

Precarity, Empowerment, and Digital Labour: Gendered Experiences of Platform Work in India, South Africa, and Brazil

Women's participation in the gig economy, a labour market characterized by short-term, flexible, and task-based work arrangements typically mediated by digital platforms is frequently posited as a means of economic empowerment and entrepreneurial opportunity in the Global South. For the purposes of this study, platform work denotes that segment of the gig economy in which labour is mediated by digital platforms and governed by algorithmic management, whereby tasks, performance, and worker-client interactions are monitored, allocated, and evaluated through automated data-driven systems. This study attempts to examine the complex realities of women's platform-based entrepreneurship in three BRICS countries, India, South Africa, and Brazil, to interrogate how national political economies, infrastructure, and socio-cultural norms shape opportunities and constraints for women engaging in platform work. It raises questions about how differing contexts influence women's ability to benefit from platform work and the extent to which structural issues (digital divides, informal labour practices, platform governance, safety, and the gendered care burden) mitigate the transformative potential of such work for women. These questions are situated within the BRICS development framework, engaging with recent BRICS declarations that emphasise women's empowerment and digital inclusion (BRICS, 2023; BRICS, 2024) and the role of initiatives like the New Development Bank in fostering inclusive growth.

The growth of the gig economy in BRICS countries has opened new avenues for women's entrepreneurship. Digital platforms and flexible work arrangements are enabling women to pursue entrepreneurial activities beyond traditional labour markets, positioning platform work as a potential pathway to economic empowerment. However, women in these contexts continue to face structural challenges, from socio-cultural barriers to regulatory gaps that complicate their participation in platform-based work. This study conceptualises platform-mediated work as a site of both potential empowerment and persistent precarity for women, offering new avenues for income generation and autonomy while simultaneously reinforcing vulnerabilities associated with informal and unregulated labour. Co-authored by feminist scholars grounded in Global South contexts, the study adopts a comparative approach across India, South Africa, and Brazil to examine how women engage with platform-based work under differing socio-political and economic conditions. Drawing on academic networks in the three countries, the research will employ a qualitative methodology that synthesises secondary literature, focus group discussions, and interviews, complemented by insights from platform actors obtained through virtual and practitioner-based engagement. Although it does not include long-term ethnographic fieldwork, the methodology remains rooted in sustained comparative analysis and practitioner-informed perspectives. This approach enables a contextualised understanding of national platform economies and identifies cross-cutting themes and policy gaps that affect women's empowerment through platform entrepreneurship.

Despite optimistic narratives about flexibility and low entry barriers, evidence suggests that platform work often reproduces existing gender inequalities. In India, for example, women workers remain a small minority in ridesharing and delivery sectors and instead cluster in traditionally feminized platform-based gig jobs such as domestic work and beauty services (Ghosh et al., 2022). Studies find that the much publicised "flexibility" of platform work does not translate to genuine empowerment for most women (Hunt & Samman, 2019; Ghosh et al., 2022). Women must juggle paid gigs with disproportionate household and care responsibilities,

meaning they can only work intermittently or at off-peak times. In Brazil's rideshare sector, for instance, mothers of young children rarely become drivers, whereas women without heavy care duties do participate, highlighting how the burden of care limits entrepreneurial engagement (Nazareno, 2024). Even when women join such platforms, they tend to work fewer hours and avoid late-night or high-risk gigs, which in turn reduces their earning potential relative to men (Nazareno, 2024). This points to a structural contradiction within platform-mediated labour, where narratives of autonomy and income generation for women are undermined by entrenched gendered responsibilities that systematically constrain their ability to benefit from such work.

