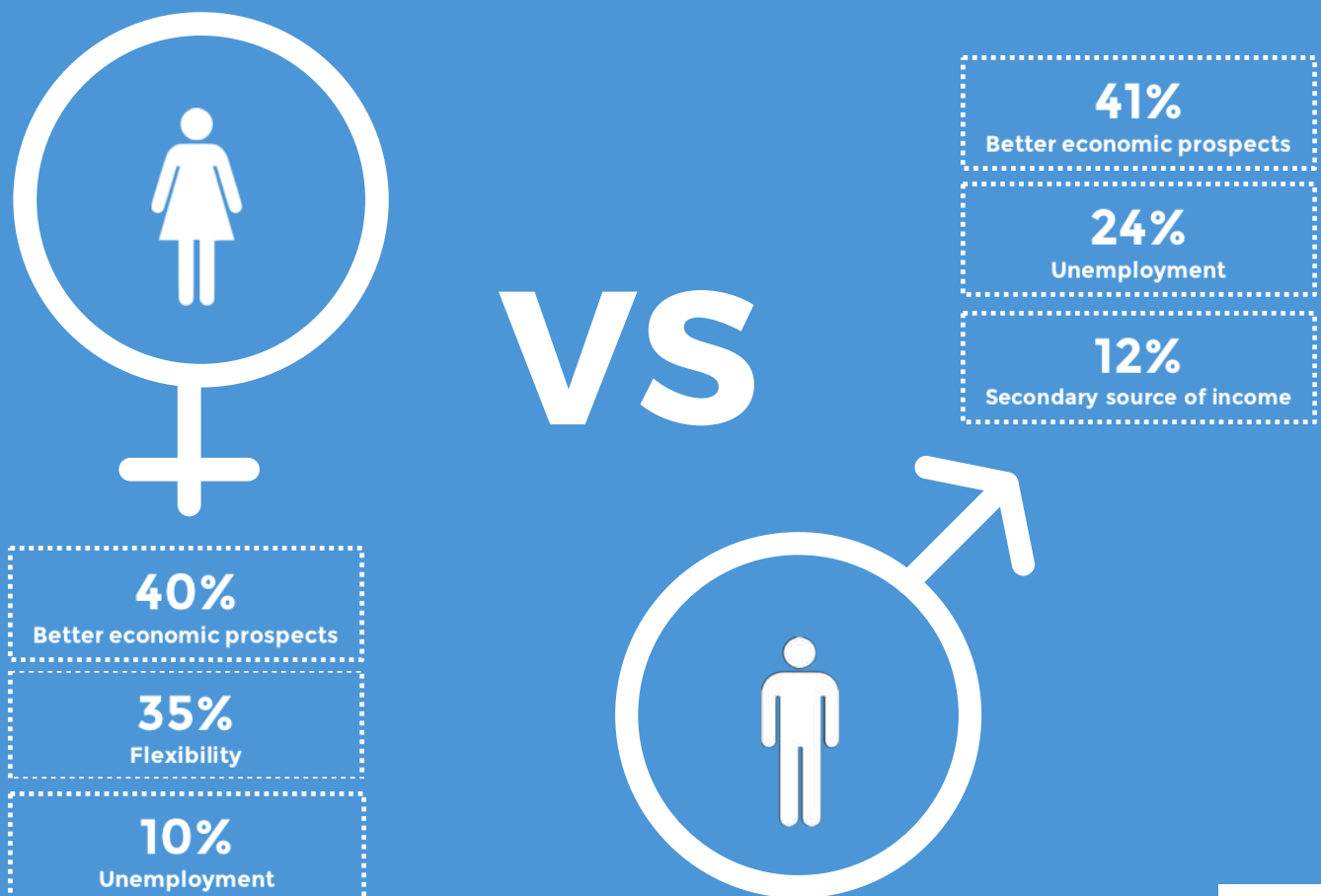


FIGURE 2

1.2 PROCESS OF JOINING

Technologically-mediated work aims to minimize and at times, eradicate the matching frictions which are prevalent in the labour market. Platforms have adopted Uber's model of "algorithmic management" to reorganize how work is allocated and to manage their workforce. Technology is used to on-board workers and to match consumers with workers. However, algorithmic management has been adopted differently across platforms, thereby, shaping work in very different ways. For example, the process of joining the platform varies significantly between ride-hailing services and on-demand personal services.

DIFFERENTIATING THE HIRING PROCESS BY PLATFORM

RIDE-HAILING SERVICES


ON-DEMAND PERSONAL SERVICES

STEP 1	
Drivers are required to download the app and submit documents – car registration, Aadhaar Card, driving license, police verification and PAN card	Workers must download the app, fill in their details and provide references. If their work experience and qualifications match the job requirements, they receive a call with details for an in-person interview
STEP 2	
After verification of documents, drivers are required to go to the platform's office to register their car with the company	Following the in-person interview, workers are required to give a "trial" of their services. Their skill level along with interpersonal skills are evaluated
STEP 3	
If the driver does not have a car, he/she can apply for a lease agreement with the company. Leasing of a car requires a down payment of approximately INR 35,000.	Makeup artists are required to have a vanity before the "trial" process itself. Beauticians have to purchase equipment worth INR 35,000 in case of cash payment or INR 40,000 taken on loan through the Shubh Loan Scheme.
STEP 4	
Drivers are mandated to complete an online training. They can complete it within three months of joining the company. The training covers costumer interaction, app navigation and road etiquettes	Beauticians are provided with training based on their skill level as ascertained during the "trial". It ranges from a week to a month. Makeup artists do not have a training session on joining. However, the platform undertakes up-skilling through "masterclasses".

FIGURE 3

Further, as illustrated in step 3 in figure 3, the process of joining was also dependent on the worker's access to economic capital. Unlike traditional employment arrangements, workers have to invest in and purchase the car in the case of ride-hailing services and beauty equipment for personal services. While most drivers engaged in leasing arrangements, women relied on family savings. We found that such gendered access to capital leads to varying outcomes. For men, unfair leasing terms can lead to unfavourable working conditions such as long working hours and passivity towards harassment. For women, access to family-controlled capital entails negotiations with gender norms and patriarchal expectations.

Thus, by shifting the burden of investments up on workers, platforms have minimized their costs and have reinforced class and gender hierarchies in the public and private domain.



I had done a makeup course from Ambika Pillai before I got married but my parents didn't want me to do this work and so I couldn't pursue makeup. After I got married, I tried doing some business with my husband which didn't go too well. Around that time, my brother joined this platform to do photoshoots. After seeing his work and his good earnings, my family felt it is okay to join.



Understanding the

LEASING EXPERIENCE

A friend of mine told me that this platform had started and it is good so I thought I will join it. This car that I am driving has been leased from the platform. We have to pay the lease rent till we drive. The car will never become mine...Despite that I chose this company because it has a greater earning capacity.

The platform says that if you [the driver] gives us [the platform] lease of INR 1,050 daily, we will give you a car. To pay that, the car will run for at least 1 lakh KMs a year and in three years, the car would have run for over 3 lakh KMs. If the car has run for over 3 lakh KMs, is it worth taking? Even then, the platform says that at the time we give you the No Objection Certificate for the car, after we evaluate the value of the car. For example, if the value of the car is INR 1 lakh, then you have to pay us INR 50,000.

However, the terms and conditions aren't like this when we do the agreement. A lot of drivers don't look at it from this perspective. But the truth is, they say that whatever the value of the car is at that time [at the end of three years], you have to give us half of that, if you want to take the car. If you don't want to take the car, then you won't get even 1 Re.

We are told that the down payment is refundable. But till now, according to me, no one has gotten the refund. I had two cars and I have returned them. It has been nine months and I still haven't received the money...I have been going to the platform's office about 4-5 times a month. They keep telling me, "see, sir, we are just writing your mail, you will get your money soon".

The biggest thing is that when we go to take a lease car, we take the car but we have no proof.

They had told us, "drive the car for three years and the car will become yours". They just said that but didn't give us anything in writing. So, when I went again after sometime, I asked them, "if I drive the car for three years, will the car become mine?" to which they responded, "first you drive the car for three years and then we will see". That means you drive for three years and the car will not be yours.

People who are fortunate get a new car. Most people get cars which have already been driven about 30,000 KMs. Once people return their cars, the platform doesn't give new drivers new cars. They simply just repair the old ones and lease them out. When so many cars are kept there, who will they give them to? Someone like us only.

When you go to take a car, they simply ask you, "which car do you want?". Whichever car you want, they book that car for you. You will get the car you want. When your file gets ready, you don't get to see the car. Before you see the car, they write your car number in the file. If the car is broken or run down or however it is, you have to take it. If you don't take the car, you won't get your money. Only once the down payment is made, they give you the gate pass.

Also, for these lease cars, they have started putting "excess run" charges on them. If we keep driving after going off-duty, they put the "dry run" charge but on top of that they also levy an "excess run" charge...Excess charge essentially means that when you are online and taking bookings, if your car exceed 200 KMs daily or 6000 KMs per month...you have to pay a penalty. Based on my calculations, a lease-car driver is driving to earn INR 300 per day. This is why I am leaving this.

2. RE(ORGANISATION) OF EMPLOYMENT RELATIONS

This section explores how traditional employment relations have been altered in the platform economy. Workers on the platform economy have been reclassified as independent contractors, partners or entrepreneurs. While several professions prominent in the platform economy such as drivers, delivery agents, beauticians and makeup artists have traditionally had limited protection under labour laws, our research shows that their status have been further invisibilised. To bring this forth, we have drawn comparisons along two axes, one, between workers' earlier occupational statuses and their current conditions in the platform economy and two, between participants' gendered positionality.

The first part of the section studies these restructured employment relations and their impact on the organisation of work as well as workers' labour processes and outcomes. We highlight that ambiguous labour agreements by platforms have led to the institutionalization of income volatility. Using participant narratives, we explain workers' contestations with precarity through a temporal lens.

