

# “Now we are Independent”: Female Online Freelancers in India and Sri Lanka

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**Abstract:** Online freelancing consists of workers undertaking specialized services online. The client and worker meet through dedicated online platforms (e.g. Upwork, Fiverr etc.), social media (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn etc.) or personal websites or contacts. Common jobs include data entry, translation, graphic design, website development, etc. The work can be done anywhere provided the freelancer has an internet connection, and at any time, provided the assignment deadline is met and the client is satisfied with the outputs. We hypothesized that online freelancing can help boost the participation of those excluded from the traditional workforce. This includes women, who may drop out of the workforce due to family and childcare commitments, and therefore cannot commit to traditional “9-to-5” jobs. Female participation in the Indian and Sri Lankan labour force is only 24% and 35% respectively (World Bank 2018). However, there is a dearth of research on the experience of online freelancing for South Asian females. Our research contributes towards filling that gap. We conducted a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) and one-on-one in-depth interviews (IDIs) in India and Sri Lanka to understand the experiences of current female and male freelancers. In Sri Lanka, we also carried out two quantitative surveys. In India, 32 FGDs and 12 IDIs were conducted. In Sri Lanka, there were 4 FGDs and 1 IDI. Many female homemakers said that freelancing gave them confidence and independence since they were able to earn some income of their own. They liked that they could balance work with childcare since online work is flexible. Freelancing also helped combat boredom during “down time.” Their families tended to approve of women working online since they could work from home and balance family duties. Tellingly, some families disapproved of men freelancing because of the perception that men should be engaged in traditional 9-to-5 jobs. Despite these positives, we found that online freelancers tended to be largely male. We end by considering the challenges women may face in the world of online work, and we hope that these findings will help policymakers assess and improve female labour force participation through these ‘non-traditional’ avenues.

**Keywords:** online freelancing, gig economy, women, flexible work, labour force participation

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## 1. Introduction

The proliferation of digital communications, knowledge work automation, and other digital advancements have revolutionized the way people work worldwide (UNDP, 2015). With as many as 51.2 % of the global population connected to the internet by the end of 2018 (ITU, 2018), the modern workplace is transforming significantly. The modern workplace is open to new producers, suppliers, and business services, is flexible and remote, and can be more or less inclusive, depending on one’s perspective (UNDP 2015).

As a result, online freelancing has risen in popularity in recent times. Online freelancing is the production and delivery of specialized services through online means. It is variously referred to as online digital work, gig work, or microwork, but there are subtle differences in the meaning of each term. For example, microwork is work that is broken down into low-skilled, repetitive and simple tasks (e.g. ad-clicking). Online gig work is location-based physical provision of labour mediated by an online platform (e.g. ridesharing, food delivery). For a detailed digital labour topography, see Schmidt (2017). In online freelancing, the client and worker meet through dedicated online platforms (e.g. Upwork, Fiverr etc.), social media (e.g. Facebook, LinkedIn etc.) or personal websites or contacts. Common jobs include data entry, translation, graphic design, website development, etc. The work can be done anywhere provided the freelancer has an internet connection, and at any time provided the assignment deadline is met and the client is satisfied with the outputs.

These unstructured, often remote work alternatives have been a boon to those who have difficulty participating in the traditional workforce. It is known that women’s participation in the traditional labour force

is relatively low for many reasons. Therefore, the opportunities presented by online digital work for women are immense. For many women, online freelancing has given them the chance to work and make use of their education and skills and contribute to household income. The benefits of online freelancing as perceived by women include the freedom to work from home, and as and when it fits into their own personal family and household schedules.

This paper is based on a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) in India and Sri Lanka to understand the experiences of female and male online freelancers, with a particular focus on the opportunities and challenges of online freelancing for Indian and Sri Lankan females. There is a dearth of literature on this subject and it is envisaged that these findings will be useful to policymakers as they attempt to improve female labour force participation in the region.

## **2. Literature review**

### **2.1 Challenges faced by women in labour force participation**

Women's labour force participation is low worldwide at around 48% (Gammarano 2018). The situation is worse in South Asia with women's labour force participation rates at 24% and 35% in India and Sri Lanka respectively (World Bank 2018). The reasons for these poor numbers appear consistent globally: lack of education, access to jobs including "socially acceptable" jobs, access to adequate and affordable childcare for those with children, the burden of household chores falling entirely on women, and other social and cultural factors (Gunatilaka 2013, Verick 2014, ILO 2016, Tzvetkova and Ortiz-Ospina 2017). Other factors include the nature and level of growth and development of the country, the supply and nature of jobs, wages, employer preferences, economic incentives such as taxation policies, labour laws, and employee protection (Samarakoon and Mayadunne 2018).

