

Platformisation of Domestic Work in India

Report from a Multistakeholder Consultation

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1. Introduction

On November 16, 2019, The Centre for Internet and Society invited officials from the Department of Labour (Government of Karnataka), members of domestic worker unions, domestic workers, company representatives, and civil society researchers at the Student Christian Mission of India House to discuss preliminary findings of an ongoing research project and facilitate a multistakeholder consultation to understand the contemporaneous platformisation of domestic work in India.

This collaborative project is being led by the the Centre for Internet and Society, India (CIS) together with Domestic Workers Rights Union (DWRU) in Bangalore. The research team comprises of Geeta Menon, Parijatha G.P., Sumathi, Radha K., and Zennathunnisa from DWRU, and Aayush Rathi and Ambika Tandon from CIS. Through a collective research process, this research team has explored the proliferation of digital platforms as a key intermediary in the domestic work sector, and in supporting or challenging deeply rooted structural inequities. For more information on the research project, see the project announcement published on the CIS website.¹ This project is supported by a grant from the Feminist Internet Research Network led by the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) and funded by International Development Research Centre (IDRC) Canada.

The multistakeholder consultation was structured in two segments: a) a presentation outlining initial observations and analysis, and b) a semi-moderated open discussion. Together, these sessions aimed to initiate conversations pertaining to the role of digital platforms, the legal classification of domestic and gig workers, and devising regulatory solutions to improve conditions of work. Preliminary findings were based on qualitative in-depth interviews with workers, platform companies, unions, skilling agencies, and labour officials in both Bengaluru and New Delhi. Feminist approaches were employed in conducting these interviews, and participatory, consensual, reflexive and collaborative research was prioritised.

¹ Tandon, A., & Rathi, A. (2019, October 1). Digital mediation of domestic and care work in India: Project Announcement. Retrieved from <https://cis-india.org/raw/digital-domestic-work-india-announcement>

Situating the lived realities of domestic workers, the event sought to centre the voice of domestic workers in the consultation around the future of their work. The event had attendance from multilingual attendees. The original presentation was made in English, and Geeta Menon translated the presentation and the discussion that followed in Kannada.²

2. Lived experience of researching

In the spirit of reflexive and transparent data collection practices, the event began with Parijatha G.P., an activist at DWRU, sharing her experience of contacting potential interviewees and how this contributed to contextualising domestic workers' lived experiences. The difficulty she faced in communicating with agency offices and the apprehension domestic workers felt towards answering questions equipped her with insights on factors inhibiting lawful working conditions.

Getting in touch with representatives of BookMyNanny, an online platform, for example, involved unanswered phone calls and multiple trips before locating a small office. After finally entering the small office space, she came across several domestic workers and began to ask them questions about their decision to work for this platform. She quickly learned that these women had come from neighbouring cities where platforms regularly canvas to recruit new workers. In many cases, these women were pushed away by their families who viewed them as economic burdens, or had fled in fear of repeated instances of domestic violence. Considering the challenges faced by these women with this company, such as receiving unfair wages, their working conditions resembled those offered by traditional offline placement agencies. In conversation with the workers, Parijatha noticed that they questioned her intentions behind seeking information from them. She concluded that in her experience so far with this research, namely visiting physical offices and navigating conversations with workers, she was able to learn about the nebulous role platform

² Rathi, A. (2019, November 16). Domestic Work in the 'Gig Economy'. Retrieved from <https://cis-india.org/raw/domestic-work-in-the-gig-economy-20191116>; Tandon, A., & Rathi, A. (2019). Domestic workers in the 'gig' economy [PowerPoint slides]. Retrieved from <https://cis-india.org/raw/domestic-work-and-platforms-presentation>

agencies can play as intermediaries and the complexity of the layered narratives surrounding worker conditions.

3. A taxonomy of business models

The researchers at CIS mapped 50 platforms operating in major Indian cities — primarily Mumbai, Bengaluru and National Capital Region (NCR) — and subsequently categorised them according to their business models. Three business models were identified: a) marketplace platforms, b) digital placement agencies, and c) on-demand platforms.

Marketplace platforms serve two distinct roles for customers. By curating worker data and customer feedback, customers have access to a database that provides them with information on workers based on their skillset, proximity, and overall ratings. These characteristics are exemplified by babajob.com. Within this business model, it is important to note that information and data are often flowing unidirectionally, privileging the customer over the worker.