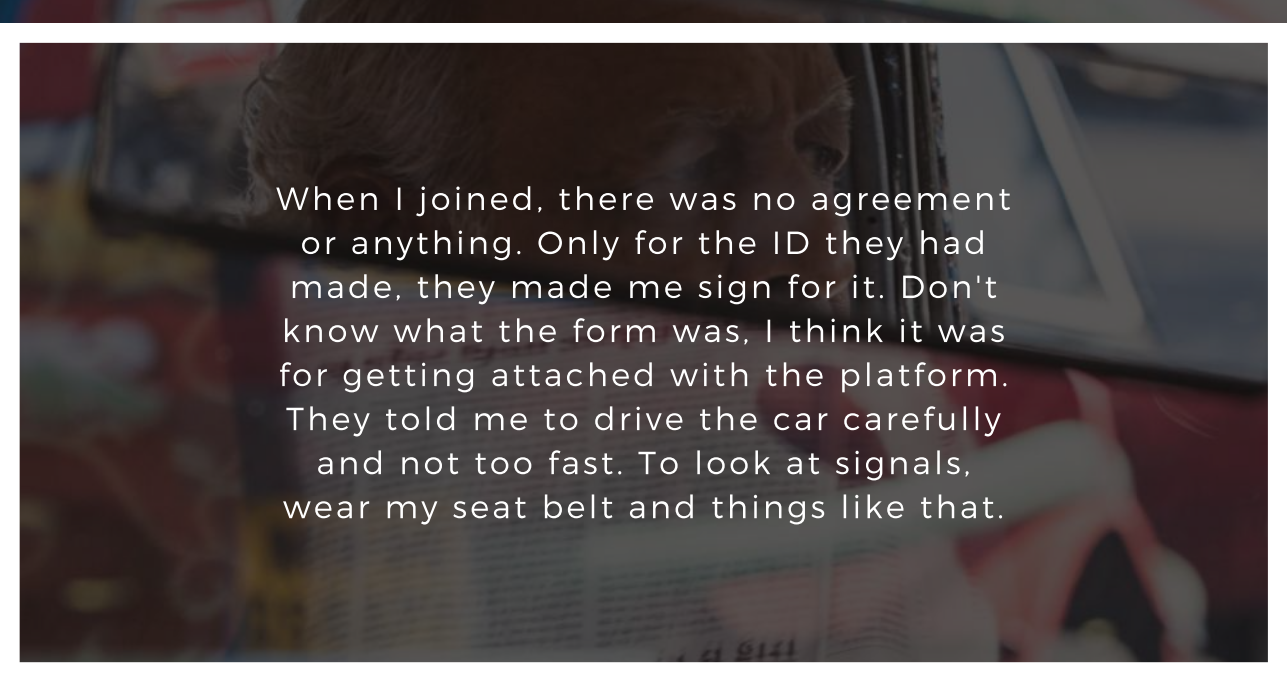
The second part of the section unpacks the promises of flexibility and autonomy in the platform economy from the perspective of employment relations. We show that the reclassification of worker status and dilution of employment relations has exempted platforms from duties and obligations arising out of labour law regulations. Platform workers are not provided social security benefits and income protections. In doing so, we have endeavoured to show that the breakdown of traditional employment relations has created structural vulnerabilities for workers.

2.1 SECURITY OF EMPLOYMENT CONDITIONS

Basis	Ride Hailing Services	Traditional Driving	On-Demand Personal Services	Traditional Salon	Professional Salon
Employment Contract	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓
No threat of deactivation/No threat of instant unemployment	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓
Continuous flow of work	✓	No, but fixed income	Depends on services	✓	✓
Certainty of current income	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓
Certainty of future income	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓

FIGURE 4

Technologically-mediated work has reshaped the contractual relationship between workers and platforms. We found that the nature of work coupled with the redefining of work through difficult to comprehend “service contracts” erodes workers’ security. The services offered on the platform economy, particularly those under evaluation, only last several minutes. Effectively, this means that the relationship between workers, the platform and clients is characterized by short-term contracts. These service exchanges have institutionalized a system of hire and fire which is undertaken through “regulatory arbitrage” (Calo and Rosenblat 2017). A central component of this “regulatory arbitrage” is the rephrasing of employment contracts into “terms of agreement” or “service agreements”. These documents are complex, require a firm grasp on English and reasonably advanced comprehension ability to understand their intricacies (Bailey et al. 2018). Through conversations with participants engaged in both types of services, we discerned that since platform workers agree to these terms and conditions of agreement through the app itself, they did not recall signing a contract. To probe this further, we asked a driver who had joined the platform approximately a month ago about details of the service agreement. He said:

A photograph of a person with dark hair, seen from the side, looking down at a document. The image is slightly blurred and has a dark overlay. A white text box is centered over the image, containing a quote.

When I joined, there was no agreement or anything. Only for the ID they had made, they made me sign for it. Don't know what the form was, I think it was for getting attached with the platform. They told me to drive the car carefully and not too fast. To look at signals, wear my seat belt and things like that.

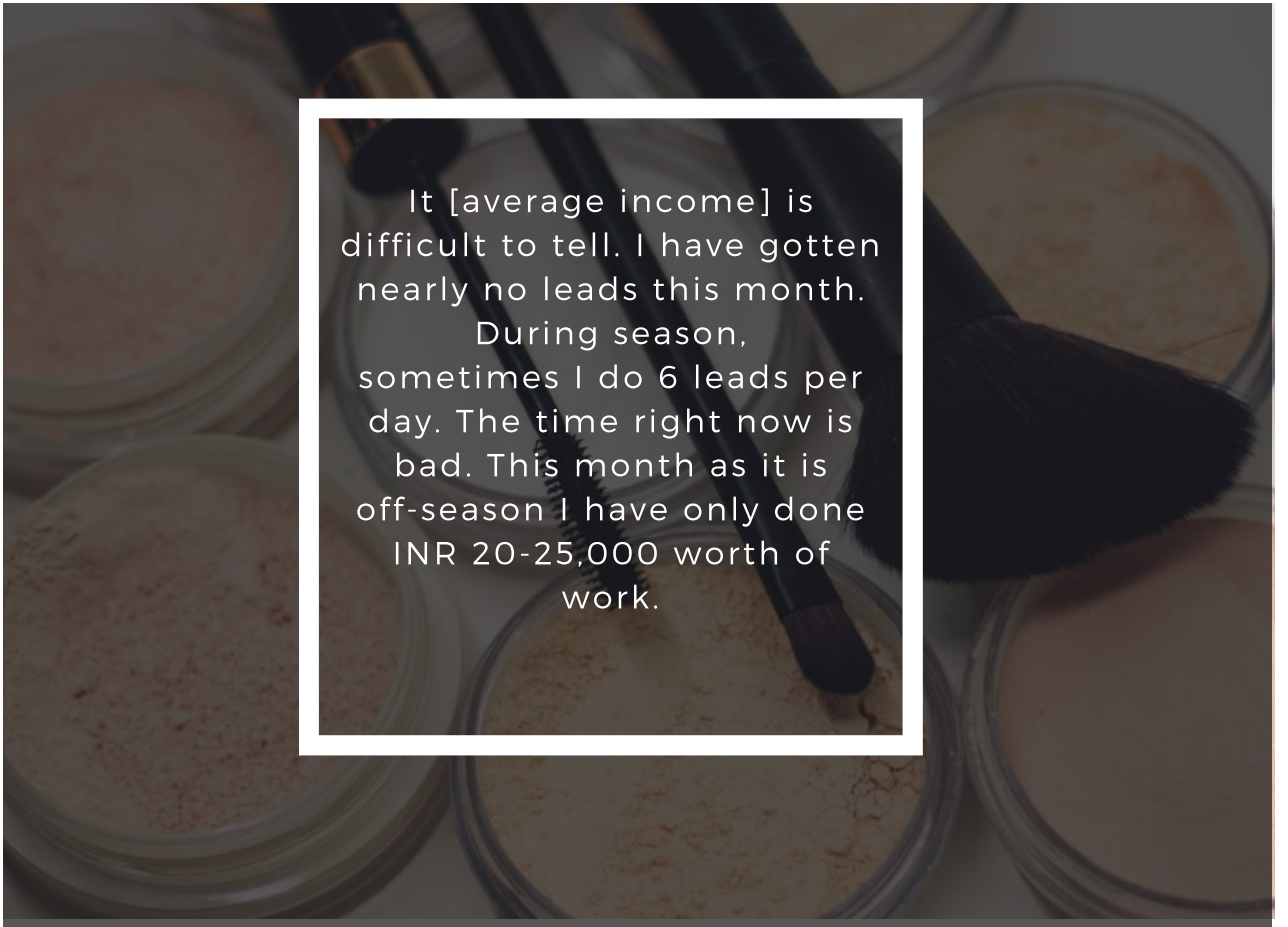
While figure 4 shows that a majority of participants earlier employed in traditional occupations also did not have formal contractual relations with their employers, we assert that opaque and ambiguous employment practices in technologically-mediated work can push platform workers into exploitative work arrangements. A dire consequence of ambiguous and diluted employment relations for both types of services is increased vulnerability to income volatility and termination of engagement on the platform through deactivation. We found that these employment instabilities and precarities manifest in differentiated way for men and women interviewed.

Interviews with participants revealed that a large part of their everyday lives on the platform economy involves dealing with uncertainties and unpredictability. The concept of ‘time’, stretching over the short-, mid- and long-term, as used by Surie and Koduganti (2016) is extended to our analysis to understand the precarity faced by participants. However, these uncertainties manifest in differing ways across the platforms.

