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DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

THE FUTURE OF WORK:

GIG ECONOMY, REMOTE WORK & AI CHALLENGES

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

S.No.	Title of the Paper	Authors	Page No.
1	Role of Artificial Intelligence in Human Resources Management	Lt. Dr. S. Sivasankar	01
2	Awareness and Challenges of Artificial Intelligence in Human Resource Management and Recruitment	Dr. M.V. Sathiyabama Ms. P. Sudha Ms. S. Midunarakavi	11
3	Impact of AI and Job Role Transformation	Dr. M.V. Sathiyabama Ms. S. Vasundharadevi Ms. S. Midunarakavi	21
4	Gig Economy: Trends and Challenges	Dr. B. Indira Priyadharshini	31
5	Gig Economy in India – An Analysis	A. Thilagavathy	38
6	Augmenting Human Capabilities: Exploring the Role of AI in Enhancing Job Performance	Dr. Aarcha. S. S	48
7	A Study on the Effect of Off – Seasonal Unemployment Stress among Saltpan Workers in Thoothukudi	J. Annal Rosly Jeyasili Dr. T. Chellammal,	58
8	AI's Application in HR	Dr. B. Rajalakshmi	70
9	AI in HR & Recruitment	Dr. P. Chinna Sahaya Rani Mrs. Vandhana Sabari	78
10	Artificial Intelligence in HR and Recruitment: A Statistical Analysis	Dr. R. Karthiga	90
11	Commerce Graduates in the Future of Work: Bridging the Skill Gap Through Institutional Reforms	Dr. Ram Raj. G.	95
12	The Role of AI in HR and Recruitment	Ms. P. Shri Bhuvaneswari Ms. S. Archana	110
13	Women In The Gig Economy: Opportunities, Challenges, And Gender Disparities	Dr. T. Kiruthika	117

WOMEN IN THE GIG ECONOMY: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES, AND GENDER DISPARITIES

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Abstract

The gig economy has emerged as a dynamic force reshaping global labor markets by offering flexible, on-demand work opportunities through digital platforms. For women, this transformation presents a mix of promise and complexity. While the gig economy offers avenues for income generation, work-life balance, and entrepreneurial autonomy, it also reveals persistent gender disparities in pay, representation, job security, and access to technology. This paper explores the role of women in the gig economy, highlighting both the enabling factors and systemic challenges that influence their participation. Drawing from global and Indian contexts, it presents a critical review of recent literature, identifies key gaps, and offers insights into strategic interventions that can create a more inclusive and equitable gig ecosystem for women.

Keywords:Women, Gig Economy, Digital Labour, Gender Disparities, Platform Work, Work-Life Balance, Financial Inclusion.

Introduction

The rise of the gig economy has transformed traditional employment models, offering short-term, task-based, and freelance work opportunities facilitated by digital platforms. Women, especially in developing economies, have increasingly turned to gig work as a means to balance household responsibilities with income generation. Sectors such as ride-sharing, food delivery, e-commerce services, and freelance content creation have seen a surge in female participation. However, this growth is often hampered by unequal access to digital tools, lack of social security, gender-based algorithmic bias, and discrimination.

In India, where societal norms and mobility constraints continue to influence women's

workforce participation, the gig economy has emerged as both a liberator and a limiter. This paper explores the dual nature of gig work for women by analyzing opportunities, challenges, and the persisting gender gap.

Literature Review

Sharma, M., & Kota, H. B. (2019) In their study on working women and investment decisions, Sharma and Kota noted that flexible income sources such as gig work are increasingly seen as viable options for financial independence. However, the absence of stable income in gig platforms can discourage long-term planning and economic security for women.

Kapoor, R., & Yadav, S. (2021) This study highlighted that despite increased digital literacy among urban Indian women, gig work participation is uneven due to gendered expectations at home, limited mobility, and safety concerns. Platform algorithms also tend to favor male workers in tasks like ride-sharing.

World Bank Report (2020) The World Bank emphasized that platform work opens doors for women who cannot participate in traditional office jobs. However, a lack of access to formal training, social security, and childcare services limits the scalability of their gig careers.

Kumar, D., & Nair, P. (2022) In their India-focused study, the authors observed that many women on platforms like UrbanClap and Meesho enter the gig economy through necessity rather than choice, often under precarious working conditions without health or retirement benefits.

