
Platforms, Power, & Politics

LAUNCH OF CIS'S FLAGSHIP REPORT ON DOMESTIC & CARE WORKERS ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS

BACKGROUND

Digital platforms are increasingly becoming a permanent fixture in urban consumption. The rise of platforms in the transportation (Ola/Uber etc.) and logistics (Zomato/Swiggy etc.) sectors has received much attention. In this report, we draw our attention to the steep increase in digital platforms in another industry, paid domestic and care work. The focus of this work is on the impact of digital platforms for conditions of work and workers rights. This work is particularly important given the increasing uptake of digital platforms due to pandemic-related restrictions, and the loss of livelihoods of millions of domestic workers. In Delhi alone, 63% domestic workers lost their jobs through the pandemic according to some reports.¹ We find that while platforms are able to provide economic opportunities to workers, they also take a large part of their earnings as commission - ranging from 20 to 70 percent. This is the case with on-demand platforms that provide short-term gigs (similar to the Uber model).

DIGITAL ACCESS & PLATFORM TYPES

Most domestic and care workers in India are women from low income and Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi groups. Workers in this sector mostly do not have regular digital access and physical mobility (to travel freely across/within cities) which severely restricts their engagement with the growing platform economy. We find that some platforms have developed strategies to reach out to workers without digital access. One such strategy is visiting slum areas and informal settlements where domestic workers tend to live, to onboard them in large numbers through manual data collection. Even so, we find that most women workers are still reliant on men in their family to register them on platforms, as they control devices shared between the family.

¹ <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/63-domestic-workers-have-lost-job-since-pandemic/articleshow/82667022.cms>

LABOUR OUTCOMES

By and large, digital platforms do not support decent working conditions for workers. We find that platforms ‘onboard’ workers far in excess of the jobs they are able to provide. This significantly lowers wages for workers as labour supply outstrips demand. Workers expressed distrust in these platforms, equating them with notorious placement agencies rampant in domestic workers’ recruitment. Workers also have to take on all indirect costs such as transportation to and from the job, cleaning equipment, etc. Some workers also allege that platforms sell cleaning equipment to them at higher rates than market prices, forcing them to spend more despite being called ‘independent contractors.’

DISCRIMINATION & SURVEILLANCE

Even though digital platforms claim to formalise the domestic work sector, they do not provide any employment benefits (paid leave, health insurance, provident fund, etc.) to workers. Instead, workers are asked to provide vast amounts of data to platforms and are subject to intensive surveillance. For example, some platforms ask customers to verify workers through facial recognition systems, even though failure rates in such systems are typically very high. Women workers also face additional forms of surveillance. For example, one company, Taskbob, sends an SMS to women workers’ husbands every time they receive a job posting, to ensure that they can keep track of their wives’ location.

Digital platforms are also complicit in discriminating against workers on the basis of their identities, as most allow customers to select workers through filters such as religion, gender, age, and in one case, caste. They also force workers to maintain high rating scores, which can act as another avenue to allow customers to discriminate against workers from minority religions, and oppressed castes.

This report argues that domestic workers continue to remain in precarious positions without any legal recognition or support, and can even be labelled the original gig workers as the gig economy continues these forms of informality. The full report can be accessed [here](#). This work was jointly authored by the Centre for Internet and Society and the Domestic Workers’ Rights Union. The authors can be contacted at aayush@cis-india.org or ambika@cis-india.org.