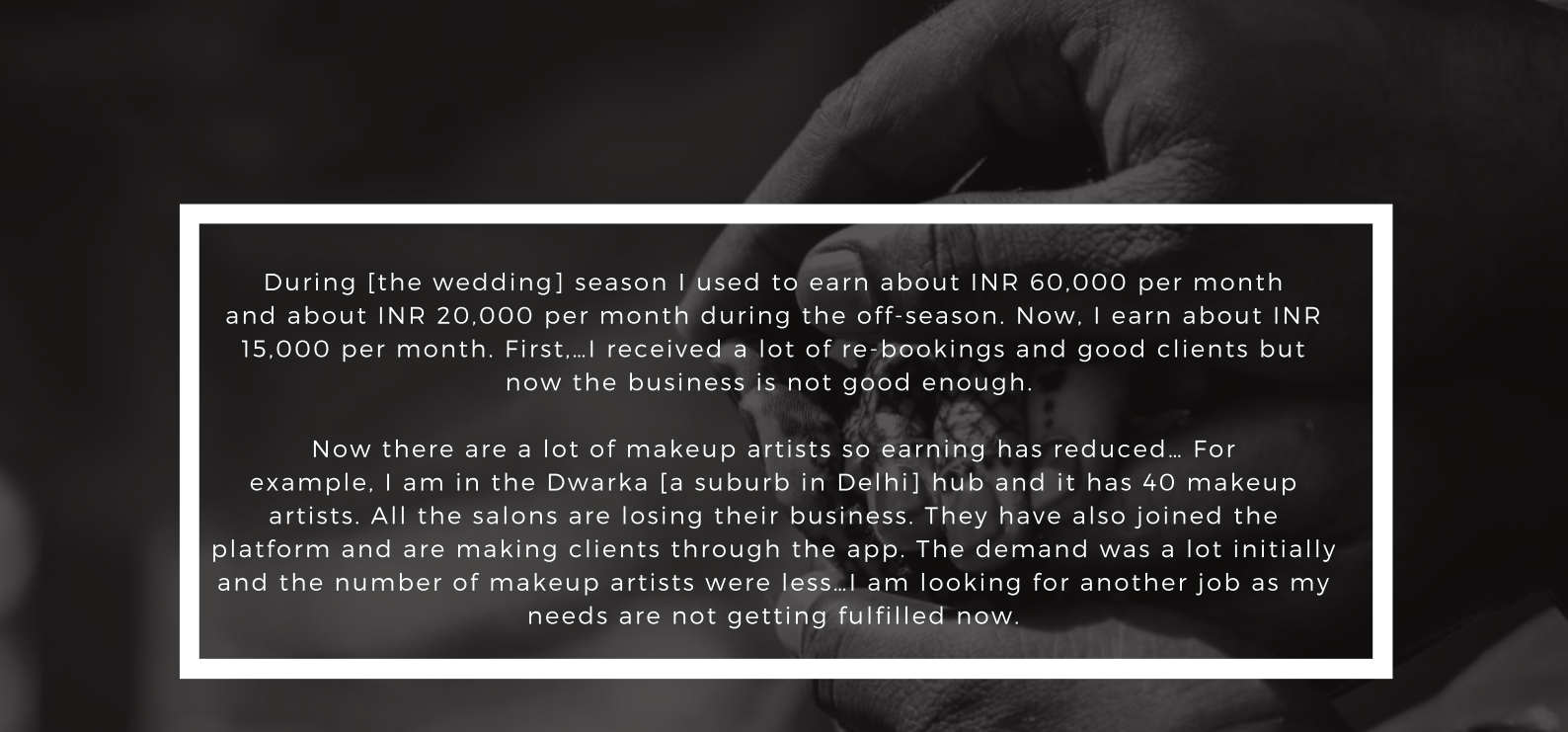
In the case of ride-hailing services, income volatility is marked over a long period of time. While drivers experience dips in work during the day (Ahmed et al. 2016), a feature common with traditional forms of employment relations, they experience precarity over the years. As seen in section 1, participants, initially joined the two ride-hailing platforms due to promises of high earnings. However, after the first two years, they experienced large decreases in their earning capacity, which continues till today.

It is difficult to tell how much we earn because first, they used to give us something else in terms of incentives. But now, there is nothing... First, I used to earn INR 50-60,000 here per week... Now with great difficulty we earn even INR 30,000 per month... they [the platforms] broke their promises and commitments. Since people have taken cars on loan for 4-5 years working with them has become a compulsion.

In contrast, makeup artists and beauticians interviewed experience income volatility over shorter periods of time. For makeup artists, unpredictability is primarily social as their services are in high demand during the Indian wedding season, which is concentrated in particular months – February, April-June and October-December. Similarly, beauticians have low earnings on weekdays. Such variability creates complexities on both ends, of earning capacity on the workers side and of labour allocation for service platforms. Sneha who earns approximately INR 75,000 per month during the wedding season, narrates her experience with income volatility:



It [average income] is difficult to tell. I have gotten nearly no leads this month. During season, sometimes I do 6 leads per day. The time right now is bad. This month as it is off-season I have only done INR 20-25,000 worth of work.



During [the wedding] season I used to earn about INR 60,000 per month and about INR 20,000 per month during the off-season. Now, I earn about INR 15,000 per month. First,...I received a lot of re-bookings and good clients but now the business is not good enough.

Now there are a lot of makeup artists so earning has reduced... For example, I am in the Dwarka [a suburb in Delhi] hub and it has 40 makeup artists. All the salons are losing their business. They have also joined the platform and are making clients through the app. The demand was a lot initially and the number of makeup artists were less...I am looking for another job as my needs are not getting fulfilled now.

The unpredictability of body labour and the growth strategy pursued by both types of platforms has increased income volatility for workers over the long-term. This has diluted workers' abilities to grapple with fluctuating demands and changing business cycles which was earlier borne by employers. This can be observed from figure 4. While driving as a traditional occupation might not guarantee a continuous flow of work, drivers are guaranteed a fixed payment during their employment period.

Once I got on the platform, I understood the reality of it and I realised I was better off before working for someone without any tension. I used to get INR 20-22,000 per month, as well as accommodation, food and everything else. Here, I have to pay a monthly instalment [for the lease] and car maintenance. On top of that, INR 50,000 per year for papers whether you drive or not. In my previous job, the company had to pay for all of this, I would get my salary even if there was no one to drive.

Thus, the narrative shows us that the structuring of platform work has allowed organizations to shift the burden of costs and uncertainty up on workers. Additionally, workers sometimes find themselves locked out of the apps, cutting off their access to potential clients (discussed in greater detail later in the report). As seen through figure 4, unlike traditional employment occupations, platform workers are in constant threat of being deactivated from the app. This makes their expectation of future income further tenuous.

Therefore, participant narratives along with a comparative analysis of traditional and platform-based work segregated by gender demonstrates that these new forms of work have furthered power imbalances between employers and low- and semi-skilled workers. By shifting costs, responsibilities of fluctuating demands and uncertainties of business acquisition up on workers, platforms have individualized risk for workers and institutionalized vulnerabilities.

2.2 WORKING CONDITIONS AND ACCESS TO SOCIAL SECURITY NETS

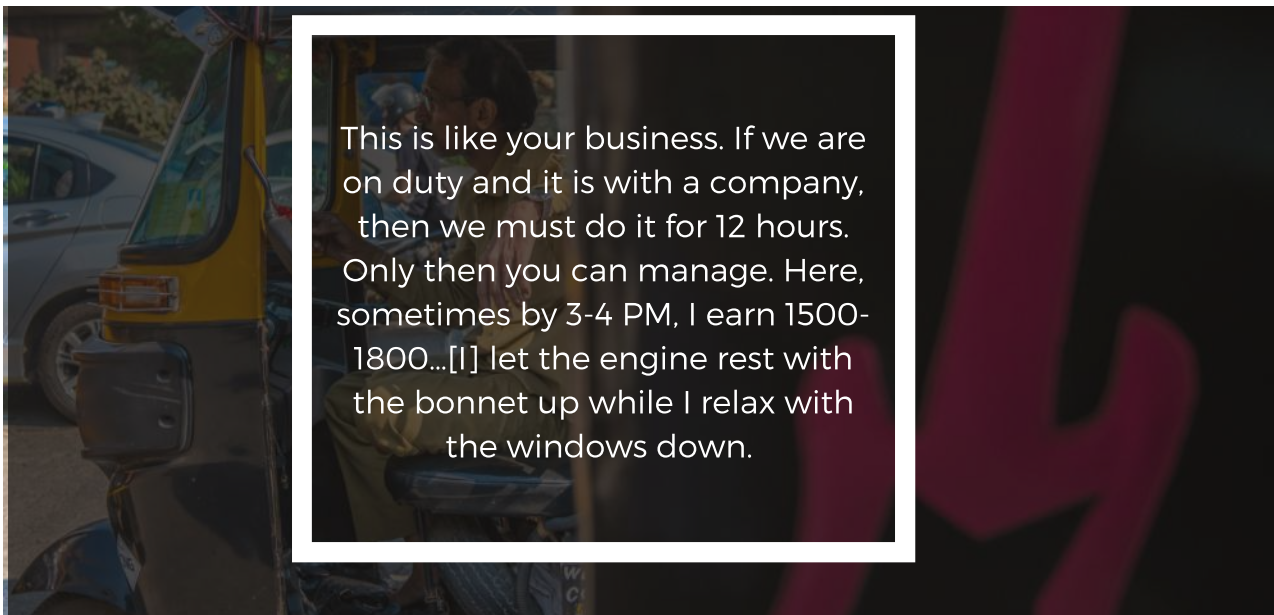
Basis	Ride Hailing Services	Traditional Driving	On-Demand Personal Services	Traditional Salon	Professional Salon
Minimum wages	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Timely payment	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓
Paid time-off	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓
Stipulated working hours	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓
Insurance	✓	✗	With Conditions	✗	✓
Over-time payment	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓
Reimbursement of costs	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓
Pension	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Union membership	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗

FIGURE 5

A report published by McKinsey and Company (2016) defines flexibility and autonomy for workers on the platform economy as high degree of control over types of work, workload, fees, clients and timings. However, we found that as the workers who constitute the platform economy are not a homogeneous category, low- and semi-skilled workers are unable to benefit from increased flexibility and autonomy. Therefore, it becomes important to contextualize the promises of flexibility within the socio-economic spaces that workers occupy and their positionality within the public and private realm.

As stated in earlier section, women participants joined the platform economy to benefit from flexibility in work timings, allowing them to balance their careers with domestic responsibilities. Similarly, many drivers interviewed also greatly appreciate the flexibility offered, which lets them “be their own boss”. However, there remains a paradoxical relationship between flexibility and social protections. Conventionally, the growth of contractual, piecemeal work undertaken even by skilled professionals has been associated with the withdrawal of social security and income protections. Workers on the platform economy do not have access to paid time-off, sick leaves, maternity leaves and over-time payments.

Through interviews, we unpacked the notion of flexibility on the platform economy and how it plays out across platforms. Even though drivers on ride-hailing applications have long working hours, they greatly appreciate the flexibility the platform offers.



This is like your business. If we are on duty and it is with a company, then we must do it for 12 hours. Only then you can manage. Here, sometimes by 3-4 PM, I earn 1500-1800...[I] let the engine rest with the bonnet up while I relax with the windows down.

Flexibility gained through their entrepreneurial status also allows drivers to take one day off per week. Most drivers said they take time-off when they “feel like it” or when “there is work at home”.