Digital placement agencies employ the same model as traditional placement agencies in terms of connecting customers to workers: customers detail their requirements, suitable workers are shortlisted, worker details are disclosed to customers, workers undergo an interview process, and the agency provides replacement services in cases of customer dissatisfaction. In comparison to the marketplace platform, digital placement agencies directly set working conditions and wage standards. Digital placement agencies can vary greatly in their treatment of workers. As reported by Priya, an attendee at the event who has found domestic work through BookMyNanny and BookMyBai, her experience with the latter has afforded her greater freedom in taking leave when necessary, involved getting paid in a timely manner by the customer directly, and affirmed the platform's willingness to advocate on her behalf. On the contrary, her experience with the former caused her to feel unsafe and financially vulnerable.

On-demand platforms are similar to the business models of popular ride-hailing platforms such as Uber and Ola. These platforms only offer cleaning services as this is the most profitable domestic short term service that is amenable to disaggregation. On UrbanClap, for example, customers can customise the services they seek by the type of work, time slot, and the size of the area to be cleaned. From the worker's perspective, the specificity of services can contribute to creating a digital track record which displays the required tasks and wages transparently.

4. Implications of business models

It is hypothesised that the entry of digital platforms in mediating this sector may enable greater transparency. An ongoing debate regarding the consequences of transparency and visibility questions the potential benefits of platformisation (increase in wages, better working conditions) versus replicating precarity through the reluctance to provide the status of an employee and sufficient employment benefits. Regarding the visibility associated with digital platforms, there emerged evidence to suggest that certain platform interfaces enable workers to curate a digital record of their work. In some cases, platforms are responsible for opening bank accounts for workers and allowing workers to track and ensure the receipt of timely and fair wages. On average, wages are higher for domestic workers securing work through online platforms. Of the platforms contacted, many of them claimed to enforce minimum wage standards in accordance with state laws.

In comparison to traditional recruitment pathways, some barriers to entry for workers are mitigated while new barriers become apparent. For migrant workers who may not have networks to mobilise on the ground, seeking out work through digital platforms can become easier. However, in some cases, the requirement for digital literacy, access to devices (basic phones or smartphones), and access to digital infrastructures can act as barriers to entry for domestic workers. For marketplace platforms, registering is free and does not require a smartphone, although it does require a device and a SIM card. This finding is substantiated by an interviewee from Delhi who registered on a platform and found work within a matter

of 3-4 days. Although, the need to be physically mobile may prove unviable for women with care burdens or other constraints.

The ability for platforms to act as a permanent digital intermediary could open up channels for both workers and customers to redress grievances and could even enable accountability measures. However, heightened visibility may invite discrimination against workers. On most platforms, workers are asked to provide personal details that are immediately accessible to employers. On some platforms, employers have the option to filter workers; on BookmyHousemaids, for example, customers have the option to filter by caste and religion. In addition to potentially facing caste-based discrimination, workers are disadvantaged further as they are not provided with any information on their employer and the working conditions they would be subject to. This discrepancy is a manifestation of the ways in which digital intermediaries can exacerbate the conditions leading to greater information asymmetry between workers and clients, in favour of the clients.

Some of these findings, specifically those related to increased wages, were later met with doubts from workers; one union member questioned the extent to which fair wages and benefits are actualised. In response, the researchers acknowledged the variability of success across platforms in enforcing fair wages by citing various examples. Some platforms operating in Karnataka have developed a rate card which combines factors such as hours worked and the number of people in the home to calculate the minimum wage. Other platforms do not allow customers to register if they are not willing to pay workers a minimum wage. In one case, if customers do input a maximum willingness to spend that is below minimum wage, they are presented with a disclaimer informing them that they are unlikely to be matched with a worker.

On the other hand, of the 50 companies identified, only one or two companies offered employment entitlements such as Provident Fund (PF) and Employee State Insurance (ESI). Unsurprisingly, platforms mostly classify their workers as independent contractors and not as employees, leading to variability in standards of work and benefits. Only a handful of companies had instituted formal leave

arrangements and/or were offering health insurance (even then, many workers were unhappy with how they were unable to use that insurance). Many of the workers present asserted that there is no guarantee of these sparse benefits materialising. Moreover, collectivising to advocate for the delivery of basic benefits continues to be met with challenges in the digital platform space. While digital platforms have the potential to improve working conditions, they do not necessarily concertedly bolster the agency of the worker.