Contextual factors in each country critically shape these dynamics. India's patriarchal social norms and public safety issues impose strict limits on women's mobility and work choices. Surveys of Indian women drivers indicate that 64% believe safety concerns keep other women from joining ride-hailing, and many face family disapproval for pursuing such work. High rates of gender-based violence (with 30% of Indian women reporting physical violence) make security a paramount concern; consequently, women often restrict themselves to safer locales or daytime gigs, or avoid platform work altogether (IFC, 2018). In South Africa, enduring apartheid legacies and persistent economic inequalities have shaped a labour market in which many Black women transition into platform-based work from the informal sector, particularly domestic cleaning, as seen in services like SweepSouth. This shift often reproduces the precarity of informal employment under the guise of flexibility, without substantial improvements in digital infrastructure or labour protections (Nhleko, 2023). Moreover, the country's high incidence of gender-based violence and crime acts as a significant deterrent for women considering client-facing platform-based work, especially during non-standard hours, reinforcing spatial and temporal exclusions rooted in gendered insecurity (Jewkes et al., 2011).

More broadly, across low-income contexts, women encounter additional structural barriers, including limited access to smartphones and internet connectivity, as well as restrictive gender norms governing technology use which are far less prevalent among male workers or those based in the Global North. Such digital and cultural divides are stark: for example, in South Asia there remains a 34% gender gap in smartphone ownership (GSMA, 2024), limiting women's ability to participate in digital labour platforms. In Brazil, while socio-cultural norms may be relatively more permissive of women's participation in the labour market and smartphone access is more widespread, entrenched patriarchal structures continue to constrain women's mobility, safety, and full engagement in platform-based work. Pervasive harassment and public safety fears have been identified as a major obstacle for Brazilian women in transportation platforms. Research shows that the level of gender-based violence in a city negatively correlates with women's likelihood of becoming rideshare drivers (Nazareno, 2025). Thus, while the gig economy operates globally, who benefits, and who bears the risks is substantially shaped by local political economy and gender norms.

Moreover, the structural conditions of gig work often mirror those of the informal economy in which many Global South women have long laboured. Digital labour platforms typically treat workers as independent contractors, offering little in terms of job security, benefits, or collective bargaining rights. Women therefore remain in precarious work arrangements without social protections, essentially a digital extension of the informal labour that dominates developing economies (Mwendwa et al., 2023). In all three countries, most platform-working women report earnings instability and lack of safety nets, reinforcing the cycle of insecurity (Hunt et al., 2019; Ghosh et al., 2022). Platform governance structures tend to aggravate this

precarity. Algorithmic management and rating systems can inadvertently penalize women, for example, if caregiving duties reduce their acceptance rates or if bias leads to lower ratings. Women workers also have less voice in platform governance and worker organizations. In India's platform economy, women remain significantly under-represented in driver associations and unions, and women-led labour organising is virtually absent even in female-dominated sectors. Lacking collective bargaining power, women often must accept unfair terms or unsafe conditions, and they rely on informal peer networks (e.g., WhatsApp groups) for support rather than formal mechanisms (Ghosh et al., 2022). Across contexts, many women platform workers fear raising complaints, a concern justified by reports that, for instance, domestic workers on South Africa's Sweep South platform can be deactivated (blocked from the app) if clients complain, with little recourse or transparency (Mutandiro, 2024). This highlights how platform policies and governance gaps leave women vulnerable: a single low rating or biased complaint can jeopardize their livelihood. In short, without structural safeguards, the platform economy may "exploit rather than empower" women, perpetuating low-paid, insecure labour under a new guise (Mwendwa et al., 2023).

Situated within the broader BRICS context, this comparative analysis also reflects on how these issues resonate at the level of multilateral policy discourse. Recent BRICS summit declarations have explicitly called for enhancing women's economic participation and bridging the digital divide. The 2023 BRICS Johannesburg Declaration reaffirmed the bloc's commitment to women's empowerment, highlighting the importance of women's entrepreneurship and digital inclusion in achieving sustainable development (BRICS, 2023). The 2024 BRICS Kazan Declaration similarly emphasises cooperation among emerging economies to foster inclusive digital economies and innovation (BRICS, 2024). These high-level commitments provide a normative framework that champions gender inclusion on digital platforms. Yet, there remains a disconnect between rhetoric and reality while BRICS institutions like the New Development Bank (NDB) profess goals of inclusive growth, targeted initiatives to support women platform workers are still nascent. For example, infrastructure investments in expanding broadband or smartphone access, critical to closing the gender digital divide, are only starting to feature in NDB portfolios. Likewise, labour and social protection frameworks have been slow to respond to the specific vulnerabilities faced by platform workers. None of the three countries yet offer comprehensive protections (such as affordable childcare, insurance schemes, or legal safeguards) tailored to women in platform work. It is contended that without more concerted and gender-responsive policy action at both national and multilateral (BRICS) levels, commitments to women's empowerment in the platform economy will remain largely rhetorical.