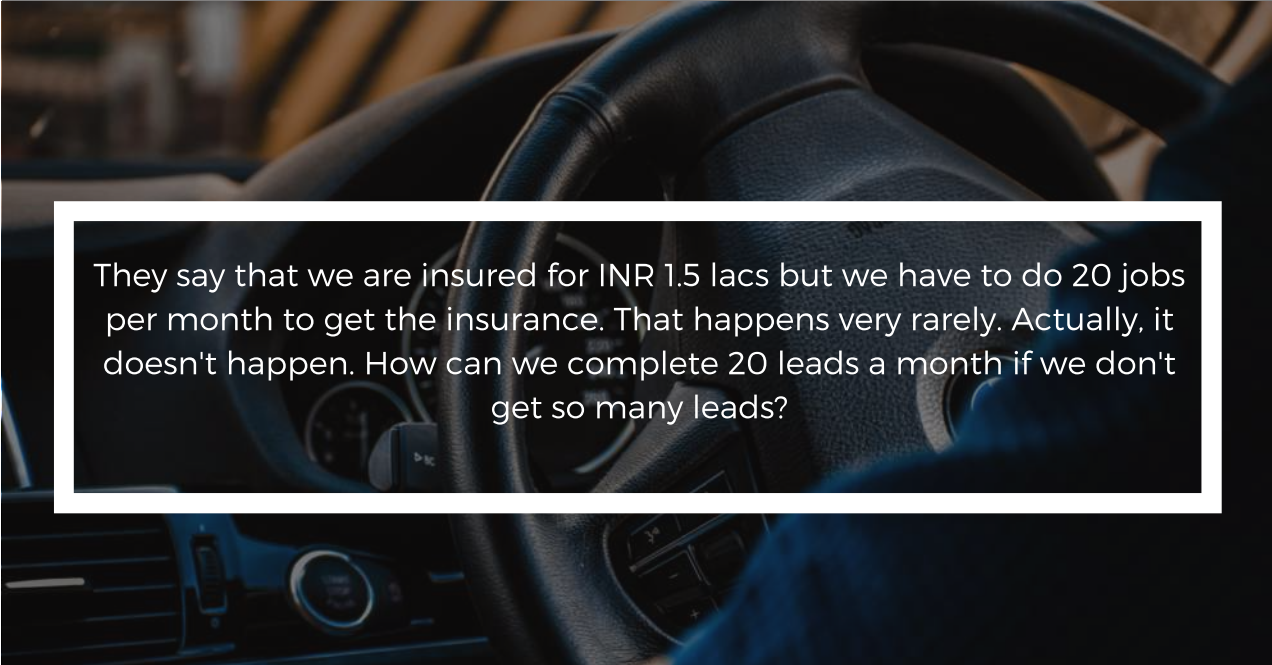
The experiences of beauticians and makeup artists are different from that of drivers interviewed. Similar to the calculations regarding their income, participants were unable to estimate the number of hours they worked per day. Additionally, since their work demands do not adhere to ‘working hours’ participants are often required to undertake boundary crossings between work and personal time.

Unlike ride-hailing services, beauticians and makeup artists interviewed have to mark leaves on the calendar on their app. These are unpaid leaves due to which many research participants endeavour to be available on the app at all times. Additionally, taking leaves is penalized by the platform – as more leaves are marked, the lower job requests the worker gets in the future. The precarity of work access means that workers do not refuse jobs.

I generally do not put [leaves]. For my brother's wedding, I took only two days off. [On] The wedding...I took a holiday... the [next day] I did one lead at 6 PM despite being up all night the days before...We have to respond to leads because otherwise it is a loss for us.

Therefore, flexibility of work can be both advantageous and problematic. Due to the reclassification of worker status, drivers, makeup artists and beauticians on the three platforms are being compelled to carry the risks and responsibilities of entrepreneurship without any control over pricing and income levels.

As a result of the dilution of employment relations, workers fall outside the purview of a variety of income protections. None of the participants reported receiving retirement benefits, pension contributions and unemployment insurance/protection. However, as seen in figure 5, this is not a departure from their previous occupational benefits. While a majority of workers on the three platforms reported that they have received insurance through the platform, follow-up questions revealed that the on-demand platform puts conditionalities on receiving insurance.



They say that we are insured for INR 1.5 lacs but we have to do 20 jobs per month to get the insurance. That happens very rarely. Actually, it doesn't happen. How can we complete 20 leads a month if we don't get so many leads?

We found that the ride-hailing platforms provide insurance to drivers irrespective of their activity on the app. However, on the personal services app, the number of jobs to be completed in a month to receive insurance varied from 5 to 25. Using figure 5 as a reference, insurance provision for drivers thus marks greater protection from their previously uninsured status. For beauticians and makeup artists however, conditionalities on insurance provisions ties in with possibilities of lower workforce turnover. Therefore, contractual work relations have normalized the lack of employment benefits for workers.

Further, figure 5 shows that workers do not receive overtime payments and reimbursement of costs unlike their previous occupations. Despite the withdrawal of such benefits, we found that all participants make the stipulated minimum wages for Delhi and receive timely payment of wages – a novelty for many in their work life.

A focus on altered employment relations thus helps to highlight that platforms have institutionalized insecurity and precarity for low- and semi-skilled workers. Overall, it is reflective of practices of neoliberalism and globalized capital, that high-income opportunities and proximity to health services make employment and minimum standards of sustenance sufficient employment provisions.

WORKING CONDITIONS: RIDE-HAILING SERVICES



Average working hours

12 HOURS



Days off per week

1 DAY

INSURANCE SUBSCRIPTION (BOTH SERVICES) (%)

RIDE HAILING SERVICES (76%)

ON DEMAND SERVICE PLATFORM (70%)

FIGURE 6

3. RATINGS SYSTEM

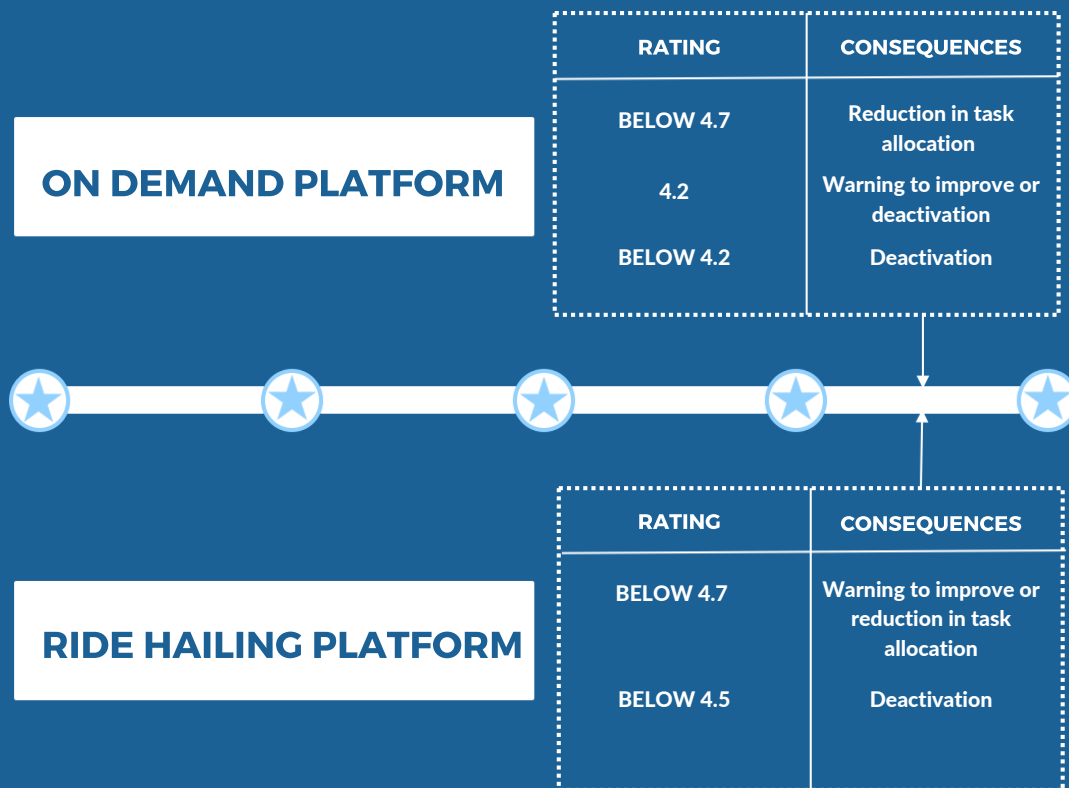


FIGURE 7

The erasure of relationality between employer and workers combined with the displacement of a physical office space has resulted in platforms relying on technologically-mediated forms of control over their workforce. The primary mode through which performance of workers and quality of services is monitored is the rating system. At the end of every service, customers rate workers by giving them “stars” on a scale of one to five. Aggregated ratings and comments from customers are then used as an evaluation of worker performance.

While ratings may be useful for building trust between two unknown, unverified transacting parties, particularly in light of perceived safety for women (Swamy 2019; BBC News 2015), we found that platforms use ratings as a tool to surveillance workers. Ratings are used to keep a tight control over workers’ duration of activity on the app, their acceptance and cancellation rates and compliance with company policies. We also found that low ratings and poor customer feedback results in instant downgrading (lower job requests) or termination without notice or explanation. Despite the dire consequences of the rating system on workers’ labour outcomes, our research showed ambiguity surrounding its workings. Thus, in this section, we aim to demystify the workings of the rating system by evaluating its varied dimensions through narratives of our participants. In doing so, we illustrate the impact the rating system has on the everyday lived experiences of workers – their interactions with clients and the additional unpaid and emotional labour undertaken to maintain high ratings.

Image 1 shows that ride-hailing platforms monitor drivers' acceptance and cancellation rates.