The burden of housework and caregiving is often a woman's responsibility in this part of the world, leaving little time for career-related pursuits. McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) estimates that women spend up to three times as many hours on unpaid care work as men in India and Pakistan (MGI 2015). Sudarshan (2014) posited that changes in gender-based roles are slow to come to South Asia although they are part of the rapid economic development these countries are undergoing. As such, women must often choose between paid work and unpaid caregiving at home. These findings are corroborated by a study by Chowdhury (2013) which found that 75% of urban mothers and 71% of rural mothers with at least one young child (under 5 years), were out of the Sri Lankan labour market due to a lack of adequate support. Under these circumstances, access to flexible work arrangements becomes an important factor for women who want to work. Premaratne (2011) underlined the importance of having access to childcare and household help for women to be able to work, and Wickramasinghe and Jayabandu (2007) showed that female workers in Sri Lanka preferred flexibility as it helped balance the demands of their work and family duties. Yet, despite moves towards teleworking and flexible work conditions being made available to women in the region, the uptake of such jobs has been limited (ILO 2016).

The reasons for this are varied: it is likely that the jobs on offer are deemed to be of less value by peers and in social and family circles, that they are not perceived to be appropriate for women (Chakraborty 2013), or are low-paying and have minimum benefits, that they do not fall under the country's labour laws and therefore employees do not have adequate safeguards, or access to rights afforded under these laws, limited access to training, and so on (ILO 2016).

### **2.2 Online freelancing and the future of work for women**

While women face challenges in working in traditional 9-to-5 jobs, or those with some degree of flexibility in work location or timings, the opportunities that have arisen as a result of digital platform-based labour cannot be ignored. The modern workplace is undergoing a transformation due to wider access to mobile phones and internet connectivity (UNDP 2015). Through access to online platforms, online freelancing and gig working has come to the fore as an alternative – and for some, as a primary means of employment, with approximately 30 million digital platform workers estimated in the Global South alone (Heeks 2019). The Online Labour Index compiled by the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) showed a 26% increase in the number of projects available on digital work platforms in 2016-2017, and popular work on offer included software development, design, and creative writing (Corporaal and Lehdonvirta 2017). As platforms improve the user experiences of both employers and online freelancers, this kind of work is likely to become more popular.

However, it is clear that a large proportion of women will continue to remain disadvantaged in terms of access to online work. LIRNEasia's AfterAccess nationally representative survey data revealed a gender gap in internet use, with Sri Lankan women aged between 15-65 34% less likely to use the internet than Sri Lankan men in the same age group; the situation is worse in India with a gender gap of 57%. Online work also tends to be undertaken on laptops or desktop computers and there are significant gaps in ownership between genders in these countries. Overall ownership of computers in Sri Lanka and India is low (12% and 6% respectively), and tends to be dominated by men (gender gap of 35% in Sri Lanka and 47% in India). Gender gaps in Internet use among those who use laptops/desktops were also observed (16% in Sri Lanka and 38% in India). With fewer women using the internet, even less are likely to engage in online freelancing. It is estimated that the number of male freelancers is 8.9 times higher than the number of female freelancers in Sri Lanka (Perampalam, Galpaya, and Senanayake, 2017).

Since women are likely to have less time for work (as discussed above), this limits the repertoire of work that they can perform, and means they are less present and prominent on these platforms, impairing their potential success as freelancers. Similar findings were observed in women-run home-based businesses in the UK, as they were likely to be operated only part-time, contributing to their marginality (Thompson, Jones-Evans and Kwong, 2009). In Pakistan, male freelancers were perceived to be "more serious" about their commitment to online freelancing (Malik, Nicholson and Heeks 2018). It is also evident that (skilled) women tend to undervalue their worth even when they do get the chance to offer their labour services or goods/products online (Sapsead et al. 2015, Dubey et al. 2017).

While these findings are valuable, there is a dearth of literature on the gendered aspects of online freelancing, especially focusing on women in emerging South Asia. Much of the discourse focuses on the general inequalities brought about by digital work. We intended to fill this gap through our research, and specifically set out to answer the following questions:

1. What are women's attitudes to online freelancing in India and Sri Lanka?
2. What are the attitudes of freelancers' families and societies to freelancing based on gender?
3. Are there any gender disparities in the treatment of women in the online workplace?