Notwithstanding these challenges, women across India, South Africa, and Brazil have responded with innovative coping and advocacy strategies. In all three countries, women-only ride-hailing services have emerged as a grassroots solution to safety and cultural barriers. For instance, Brazil has witnessed the rise of apps like FemiTaxi and Lady Driver that connect female riders with female drivers, directly addressing women's security needs and tapping a demand for safer transportation. Similar services have appeared in India (e.g., Sakha Cabs in Delhi, and recent trials of women-only bike taxis in Bengaluru) and in South Africa (e.g., Bolt's "Women Only" ride option) as female entrepreneurs create niche platforms to serve women customers and employ women drivers. These examples foreground women's agency within platform economies, demonstrating that they are not merely passive recipients of structural

inequities or algorithmic biases. Rather, they actively reconfigure digital labour spaces by developing alternative, community-oriented models that centre safety, dignity, and collective care, interventions that, albeit limited at present, challenge dominant, masculinised, and market-driven paradigms of platform work. In line with Mohanty's (2003) critique of the "universal oppressed woman," such practices reflect situated forms of resistance and agency emerging from within the Global South. Other collective responses include the formation of driver cooperatives and women's collectives to improve working conditions. In Brazil and South Africa, some platform workers have organized cooperatives or unions to lobby for better wages and protections, though women's participation in leadership remains limited. In the broader African context, feminist tech initiatives like Uganda's "Diva Taxi" (an all-women ride app) show the potential for women-led platform enterprises to both empower workers and offer safer services. Furthermore, there are increasing calls for platform-provided training and support to address gender-specific challenges. Ride-hailing companies and NGOs have begun offering safety training, self-defence workshops, and digital literacy programs aimed at women platform workers. For example, Uber India's "Driving Change" campaign introduced sexual harassment awareness training for drivers and partnered with NGOs to improve women's safety on its platform. Such measures, alongside features like women-preferred matching and SOS alerts, are steps toward a more gender-sensitive platform design. However, these initiatives are often voluntary or localized, and systemic support remains lacking. There is a clear gap in public policy and platform accountability: government regulation has yet to ensure baseline protections (e.g., against algorithmic biases or harassment), and most platforms' efforts at inclusion are ad-hoc.

This comparative analysis brings into focus the extent to which women's entrepreneurship in the platform economy is inseparable from the structural and gendered dynamics that govern access to labour, technology, and public space. While digital platforms in India, South Africa, and Brazil have opened new income-generating avenues, persistent exclusions rooted in digital divides, informal labour regimes, unsafe working conditions, and the unequal distribution of care responsibilities continue to limit equitable participation. These conditions are not incidental but reflect longstanding socio-economic hierarchies that disproportionately burden women, especially from marginalised communities. Addressing such inequalities demands coordinated, multi-level interventions: transparent and accountable platform governance, gender-responsive state policies, inclusive infrastructure, and meaningful collective organising to amplify women's voices and bargaining power. Within the BRICS framework, sustained cooperation aimed at facilitating the exchange of gender-responsive innovations and the mobilisation of targeted institutional support, particularly through instruments such as the New Development Bank (NDB), constitutes a critical mechanism for addressing structural disparities in platform-based economies. The NDB has articulated a commitment to mainstreaming gender equality across its operational framework, affirming that inclusive growth and the advancement of women's economic participation are integral to long-term development goals (New Development Bank 2016, updated 2024). Although platform economies risk reinforcing gendered precarity in the absence of appropriate regulation, the implementation of context-specific, justice-oriented reforms holds the potential to gradually reshape platform work into a more equitable and empowering domain of labour, in line with the broader developmental commitments articulated by BRICS member states.

Keywords: women's entrepreneurship and empowerment; gig economy; Global South; platform work; gender inequality; BRICS; digital divide; informal labour

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