4.1. Transparency

Findings presented in relation to transparency were twofold. Firstly, researchers interrogated their own understanding of digital platforms and contrasted this with how workers themselves understand their employment relations vis-à-vis the mystification of digital platforms. Secondly, the unidirectional flow of information, which privileges customers, generates a lack of trust directed towards platforms. In their first interview with a worker, researchers noticed that the worker repeatedly refused to say that she was employed through or by a digital platform. She did not affiliate herself with any company and chose to distance herself from notorious placement agencies. According to her account, her number was uploaded on the internet at which point she started getting calls for work. Her insistence on separating herself from conceptions of a digital platform is indicative of the many channels workers use when registering with platforms; therefore, claims of digital platforms eliminating intermediaries become shallow. Examples of these channels include proximate male points of contact or referral networks.

The unidirectional flow of information refers to the absence of employer data featured on platforms. Often, information regarding workers is accessible to customers, while employer data is not made available to workers. In fact, many companies have onboarding camps and physically recruit workers from informal settlements within urban spaces. Throughout the recruitment process, workers are asked to provide a lot of personal information and identification without knowing the purposes for which it will be used, where it will be stored, etc. This is especially

precarious when workers wish to redress grievances. Often, there is no information on which they can base their claims and the mechanisms for doing so are limited. In this scenario, workers are compelled to take on jobs and trust their employers to create fair and safe working conditions. On occasions of grievances such as theft allegations companies may involve themselves as investigators in worker-customer grievances; however, the customer's word is usually awarded greater legitimacy, leaving the worker in a vulnerable position.

In addition to reflecting on theoretical versus practical imaginations of workers, researchers critically reflected on how their data collection practices could be viewed as invasive, the way recruiters solicit data from workers. Through this realisation, the researchers strive for their participatory methodology to enable a two-way flow of information, the kind of flow that is largely absent from the digital platform sphere.

4.2. Professionalisation

In pursuit of formalising the domestic work sector, digital platforms rely on professionalisation schemes; however, there is no consensus on what professionalisation entails or how training should be executed. Despite the lack of consensus, these schemes are advertised as opportunities to grow one's earning potential and enhance customer service.

Within this landscape, professionalisation often manifests itself in soft-skills (maintaining hygiene, conflict resolution, etc.) training programs instituted by digital platforms. In some respects, this training can be viewed as a performance of class upgradation, ensuring that the worker is 'fit' and 'prepared' to interact with the customer. At the same time, many workers communicated that they desired this kind of training to learn skills and information that they do not have access to. Workers who have access to this information and have successfully completed training programs tend to move higher up along the domestic work hierarchy. Here, it is important to note, that even within a sector that is overrepresented by women, professionalisation led to a masculinisation of the workforce. For example,

UrbanClap's cleaning services (branded as "deep cleaning") involve the use of mechanised tools such as a vacuum cleaner.³ All the workers who provide these services are male, since this form of work is seen as the domain of men.

4.3. Collective bargaining

Interviewees contacted throughout the research process and several event attendees advocated for outlining strategies to enable collectivisation and unionisation efforts. Communication and information transfer between unions and online platforms is inadequate. Challenges associated with unionisation are exacerbated by the distance created between workers via platform infrastructures. The distance created is due to a lack of awareness regarding the functioning of digital platforms as well as limited geographic scope. Conventionally, unions are assigned specific geographic areas, therefore worker networks are highly localised - on digital platforms with workers from all over the state or the country, workers are unlikely to know or connect with one another. Despite these restrictive infrastructures, workers are adapting tactics to take part in collective bargaining. For example, workers decide to pick up cleaning equipment from the back office during the same time slot to conduct negotiations with higher bargaining power.

During interviews with company representatives, researchers noted that some companies were willing to work with unions as many platforms are currently recruiting through referral networks. This willingness may have the potential to create solidarity channels between unions and companies. It is also beneficial to platforms because it provides them with a straightforward route to acquire data on workers. Such collaborations could set the foundation for regulatory and policy change.

³ According to documents submitted to the Ministry of Corporate Affairs in August of 2019, UrbanClap was valued at USD 843.40 million. In terms of number of workers, including all services in addition to "deep cleaning", it is estimated that 20,000 workers have registered on the platform as of September 2019. See also Sharma, S. (2019, August 7). UrbanClap valuation nearly doubles to \$843.40 mn in 8 months. TechCircle. Retrieved from <https://www.techcircle.in/2019/08/07/urbanclap-valuation-nearly-doubles-to-843-40-mn-in-8-months-after-75-mn-series-e-round>; Thakur, A. (2019, September 4). Are you being served?: The UrbanClap success story. Fortune India. Retrieved from <https://www.fortuneindia.com/enterprise/are-you-being-served/103554>

5. Summary of stakeholder remarks

The roundtable discussion illustrated the diversity of perspectives in this field present. Workers, researchers, company representatives, and labour department officials offered their insights on the research.