OECD Report (2021) This global analysis found that women gig workers face a gender pay gap of up to 20% and are overrepresented in lower-paying service-oriented tasks. It recommended gender-aware policies, platform transparency, and enhanced digital access.

Opportunities

- Flexibility and work-life balance: The primary draw for many women is the flexibility offered by gig work, allowing them to balance income generation with household and caregiving responsibilities. Studies have shown that mothers, in particular, have been drawn to the gig economy for this reason, with a 79% increase in freelancing among mothers between 2008 and 2016.

- Skill development and entrepreneurship: Gig work can be a pathway for women to develop new skills, enhance existing ones, and even pursue entrepreneurial ventures, fostering economic independence and innovation.
- Accessibility and diverse work options: Digital platforms have opened up new avenues for women to access work, especially those who may have been excluded from traditional employment due to social norms or geographic limitations. Women engage in diverse gig roles across sectors like technology, customer service, home services, and creative industries.

Challenges and gender disparities

- Income Instability and Wage Gaps: Gig work often comes with unpredictable income and a lack of traditional employment benefits like health insurance, retirement plans, and paid leave. Women gig workers, especially those with caregiving responsibilities, face heightened vulnerability to economic shocks due to this instability. Research indicates a persistent gender earnings gap, with women often earning less than men for comparable gig work, sometimes due to occupational segregation into lower-paying "feminized" sectors like domestic work and beauty services.
- Lack of Social Protection and Legal Safeguards: Gig platforms classify workers as "independent contractors," leaving them outside the scope of traditional labor laws and protections, including those concerning minimum wages, occupational safety, and protections against sexual harassment. The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 (POSH) for instance, does not apply to gig workers, exacerbating safety and security concerns.
- Algorithmic Bias and Discrimination: Algorithmic management, which automates worker performance monitoring and control, can introduce new forms of bias and control, potentially disadvantaging women gig workers. Algorithms may mandate targets difficult for women to meet due to their caregiving responsibilities and limited working hours, potentially leading to fewer opportunities. This bias, along with social stereotypes

and biases from customers, can impact women's job opportunities, earnings, and overall treatment in the gig economy.

- Digital Divide and Access to Resources: Unequal access to digital technology, especially in rural areas, can hinder women's participation and advancement in the gig economy. Women may also face limited access to training, networking opportunities, and financial resources that are crucial for success in gig work.
- Workplace Safety and Harassment: Women in certain gig roles, like ride-sharing and food delivery, face increased risks of harassment and unsafe working conditions, including physical assault, verbal abuse, and stalking. Lack of access to basic facilities like toilets further exacerbates these challenges.

Addressing the challenges and fostering inclusivity

- Policy Reforms and Regulation: Reforms are needed to redefine employment relationships in the gig economy, providing gig workers with access to social security benefits, labor rights, and protections similar to traditional employees.
- Gender-Sensitive Policies and Infrastructure: Governments and platforms should implement gender-sensitive policies, including accessible and inclusive digital platforms, grievance redressal mechanisms, and supportive infrastructure like childcare facilities and safe working conditions.
- Skill Development and Digital Literacy: Investments in skill development programs and initiatives to enhance digital literacy among women gig workers are crucial to bridge the digital divide and improve their employability and earning potential.
- Combating Gender Biases and Stereotypes: Social narratives and awareness programs can help challenge gender stereotypes and biases that hinder women's participation and success in the gig economy.
- Supporting Women-led Initiatives and Organizations: Fostering community support networks and collaborating with women-led unions and civil society organizations can empower women gig workers and advocate for their rights and needs.

By addressing the systemic issues and leveraging the opportunities, the gig economy can be transformed into a more equitable and empowering environment for women, contributing to their financial independence, well-being, and overall economic growth.

Conclusion

The gig economy presents a complex landscape for women—offering unprecedented flexibility and access to income while simultaneously exposing them to vulnerability and exclusion. Policymakers, platforms, and civil society must work collaboratively to reduce the digital divide, implement gender-sensitive platform policies, and provide gig workers with social protection frameworks. Closing the gender gap in the gig economy will not only empower women but also contribute to more sustainable and inclusive economic growth.

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