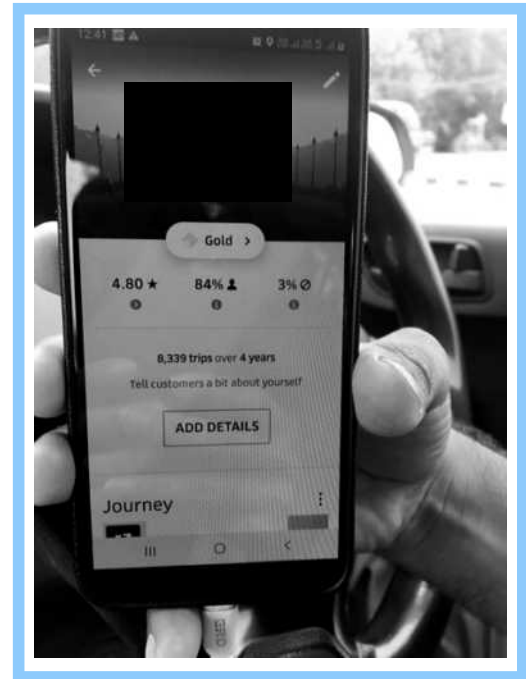
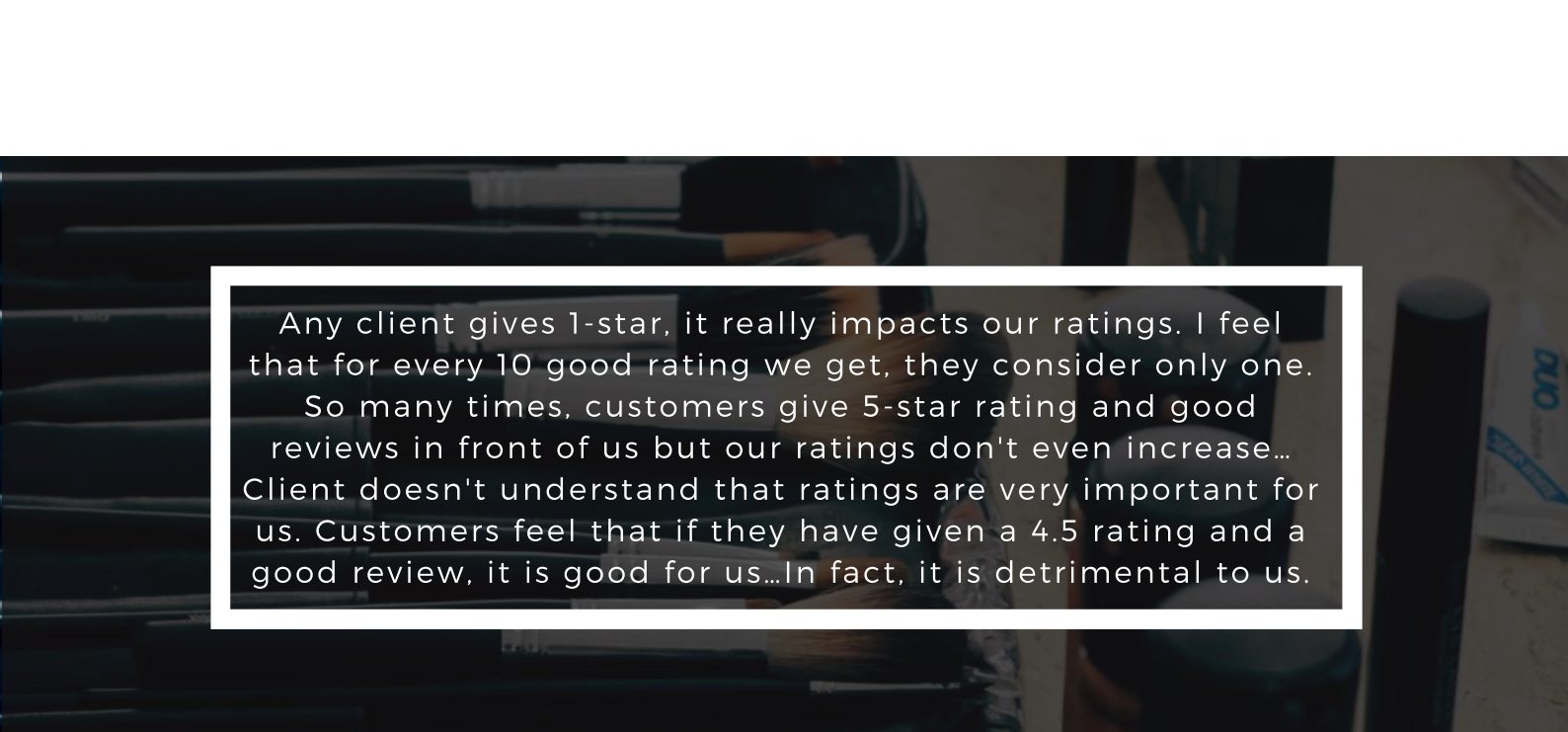


IMAGE 1: SCREENSHOT OF PARTICIPANT'S APP'S INTERFACE

If we get a ride and we cancel, then our rating reduces. Our acceptance rate and cancellation rates are also affected.

Despite the importance of ratings to the functioning of the system and workers' everyday experiences, most research participants on both platform types reported that the rating mechanism is not open and transparent.

...if I am in the CNG line, I can disconnect myself [from the app] so the request goes to someone else. But I can't cancel it. I have not cancelled any ride request. I have heard from other drivers that cancellation can lead to deletion/freezing of account.



Any client gives 1-star, it really impacts our ratings. I feel that for every 10 good rating we get, they consider only one. So many times, customers give 5-star rating and good reviews in front of us but our ratings don't even increase... Client doesn't understand that ratings are very important for us. Customers feel that if they have given a 4.5 rating and a good review, it is good for us...In fact, it is detrimental to us.

In order to better understand the functioning of the rating system on the three platforms, we pieced together information collected from our participants to approximate the parameters. This has been visually represented in figure 7. We found that a rating above 4.7 is considered as satisfactory service provision by all three platforms. On the ride-hailing platforms we studied, if a worker's aggregated rating falls below 4.7, he receives a warning message, following which, the number of jobs allocated to him decrease. Workers on the on-demand services app do not receive a warning message but their task allocation also decreases below an aggregated rating of 4.5 stars. While drivers are deactivated from the platform without notice or explanation when their ratings fall below 4.5, makeup artists and beauticians are deactivated for ratings below 4.2 stars. Based on conversations with workers, the entire process seems to be undertaken algorithmically. Thus, despite user determined ratings being subjective, they are still used as the basis for instant downgrading or termination without notice or explanation. Further, unlike traditional employment, there is no communication with clients or the management regarding performance ratings and reviews. This further disadvantages workers as they cannot provide explanations, demand rectifications or undertake measures to improve the quality of their services.

Knowing that ratings are used to determine workers' performance, income and employment relations, customers use the mechanism to perpetuate inequalities between themselves and workers as explained by Niyati:

I had a lead for two jobs, I had to make two low buns for the client. I took 10 minutes to finish the work...the client gave me 1-star. We are not the authority, we are *bande ve* [bonded] and working here is our compulsion...Should I have no respect? The client's only problem was that I took 10 minutes... Client knows they can reduce ratings so they misbehave.

Drivers on ride-hailing platforms have similar experiences wherein ratings are used as a mean to reinforce hierarchies between workers and customers:

Customers expect you to come wherever they want or drop wherever they say. We have to oblige because otherwise they rate us poorly and our rating comes down. This is especially a problem when they ask us to come inside their society and pick them up...This is unfair for us.

We assert that the creation and sustenance of hierarchies as a consequence of the rating system can be attributed to the rigid structures of hereditary caste-based occupations. The division of work into menial and skilled occupations impacts customers' perceptions towards the value and quality of services and those who perform them. This stands in contrast to findings by Kameswaran, Cameron, and Dillahunt (2018) who show that interaction between drivers and customers on a ride-hailing platform in Detroit resulted in dissolving of boundaries between the two parties through the exchange of social and cultural capital.

Another cultural specificity which impacts the workings of the rating system in India is the belief that "there is always scope for improvement". Through interviews it was recognized that customers often do not give a 5-star rating to encourage workers to develop their skills and advance their service delivery. This further leads us to postulate that western forms of technologically-enabled organizational practices in a different social and cultural context can disadvantage workers and aggravate their vulnerabilities.

Thus, we found that the rating system in its current form can be intrinsically problematic. Customers rating workers are not vetted and/or qualified to provide complete feedback on employment performance. Rating systems also do not take into account poor behaviour on part of the customers. In order to plug these gaps, one of the ride-hailing platform has incorporated a two-way rating system but the other platforms are yet to introduce it. However, it is seen that consumers with poor ratings are neither blacklisted nor penalized.

They [the platform representatives] told us that we should give the customer a 5 rating only, no matter how they behave so I always give a 5 rating.

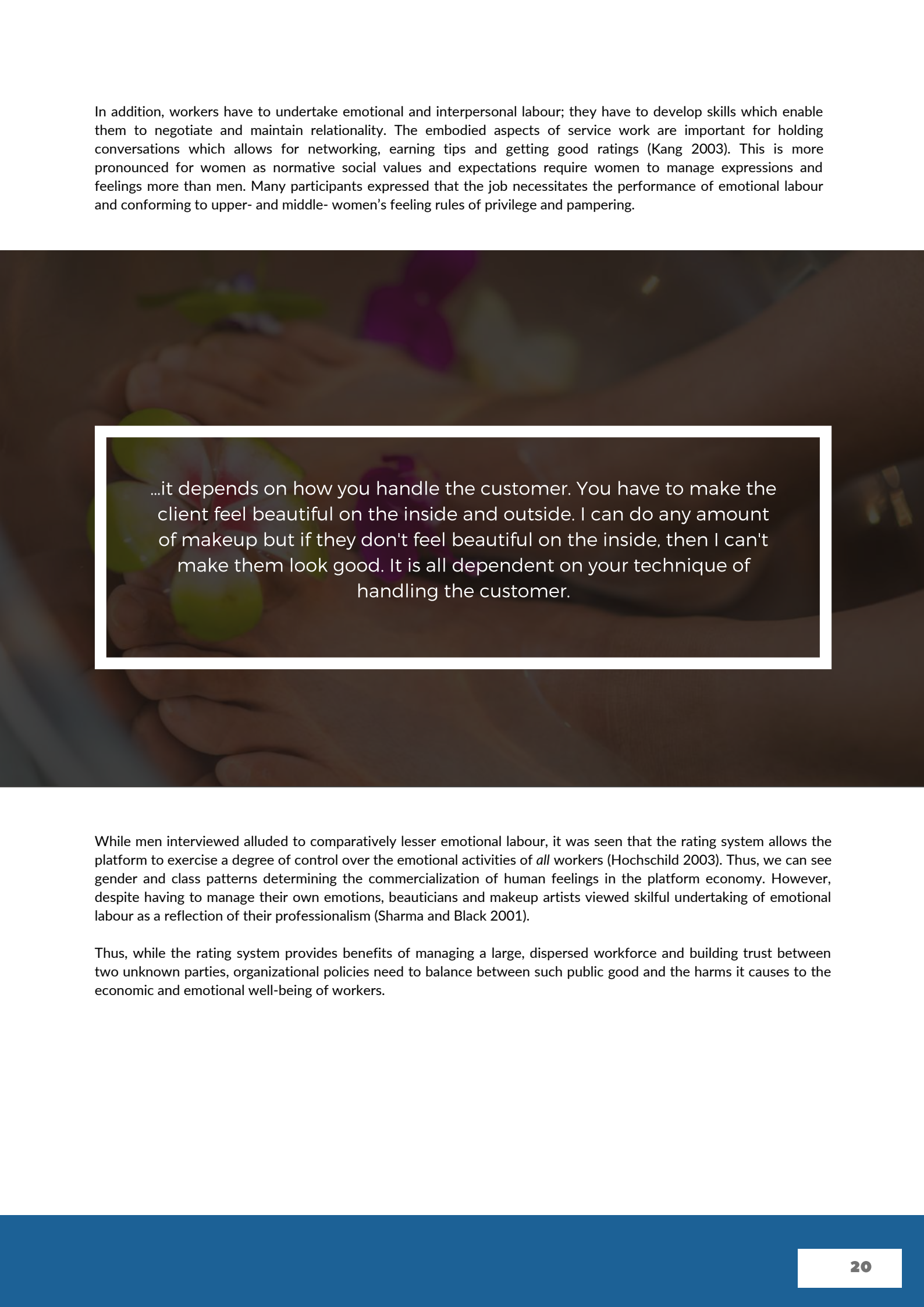
Therefore, to maintain satisfactory rating and to receive appropriate feedback, workers on the platform economy have to agree to perform unpaid labour. From our research we found that the expectation and performance of unpaid work was higher for women workers interviewed. While many participants did not mind performing a few, small, unpaid tasks, some believe that the rating system forces unpaid labour upon them.

