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Title: A feminist organising agenda – Reflections on the collective resistance of women platform workers in India

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Abstract:

Since 2020, platform workers in India have led several instances of spontaneous organising against extractive platform practices amid dire economic conditions they faced during the pandemic. 2021 witnessed a remarkable instance of mobilisation among women platform workers in the beauty sector overcoming structural challenges of collective action. Drawing from writings in foundational feminist economics and contemporary feminist political economy, I reflect on the ongoing collective resistance by these workers, and its mobilising factors and indications towards a feminist organising agenda for women platform workers to sustain and formalise their resistance. Through the implicit frame of Power's work on social provisioning (Power 2004; 2013), I discuss a worker organising agenda within the context of the gendered opportunities and outcomes of platform work. In doing so, I situate my analysis within the facets of the feminist political economy of space, time, and violence (Elias and Rai 2019) embedded in everyday platform work.

Introduction

The platform economy has been identified as replicating neoliberal patterns of ownership and control, including the way that it extracts and exploits paid and unpaid labour (van Doorn 2017). It isn't surprising then that the platform economy, despite its overt rhetoric of an avenue for access and participation for women, is highly gendered. Work for women in

the platform economy reproduces gendered forms of inequality that shape women's work in the 'traditional' labour market.

Vertical and horizontal occupational segregation follows women to the platform economy. Women comprise a very small percentage of workers (less than 1 percent, in the case of India (Goyal 2021) in dominant sectors such as ride-hailing and delivery (ILO 2021). They are predominantly present in historically feminised sectors of beauty work, domestic work, health care work, and tutoring. Even in these forms of platform work, there is a predominance of men in higher-paying mechanised and professionalised work such as 'professional cleaning', when compared to traditional domestic work occupied by women (Rathi and Tandon 2021).

The everyday work of women in the platform economy involves navigating gendered dimensions of economic activity and outcomes alongside unfair and highly-skewed terms, precarious working conditions, and the absence of income, job, or social security (Medappa, Ray and Hussain 2020). Collective resistance to platform dominance and exploitation has been nascent in India, but rooted in grassroots mobilisation (Rakheja 2020). However, collective action among women platform workers is hindered by persistent historical challenges of organising (Agarwal 1997; Ghosh 2004), as well as distinct challenges in platform work due to the socio-spatial isolation of workers and artificial segmentation of workers in an attempt to foreclose consensus on collective bargaining demands.

Overcoming these challenges, in October 2021, over a hundred women beauty workers from Urban Company (UC), India's dominant platform for personal services, led a sit-in protest outside the platform's head office in the Delhi-NCR region, after months of efforts towards attaining better terms of work through internal negotiation with the platform (Barik 2021a; Mehrotra 2022). Among their demands were reductions in commission and other platform fees, removal of arbitrary platform policies especially regarding monetary and non-monetary penalties, a commitment to worker-led autonomy and flexibility of working time, and development of effective grievance redressal and support mechanisms (AIGWU 2021a).

In this paper, I reflect on the factors mobilising sustained collective resistance by these women platform workers. I discuss the gendered realities underpinning the collective bargaining agenda of the workers. To do so, I use media reports and primary documentation of the protests. These include short video accounts by workers and their lists of demands for the company, shared by the All India Gig Workers' Union (AIGWU), a grassroots-mobilising union of platform workers.

I use Power's social provisioning approach as an implicit frame to situate the economic realities and grievances of women workers in the platform economy. Power (2004; 2013) conceptualises social provisioning as a broader understanding of economic activity, drawing away from orthodox economics' notions of pecuniary advantages and individual competition. Social provisioning incorporates interdependent and multilayered processes

and social structures in the study of women's economic activity, thus enabling analysis of women's unpaid and non-market activities. Power advocates for adopting key components of the approach in analysis, principal among them being the centering of analysis around care and unpaid work. Under the approach, wellbeing and agency are identified as key measures of economic success, building on the capabilities approach conceptualised by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000). Kabeer (2021) provides an intersection of the two, defining capabilities as the 'capacity for purposive agency' for a broader assessment of the opportunity set of available alternative choices beyond the actual choice made.

The feminist political economy of everyday platform work

Closely related to Power's social provisioning approach is the concept of social reproduction, widely explored in the feminist economics and feminist political economy literature. Complementing key tenets of the social provisioning approach, social reproduction situates care at the centre of analysis, that is, the paid and unpaid care undertaken for oneself and others in the reproduction and regeneration of human labour processes and associated social structures (Mezzadri, Newman and Stevano 2021). Elias and Rai (2019) in their paper on feminist political economy in micro time and space scales, discuss the *everyday* of social reproduction. They elaborate and propose a framework of feminist political economy to understand care work and the broader processes of social reproduction, as it manifests in and influences the everyday. They conceptualise a framework within the facets of space, time, and violence to reveal 'the ways in which the work of social reproduction plays out temporally, spatially, and in the context of gendered structural violence'.

Women workers in the platform economy, likewise, navigate the political economy of space, time, and violence in their everyday work. Their work is governed by extractive and opaque mechanisms and algorithmic management, with precarity and exploitation seamlessly woven into the platform regime. This is evident in the grievances raised by the beauty workers during the protests, which included indiscriminate and arbitrary penalties and fees charged by UC, policies that foreclosed flexible work arrangements, and absence of support for issues faced during everyday work. These demands and workers' accounts of working on the platform reveal the politics of navigating the everyday, which is inextricably tied to social reproductive care and unpaid labour, whose burden has been reconfigured and distorted by platforms, marring the strategies of resilience that workers adopt to undertake paid and unpaid labour.