The first question was posed by a researcher of urban poverty from Azim Premji University. Referring to the 260 INR hourly wage mentioned by a CrewOnJob worker during the presentation, the researcher posited that this is an unsustainable amount for minimum wage as per his research on long-term platform business models. He raised concerns regarding the percentage of money the company can make per month while wages remain this high. Both researchers and workers attending the event addressed this question. Both parties explained that the wage figure does not factor in days and hours spent without work (i.e. between jobs), leave, sick days, travel costs, and a host of other realities that contribute to the precarity and instability of domestic work. Another concern raised was regarding the inclusion of the models other than the on-demand model within the gig economy. Considering the precarity described above, as well as the historically transient nature of the job, the conditions of work combine to classify domestic work as encompassed within the gig economy. It was further clarified that the phenomenon being spoken about was more generally that of platformisation.

Shifting gears from wages to platform infrastructures and the role they play in recruiting workers, Akshay Kumar, a representative of HomeDruid, explained the details of the company's operations and the efforts they make to protect their workers. He concluded his remarks by asking how companies, like HomeDruid, can break out of the placement agency mould that they are cast in, and stand out solely as a platform company. He elaborated by clarifying the differences between HomeDruid and traditional placement agencies in terms of the services and benefits they offer to workers. The researchers addressed this question by emphasising that establishing trust from the bottom-up is challenging because customers and workers are straddling general notions of distrust surrounding the platform itself. For customers, it might be difficult to allow a platform to shape who enters their home.

From a worker perspective, they also cannot trust the kind of employers and working conditions they may be exposed to. In response, Geeta Menon stressed upon the power that social networks hold over company platforms—trust is a difficult asset to market, especially since companies and platforms are, in comparison to unions, alienating spaces for part-time domestic workers in particular.

The discussion concluded with exchanges between a representative of the Karnataka labour department and domestic workers. The representative aligned himself with the view that enabling collectivisation is necessary to better the conditions of domestic workers in the gig economy. He also spoke about the benefits of education and training programs offered to domestic workers by platform companies. Addressing the research directly, he was less concerned with understanding various business models and interested in protecting gig workers as they enter the framework of employment relationships. Because the Karnataka labour department is beginning to incorporate placement agencies into their regulatory framework, they seek recommendations on how this may serve as a basis for regulating the activities and operations of digital platforms.

The workers drew attention to the lack of safety in domestic work, especially because of a lack of grievance redressal structures. They stated that the onus, responsibility, and burden seems to always fall on the workers' shoulders. Attendees were informed of a new helpline (dial 155214) to register and docket worker complaints with labour department officials. Along with being accessible via twitter, he offered this as part of an alternative solution as the labour department has restricted jurisdiction over criminal cases such as in the case of theft allegations. Despite this comment, workers opined that the labour ministry has the power to require employer registries which would not interfere with investigations, but aid them.

Workers concluded the event by highlighting the lack of upward mobility available to domestic workers. Given the conditions of work that were and largely continue to

be present in this sector, it is imperative to move in a direction that leads towards regulation, enables an equal transfer of information, and prioritises fair work.

6. Concluding remarks

As the findings suggest, there have been improvements in certain aspects (digital records of work, timely fairer wages, training services) of domestic work through the proliferation of digital platforms. At the same time, broader theoretical analyses demonstrate the presence of reinforced and nuanced impediments associated with digital mediators. This tension highlights the need for uniform standardisation of labour practices from a regulatory and legal standpoint. Ideally, further research and continued meetings with community members will result in findings that can concretely address these gaps. By continuing consultations with community workers, and upholding feminist methodological perspectives of self-reflexivity, intersectionality in participation, we are aiming to build a knowledge base around the role of platforms in domestic work. This knowledge base is centering workers' perspectives in discussions of the future of work and the evolving nature of the gig economy. In doing so, we hope to pivot the conversation to centre the future of the workers represented in this study rather than simply focusing on the future of work. Through a focus on worker experiences and conditions, we can better identify emerging and continued inequities in the domestic worker sector and address them collectively and in solidarity.

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