If they ask us [to do unpaid labour], we have to handle to get a good rating. So, we please them. If they get angry then they will give us a bad rating. Even if we don't feel like it, we still have to give our 100%.

We also found that at times, demands to perform unpaid labour take exploitative forms.

Generally, I have had a good experience but you get all types of clients. Some clients really trouble... For example, one client said my work was good but gave me a bad rating...The client said that if you refund my money, I will improve your rating.

In addition, workers have to undertake emotional and interpersonal labour; they have to develop skills which enable them to negotiate and maintain relationality. The embodied aspects of service work are important for holding conversations which allows for networking, earning tips and getting good ratings (Kang 2003). This is more pronounced for women as normative social values and expectations require women to manage expressions and feelings more than men. Many participants expressed that the job necessitates the performance of emotional labour and conforming to upper- and middle- women's feeling rules of privilege and pampering.



...it depends on how you handle the customer. You have to make the client feel beautiful on the inside and outside. I can do any amount of makeup but if they don't feel beautiful on the inside, then I can't make them look good. It is all dependent on your technique of handling the customer.

While men interviewed alluded to comparatively lesser emotional labour, it was seen that the rating system allows the platform to exercise a degree of control over the emotional activities of *all* workers (Hochschild 2003). Thus, we can see gender and class patterns determining the commercialization of human feelings in the platform economy. However, despite having to manage their own emotions, beauticians and makeup artists viewed skilful undertaking of emotional labour as a reflection of their professionalism (Sharma and Black 2001).

Thus, while the rating system provides benefits of managing a large, dispersed workforce and building trust between two unknown parties, organizational policies need to balance between such public good and the harms it causes to the economic and emotional well-being of workers.

4. DEACTIVATION OF WORKER PROFILE

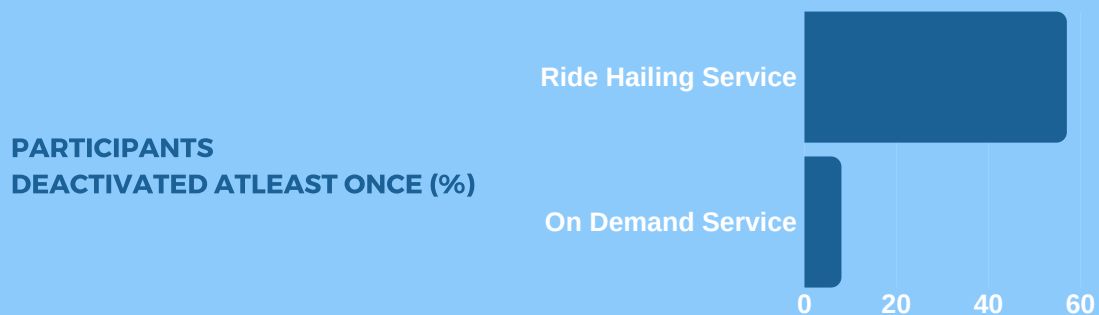


FIGURE 8

Technologically-mediated work creates structural inequalities for workers at various levels. As seen in the previous section, the rating system reinforces and creates power imbalances between workers and consumers. We found that the rating system is used as a basis to algorithmically deactivate worker profiles. Our research also found that women are doubly disadvantaged as a consequence of arbitrary deactivation due to their conditional access to public resources and spaces.

Since deactivation is algorithmically undertaken when a worker's rating falls below a certain threshold, workers suddenly find themselves either locked out of the app or unable to access job requests. Workers do not receive a warning or explanation for their sudden deactivation. Additionally, we found that there are no mechanisms in place for workers to request rectification, or provide explanations. Most participants reported that platform representatives tell them that nothing can be done about ratings given to them by customers.

...they don't tell even when we ask them about what we did wrong. There is no call center and nobody tells us even when we go to the office. We get tired of calling the call center, but they can't pinpoint [the problem] and they don't tell us the issue in the ride. They just say that they can't tell us and get away with such excuses.

Due to the physical displacement of an "office space", workers do not have a centralized location where they can lodge complaints, follow up and seek redressal against company policies, consumers and third parties. Resolving of disputes is arbitrary and difficult to pursue for workers who lack social and economic capital.

I used to get customers who used to drink and come and then not pay. What can we say to them? ...If we say something to the clients, they [the platform] will block us...I took a duty from Connaught Place [business district in New Delhi]. The client asked me to open the door for him, I got up and opened it...There was no tissue in the back so the client said, "what kind of car do you have? You don't even have tissues in it"...I said I am sorry but he kept complaining...his bill came to approximately INR 700...He said I won't pay you...I called [the platform] and told them but they said that at that time you should have called the police. I thought that I would have to give more [money as bribe] than the fare amount if I had called the police. Calling the police is a nuisance for us – the client in his inebriated state could have lied to the police that I had said something to him so I thought it is better to just let it go. I told the helpline that there is no help for the driver, all the help is for the customer only.

The hierarchical relationships of platforms is more pronounced for women workers. While drivers interviewed reported visiting the platform offices regularly or leveraging on public resources to solve their problems, women on the on-demand services app could not due to their gendered location in the labour market. Additionally, women's conditional access to public spaces results in greater surveillance and control over their mobility (Phadke, Khan, and Ranade 2011). This was discernible even when approaching women workers for interviews – their mobility was severely restricted and monitored by the patriarch of the household. We found that women did not leave the house unaccompanied for personal chores and endeavours. Deactivation without warning, lacking assistance by the help center and arbitrary resolution, the platform economy disregards the particular needs of women, thus further invisibilising them in the labour market.

Due to limited recourse available to them with regards to deactivation and unfair ratings, workers often have to bear exploitative and abusive practices by clients. It also allows for platforms to exercise multidimensional control over workers' time and preferences; eroding the promises of flexibility and autonomy offered by the platform economy. Therefore, platforms must be mindful of workplace technologies and its impact on workers' experiences and livelihoods.



Understanding the

DEACTIVATION PROCESS

I joined the platform as a beautician over a year ago...My current rating is either 4.7 or 4.8. It has reduced recently. They don't send a message if my rating falls below a certain level, anyways, I can see it on the app itself. They always tell us to keep our ratings high. When it falls, they block us for one week. Then you have to run around like a mad person.

I have been deactivated. It was only 6 months after joining the platform. My son fell very sick. He was admitted in the hospital but I had to leave him and go to work because for three days, the hospital bill was amounting to INR 18,000. I did not have so much money. I got a lead close by so I thought I should do it to earn some money. I went to the client in tension but I forgot the disposable sheet. The client got very angry. I remember, she said, "I don't know how the platform keeps people like you, you don't even know how to do work". She told me not to do the job and just leave. Since I did not perform the task, she did not pay but the commission [paid to the platform] of INR 1,200-1,300 got deducted from my account. I ended up losing money. I didn't earn anything and lost more.

After that, I was even more tensed and needed to earn money. The next day, I took a job with a manager or employee of the platform. I went to her house but had forgotten the peel-off wax. I apologised and completed the task with normal wax. When I went home, I realised I was not


getting anymore leads. I called the helpline and they informed me that I had been blocked as the client had directly complained about me...The biggest problem is that the helpline people answer the phone very rudely. You keep calling and they don't answer...I keep calling and then I take a screenshot of my call history and send it to my manager at the head office to show him that I have been calling the helpline for 10 minutes but there is no response. Then only when he sends some message to the helpline, I get a call.

[Due to poor response from the helpline] I went to the main office but they said it will be unblocked only after 2-3 days. However, at that time, I desperately needed money, only God knows how much I needed money. I decided I will not stop until my account is unblocked. I apologised profusely to the customer and tried to explain the situation to her. After requesting a lot, it finally got unblocked on the fourth day. The helpline did try to help a little after I made several emotional pleas to them. I also showed the hospital bill. Only after all of that did my account get unblocked.

5. SAFETY

Income volatility combined with uncertainties of employment relations dilutes workers personal preferences with regards to the spatial and temporal aspects of their work. Platform workers are compelled to tolerate greater unpredictability in both work timings and risks associated with performance of work. However, public discourse on the platform economy has privileged the safety and wellbeing of customers. The majority of newspaper reports and articles have highlighted the vulnerabilities faced by consumers. While the safety of consumers is a pressing concern that still needs to be addressed, we found that this often overshadows the everyday safety concerns faced by workers. In this section, we bring forth the persistent threat of verbal harassment, bodily harm and sexual harassment that workers must regularly contend with. Our research also found that workers experience differentiated threats to personal safety based on their gender.

Due to the structuring of work allocation on platforms, workers are exposed to a range of actions, situations and people which threaten their personal safety. Through our research we found that workers are frequently subjected to verbal harassment by consumers. The most common reasons workers cited for verbal harassment were: when they were late, when consumers believed that work had been performed inadequately and when consumers had conscious and unconscious biases against certain social groups. Therefore, the distribution of power is based upon the socio-economic position of the worker and the consumer, making tangible the gender, class, caste and sexual dimensions of labour.