Platforms have distorted the spatiotemporal rhythms of work, altering task and time frames of work and reconfiguring the city and the home as workspaces. What remains, however, is the indivisibility and rigidity of social reproductive labour constituting care and unpaid work. Women's time is precarious, owing to their own temporalities being contingent on others who are dependent on their social reproductive labour (Sharma 2014). However, platforms have hard-coded an assumption of a high elasticity of time for workers, expecting them to

remain available 'on-demand' to perform work. Women workers on the other hand, have to cater to multiple temporalities during the work day on the platform, while their own time is inelastic considering their entire 'work' day and the care and unpaid work they have to undertake.

The beauty workers' accounts of their work on UC reinforce that their care and unpaid work constitutes and shapes their paid work and results in choice constraints with decision-making on the platform. This echoes the literature in feminist economics and feminist political economy on the continuum of paid and unpaid work and the myth of a dichotomy between these spheres (Anand and Nandi 2019; Sengupta 2019).

The 'home' was ubiquitous to the workers' grievances with platform practices, with workers being subjected to intractable routes for balancing 'work' and 'home'. An account from a worker identifies the false affordance of flexibility by UC to its workers:

“When we joined the platform, they told us that we have freedom over our work. We can manage both our work and home through part-time work. Now, they say you have to complete 30 to 40 bookings [a month], or you'll face a penalty of Rs. 2,000 or even have your account ID blocked.” (AIGWU 2021b)

Platforms as hegemonic economic actors have pushed the narrative that platform work is a panacea for low rates of labour force participation by women because of the flexibility and autonomy they offer. They have appropriated the notion of flexible work, while in reality exercising real-time flexibilisation of labour to manage service demand (Hunt et al 2019; Sekharan and Tandon 2021). The possibilities of worker-led flexibility are obstructed by monetary and non-monetary penalties that UC imposes on workers aiming to manage their care and unpaid work. These include monetary penalties for not accepting work requests and the inclusion of 'response rate' and 'service delivery rate' calculations in workers' ratings, which are used by UC for decisions on arbitrary, uncompensated (re)training sessions, and termination from the platform by blocking account IDs (AIGWU 2021b).

In December 2021, UC notified (and later introduced) a new subscription plan for workers called the minimum guarantee (MG) plan, in which workers have to schedule their work day slots a month in advance and pay a subscription of up to Rs. 3,000 (~USD 40) to access work. The workers and AIGWU recognised this move as a 'pay to work' scheme and vehemently opposed its introduction (AIGWU 2021c). The new plan compels workers to pay to access work, and at the same time penalises them for not adhering to its rigid work time scheduling when workers have to undertake care and unpaid work. These penalties tied to work time rigidity leave workers not only choice-constrained, but choice-coerced between flexibility, and income and job insecurity.

Location-based platform work that workers undertake transforms the city – a highly gendered social space, and customers' homes into their workspaces. Workers are disrupted

from their sites of care work, as they travel between multiple sites of paid work in customers' homes. This spatial fragmentation of their work day leads to a greater gendered burden of mobility as workers are more likely to travel between sites of paid and unpaid work during the span of the work day, typically undertaking care and unpaid work in the afternoon before returning back to sites of paid work.

Navigating increased mobility requirements within the city amplifies workers' gendered experiences of the city, where they are often deprived of public infrastructure and facilities for self-care during the work day. Workers at the UC protests highlighted the lack of infrastructural support such as access to basic amenities like restrooms and drinking water, even as these infrastructural needs are intensified due to the nature of UC's location-based services. The workers raised their grievances against the lack of support from UC relating to their personal safety in public spaces, as well as in invisibilised spaces of the customers' homes. UC does not provide transport and conveyance allowances and does not have adequate safeguards or support mechanisms, with workers demanding human managers for support as opposed to automated and IVR helplines. Compounding the absence of support, workers said they are penalised by UC for strategies they undertake against the threat of harm and direct violence, such as monetary penalties for rejecting a lead after receiving bookings from male customers (AIGWU 2021b).

Beyond the risk of direct violence, workers navigate the everyday structural violence of platform work, stemming from the legal non-recognition of platform work, intensive surveillance and algorithmic management practices, and an exacerbation of paid and unpaid work burdens. UC leveraged this structural violence in a show of direct harm and violence by filing an injunction against workers during their second protest in December 2021 for activity it termed 'illegal and unlawful' (Barik 2021b).

Building associational power from the grassroots

Platform workers and workers' organisations presently lack institutional power for organising. However, platform workers' movements have been building their associational power through grassroots organising and worker participation for setting bargaining agendas (Schmalz, Ludwig and Webster 2018; Basualdo et al 2021). The beauty workers in this case study demonstrate their accumulation of worker power, especially utilising digital tools such as private chat applications to compensate and remedy prior challenges with coordination. Notably, these tools are utilised to foster networks of care and solidarity providing mutual support, and to neutralise the information asymmetry they face in platform work. In many ways, workers have transformed these tools into sites of resilience and resistance for navigating the politics of everyday platform work. Since the protests in October, AIGWU's involvement has been instrumental in sustaining the workers' collective resistance, and the union possesses the institutional capacity to formalise organising at the policy level. As the workers move towards formalising their resistance, the gendered underpinning of their current collective demands indicate the need to frame a feminist

organising agenda, rooted in the political economy of space, time, and violence in everyday platform work.

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