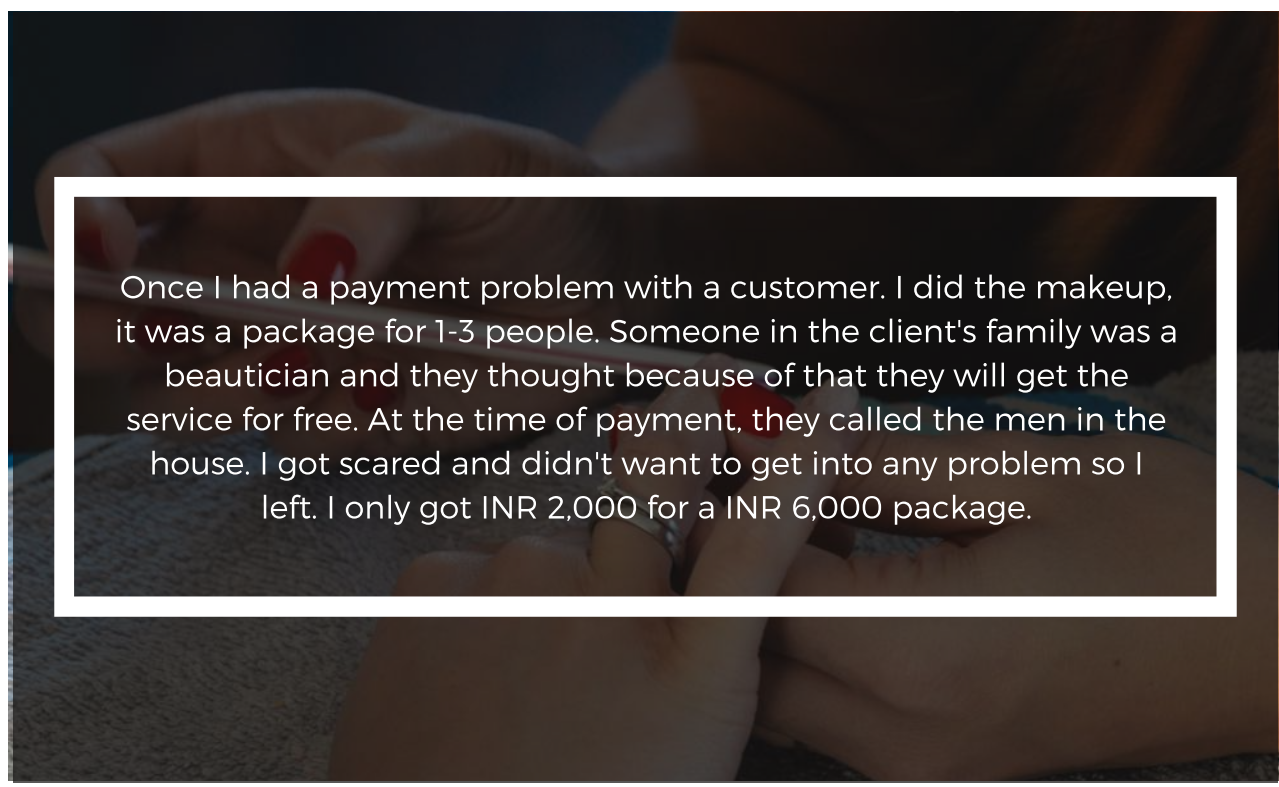


Overall the work is good but the client-customer relationship is a problem. Once I had gone for a lead and when I was doing my work, the customer started shouting. I just wanted to leave at that point but I couldn't...I went there at 7 AM, no salon would have given them service at that time...The client was the one under pressure and not me. They should tell the client to respect the makeup artist.

Our research also aligns with the well-founded discourse on public safety in India; one, that more men than women face violence in public spaces, and two, that women face more violence in private spaces than public spaces. A majority of drivers interviewed framed the constant threat of violence on roads as “expected” and “normal”.

If we touch someone with our car, sometimes, they slap us. Otherwise, people swear at us. For example, go towards Kamala Market [a suburb in New Delhi], there is so much dirt and crowd there. Cart pullers come in front of the car often and then they shout at us. What can we say?

In contrast, even though women interviewed use public transport to go for appointments, they did not report any harassment and/or threat to personal safety. However, due to the fragmentation of tasks which are geographically dispersed, platforms generally lack a physical space and work is performed at the consumer's house. The performance of work in private spaces dissolves spatial and temporal boundaries between work and non-work and thus, further aggravates the unequal power relations between consumer, worker and employer. We assert that the normalization of violence against men in public spaces and the threat to the safety of women in private domains is intertwined with notions of "honour" imposed upon women's bodies in India. The performance of body labour by makeup artists and beauticians in intimate settings of a client's home diminishes the bodily and sexual autonomy of women workers of lower socio-economic status. This deeply entrenched societal belief exposes beauticians and makeup artists to a range of risks and vulnerabilities as well as degrees of harassment and exploitation.

A photograph showing a woman with red-painted fingernails applying makeup to a client's face. The scene is dimly lit, focusing on the hands and the face. A white text box is overlaid on the image.

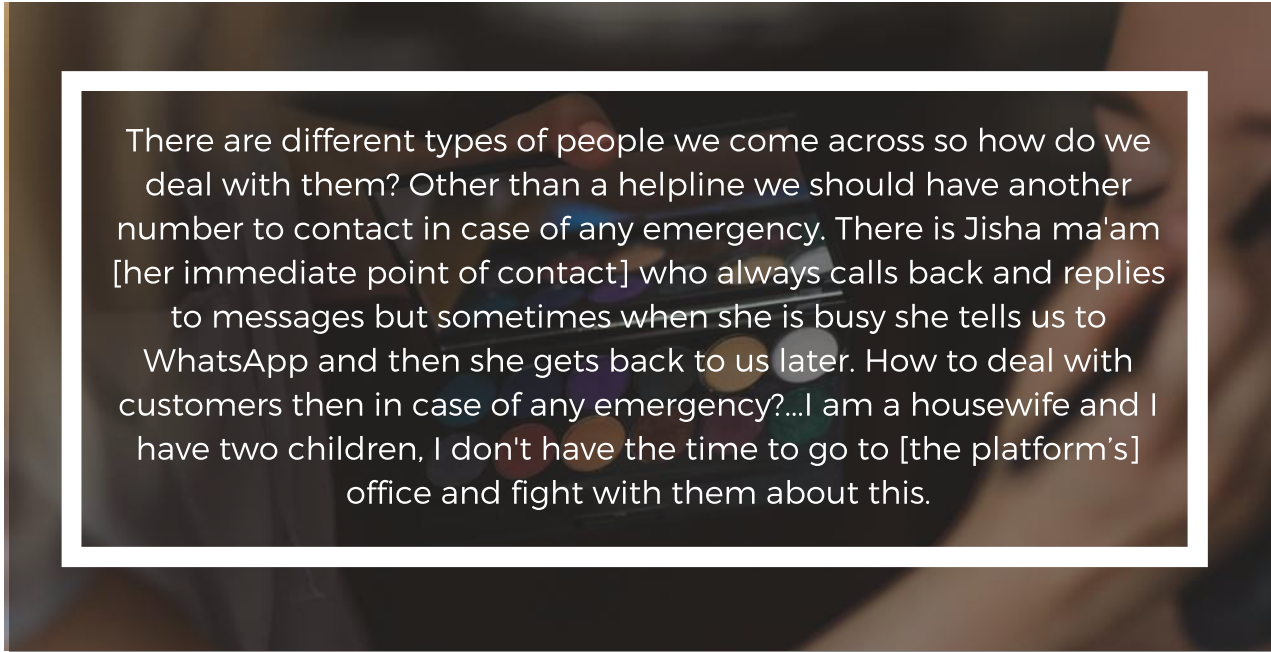
Once I had a payment problem with a customer. I did the makeup, it was a package for 1-3 people. Someone in the client's family was a beautician and they thought because of that they will get the service for free. At the time of payment, they called the men in the house. I got scared and didn't want to get into any problem so I left. I only got INR 2,000 for a INR 6,000 package.

Thus, the potential threat of male aggression and/or inappropriateness in unfamiliar, closed settings is an ever present concern for women workers. The platform has taken cognizance of these risks and therefore, provide instructions during training sessions to mitigate potential safety hazards. Workers are instructed to call clients within 15 minutes of receiving a booking to gauge if the customer is "genuine or not". If the appointment is booked by a man, workers are asked to insist on speaking to the woman. However, some workers reported verbal aggression by the men booking appointments and threats of cancelling service requests. Workers are also required to call the client before leaving their house.

Women interviewed recognize that the process of calling clients does not ensure their safety. However, they believe that they must rely on their "sixth sense" to determine potential threats to earn a living. Many keep family members informed about their leads and whereabouts. In doing so, the platform has shifted the burden of responsibility onto workers themselves. Those who do not feel confident in their evaluation of a consumer's intentions, ask a male relative to drop and pick them up from appointments to ensure safety and well-being.

Sometimes the other girls have told me stories that men book appointments. If a man books an appointment, I always ask them to let me speak to ma'am. If I am still not satisfied and I feel scared, I take someone along. Anything can happen when you go to someone's house...But if no one is at home to take along, then we have to be brave and go.

All three platforms have insufficient mechanisms to assist workers in emergency situations. Workers are required to call the helpline in case of any problems. In addition to the helpline, the on-demand platform provides another point person – the worker's immediate supervisor; but they might not always be effective in emergency situations.



There are different types of people we come across so how do we deal with them? Other than a helpline we should have another number to contact in case of any emergency. There is Jisha ma'am [her immediate point of contact] who always calls back and replies to messages but sometimes when she is busy she tells us to WhatsApp and then she gets back to us later. How to deal with customers then in case of any emergency?...I am a housewife and I have two children, I don't have the time to go to [the platform's] office and fight with them about this.

On all three platforms when workers have contacted the helpline, they are instructed by the representative to call the police. No worker reported receiving support mechanisms from platforms to pursue police reports/cases. Given workers' class, caste and gender positions, lack of official mechanisms and support discourages workers from pursuing any legal action. This is particularly pronounced for women workers.

I got a lead for makeup for an aunty. Her son had booked for her. The son fell in love with me. He started sending me messages...I blocked his number but he had 5-6 other numbers...This went on for some time, about six months. I was scared that if I tell [my husband] then it will come down to my work. Then, finally I told my husband about it and told him to handle it...my husband told me to leave [the platform]...he has become fearful of the work I do. Now he always asks me where I am going, if I faced any problems...if this goes to my home, then imagine what will happen?

This incident shows how sometimes safety hazards extend beyond the immediate workspace. Due to inadequate redressal mechanisms, women are often put in unsafe circumstances in trying to balance patriarchal protection and financial independence. They find it hard to report harassment and violence due to the stigma attached and the consequent impact on their mobility. Therefore, by shifting responsibility onto workers, platforms have failed to understand the varied positionalities their workers occupy and the structural and material inequalities which exacerbate threats to their safety.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

The research suggests that the platform economy provides workers with an alternative source of employment, flexible work, low barriers to entry and the opportunity to partake in the service economy. However, as this report highlights, a few challenges remain. The final section of the report suggests ways in which more inclusive and fairer policies can be institutionalized to protect the interests of workers. The ensuing discussion is based on workers' articulation of changes they wish to see, legal precedents and existing legal frameworks that can be leveraged and the prevalent discourse on regulatory regimes and labour policies. In doing so, this section calls attention to the importance of combining technological innovations with regulatory innovations to protect the interests and ensure the wellbeing of workers.

1. WORKERS' ARTICULATION

During our research, we found that while workers detailed the problems they faced on the platform economy, the majority of them also provided solutions to these problems. We believed recording these articulations is extremely valuable to provide an insight into solutions by workers, for workers. We divided these articulations by service type to better capture the particular difficulties faced, many of which were highlighted in the findings sections.

As asserted in the findings section, drivers on the ride-hailing platform have had to contend with income volatility over the long-term due to changes in rates per km and lower incentives. Therefore, workers sought return to their previous income structures, particularly income that was promised to them at the time of joining. Additionally, to mitigate arbitrary changes in the future they desired the institutionalisation of greater transparency on the part of platforms. Many wished that platforms would engage with drivers more by consulting them when making decisions about their income earning capacity. Several drivers also hoped that such transparency in operations and engagement with drivers would extend to other areas of the platform such as leasing terms, ride allocation and the deactivation procedure. They believed that decreasing income volatility and lowering structural inequalities through a fairer deactivation process would automatically decrease power imbalances between consumers and workers as well.

Makeup artists and beauticians on the on-demand services application also gave several suggestions to reduce their income volatility. They wished that the platform provided them with a guaranteed amount of income or volume of business. In order to overcome dips in business, they also hoped for better rates per job, differentiated pricing between peak and off-peak periods and increasing the business categories offered and available to them. They believed that provision of better social security provisions by the platform would also cushion them during low business cycles.

A majority of participants on the on-demand service platform wanted the institutionalisation of a two-way customer ratings system. They hope that rating of customers combined with the introduction of better safety mechanisms would enable the dismantling of inequalities between them and their customers. Several also believed that introducing a penalty for cancellation of advance bookings would improve their incomes as well as make customers realise the value of their time and services.

Thus, we found that the inclusion of workers' articulations of the changes they wish to see could make the process of finding solutions more inclusive and holistic.

2. LEGAL PRECEDENTS AND FRAMEWORKS

As the platform economy has grown, there have been increasing calls demanding for its regulation through legislative action. While many believe that the platform economy requires reframing of existing legislations, we find that legal precedents and existing frameworks, both globally and in India, can be leveraged upon to plug several of the current gaps. We highlight four such laws which we find might be pertinent to the protection of interests of workers employed in the platform economy. Two of the legal frameworks mentioned are gender specific as they can address the differentiated risks faced by women workers. In doing so, we hope that legislations can be a means of introducing institutional and cultural change in the functioning of technologically-mediated work in India.

A. ASSEMBLY BILL NO. 5, SUPERIOR COURT OF LOS ANGELES

Platforms, particularly, Uber has been dragged to courts across the world due to its fraught relationship with workers and licensing policies. A recent landmark judgment by a Californian Court has been the first to fundamentally disrupt the workings of the platform economy. The judgment mandates organisations to undertake a litmus test, known as the ABC test, to determine whether a worker is an employee. To be hired as a contractor, the business must prove that the worker is not under the organisation's control, not doing work central to the organisation's business and has an independent business in that industry (Campbell 2019).

Platforms whose workers cannot pass the ABC test will be reclassified as employees. The platforms will then be legally obligated to provide employees with labour protections such as health insurance, minimum wages, paid time-off, overtime payments and paid maternity and paternity leaves (Seetharaman 2019). A similar template of legally mandated labour protections can be adopted to the Indian context to better safeguard workers against exploitative policies of platforms.

B. EMPLOYEES' PROVIDENT FUND AND MISCELLANEOUS EXPENSES ACT, 1952

A seminal judgment by the Supreme Court of India can also be used as an example of a more inclusive definition of "employee". Similar to the ABC test, the Court ruled that workers engaged either directly or indirectly by an organisation in connection with work central to the organisation's business and are paid wages must be considered as "employees" under the Employees' Provident Fund Act (Kini 2019). Inclusion of workers employed in the platform economy under a similar definition of "employees" can be the first step in the provision of social security to them. This could pave the way for better labour protections for workers in the platform economy.

C. THE SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF WOMEN AT WORKPLACE (PREVENTION, PROHIBITION AND REDRESSAL) ACT, 2013

With the growing popularity of on-demand services leading to the increasing number of women engaged in the platform economy, employers must undertake steps to ensure the provision of a safe working environment. While the Sexual Harassment at the Workplace Act 2013 is required to protect all women workers from workplace harassment and assaults, informal workers are often left out of its purview. Given the absence of a physical workplace and a customary employer-employee relation in the platform economy, responsibilities of reporting and investigation shift from an Internal Complaints Committee (established by the employer) to a Local Complaints Committee (LCC) and the police. The LCC is formed at the ward or municipal level by the District Officer.

Despite over five years since the operationalization of the Act, not all districts have a LCC. Women face severe vulnerabilities when they are required to lodge a complaint at a police station. These are further exacerbated when women do not receive support from employers such as paid leaves of absence as stipulated in the Act. However, in all circumstances, women often face intimidation, threats and pressures when the power, social and economic relationship between the complainant and accused are uneven. Therefore, platforms must be mindful of the power dynamics between the platform, worker and customers and must design mechanisms to protect the interests of women filing complaints under the Act.

D. WORKER MOVEMENTS AND LEGISLATIVE ACTION

The increasing number of women in the platform economy and a study of their differentiated experiences highlights the necessity to draw up on interventions by women to demand for change. In India, self-employed women have a long history of collectivization efforts to help them overcome weak bargaining powers, gendered access to public resources and differentiated risks faced in the labour market. The coming together of women engaged in informal, self-employed work has on several occasions resulted in public recognition of problems leading to legislative action. For example, women pioneered the introduction of the Construction Workers Act in Tamil Nadu and rallied for changes in healthcare and maternity benefits provided to tobacco workers in Gujarat.

Further, organisations such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA), the Working Women's Forum (WWF) and AWARE have also played a monumental role in galvanizing women to demand for better rights; not just from employers but from the state as well (Baruah 2004). Through collectivisation efforts, these organisations have also been effective in reducing gender and patriarchal controls with regards to women and work.

Thus, the collectivisation efforts and mobilisation of women workers by these organisations can be used as precedents for similar efforts by women workers on the platform economy. Workers can also collaborate with such organisations to leverage on their vast expertise and resources. Additionally, the coming together of women on the platform economy can help build group solidarities to effect changes such as better working conditions, access to cheaper financial instruments and social security entitlements such as insurance, childcare and maternity benefits.

3. HUMAN-COMPUTER INTERACTIONS, COMPUTER-SUPPORTED COOPERATIVE WORK AND POLICY DISCOURSE

As the platform economy has grown, there have been growing demands for greater self-regulation by platforms. For example, the Fairwork Foundation akin to the Fairtrade Foundation highlights the best and worst practices in the platform economy through an engagement with stakeholders. The aim of the Fairwork Foundation along with similar independent research is to question dominant neoliberal market mechanisms and thereby, pressurize platforms to institutionalize fairer relationships between themselves, workers and consumers.

Another method through which the endogenous social contract between employers and employees has been enforced is unionization and collective bargaining. Many major Indian cities, particularly, Mumbai and Delhi, have rich histories of taxi unionization. In the past, they have been central in ensuring higher fares, better working conditions and provision of benefits to traditional fleet operators. Therefore, unionisation and collective bargaining can be taken in collaboration with existing taxi unions and larger trade and labour unions at the state and national level; since they have often shown solidarity towards various worker movements in the country.

The rating system must recognize the cultural context of its users. A review and appeal mechanism must be institutionalized for poor ratings and subsequent deactivation of worker profiles. Formalization of an appeal process with clear procedural guidelines, timelines and third-party engagement, communicated to all workers and customers can make rating systems and deactivation fairer and more reflective of the quality of services. Further, as suggested by research participants, the introduction of a two-way rating system would help to dismantle hierarchies prevalent in the platform economy. Customers with poor ratings and reviews should be held to the same standard as workers through penalization and blacklisting of profiles.

Finally, technology should be leveraged to create safer workplaces for the future (Dillahun and Malone 2015). Virtual helplines and community forums can be setup to establish stronger reporting mechanisms and a SOS button can be incorporated into workers' app interface in coordination with local law enforcement.

CONCLUSION

As the platform economy grows in size, we are at a critical juncture and must work towards the dignity of workers and to build inclusive and safer workplaces of the future. While platforms such as the ones under study provide more efficient and instantaneous ways of matching workers and consumers through the use of technology, we cannot ignore the contestations that underline technologically mediated work, digital technologies and reconfigured workspaces.

Our research shows that there needs to be greater reflections and introspection on the technical designs of platforms. It is imperative that platforms work towards reducing the information asymmetries that plague platform, worker and consumer relations currently. Apps must provide workers with more information about consumers such as past reviews and ratings, details of the tasks/rides and algorithm design. By institutionalizing these mechanisms, the platform will also reduce power asymmetries between the different stakeholders. As suggested by Ahmed et al. (2016), workers can be included in the process by empowering them to share real-time information; adding to the data platforms already collect about users and non-users.

Through worker narratives, the report made visible the material and structural aspects of the platform economy that have often been neglected. It was seen that workers, embodiments, technology, spatiality and temporality intersect with the varied positions that participants occupy, particularly, gender, class and caste to impact their labour outcomes and their lived experiences. It also becomes important to recognize the blurring of boundaries between the public and private, market and society and expansion and welfare. While the provision of alternative sources of employment and flexibility of work arrangements cannot be ignored, it is important to understand the costs and impacts, and evolve thoughtful ways to build future workplaces.

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FUTURES OF WORKERS

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