### **3. Method**

This research is part of a three-country study on online freelancing LIRNEasia conducted in Sri Lanka, India and Myanmar among current online freelancers and those with the potential to do online work. This paper discusses our Sri Lankan and Indian findings only, among current online freelancers, pertaining to gender.

While we recognise that gender is not a binary construct, given the limitations of the data available, the study only covered males and females as traditionally defined.

We conducted a series of qualitative FGDs and IDIs among men and women currently undertaking online work. The fieldwork was conducted from January-March 2016 in Sri Lanka and June-August 2017 in India. We interviewed freelancers aged 16-40. Current literature indicates that online freelancers are usually "millennials" (born between 1981 and 2000) (Kuek et al. 2015). However, we wanted to include older people who may have the skillset for online work, so we used 40 as our upper age limit. We aimed to understand what motivated the freelancers to start freelancing, the opportunities and challenges they saw, their likes and dislikes in freelancing, their perceptions on what their families and wider societies thought about freelancing, and, of course, how gender affected their experiences as online freelancers. All responses were completely anonymised.

#### **3.1 India**

We interviewed 151 online freelancers across 32 FGDs and 12 IDIs in five population centres: Bangalore, Delhi, Mumbai, Mumbai Semi-Urban, and Pune. The freelancers were recruited through purposive sampling (involving posting on Facebook and the online freelancing platforms Freelancer and Truelancer), and snowballing.

**Table 1:** Distribution of Indian sample by geography

Protocol type	City	Sample size	
		No. of protocols	No. of respondents (Total)
FGDs	Bangalore	7	32
	Delhi	4	18
	Mumbai	11	42
	Mumbai Semi-Urban	7	32
	Pune	3	15
	<b>Total</b>	<b>32</b>	<b>139</b>
IDI	Bangalore	3	Same as Protocol No.
	Delhi	4	
	Mumbai	4	
	Mumbai Semi-Urban	0	
	Pune	1	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>12</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>44</b>	<b>151</b>

Notably, we were able to recruit far more male than female subjects, reflecting the fact that there tends to be disproportionately more male than female freelancers. The gender breakdown of the sample is as follows:

**Table 2:** Distribution of Indian sample by gender

City	Male	Female	Total
Bangalore	33	2	35
Delhi	18	4	22
Mumbai	25	21	46
Mumbai Semi-Urban	23	9	32
Pune	8	8	16
<b>India Total</b>	<b>107</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>151</b>

In terms of occupation, most of the women were homemakers and students, while the others included those engaged in other fulltime jobs, looking for work, or fulltime freelancers:

**Table 3:** Distribution of Indian female sample by occupation

Homemakers	16
Students	13
Other (incl. regular fulltime employment, fulltime / part time freelancers, looking for work)	15
<b>Total</b>	<b>44</b>

### 3.2 Sri Lanka

We interviewed 19 online freelancers through 4 FGDs and 1 IDI in two population centres: Colombo and Matara. We used multiple recruitment methods, including posting “jobs” on online freelancing platforms, where we promised payment to workers who met our screening specifications and who consented to be part of the research. We also snowballed, and used the paid services of a market research firm. Finally, we attended “microwork training programs” run by third parties in Sri Lanka.

**Table 4:** Distribution of Sri Lankan sample by geography

Protocol type	City	Sample size	
		No. of protocols	No. of respondents (Total)
FGDs	Colombo	3	13
	Matara	1	5
	<b>Total</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>18</b>
IDI	Colombo	1	Same as Protocol No.
	Matara	0	
	<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>5</b>	<b>19</b>

Like our Indian sample, we found more male freelancers than females:

**Table 5:** Distribution of Sri Lankan sample by gender

City	Male	Female	Total
Colombo	7	7	14
Matara	4	1	5
<b>Sri Lanka Total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>19</b>

In terms of occupation, only one interviewee was a fulltime homemaker. Others included students, those otherwise employed fulltime, and those waiting for university results.

**Table 6:** Distribution of Sri Lankan female sample by occupation

Homemakers	1
Students	3
Other (incl. fulltime employed, awaiting university results)	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>8</b>

We also conducted two quantitative studies in Sri Lanka in 2016 to assess awareness of online freelancing and willingness to freelance online. To assess awareness, we conducted a nationally representative baseline survey with a sample size of 5,377. To assess willingness, we conducted another survey of 160 individuals with the potential to do online freelancing. For quantitative study details, see Galpaya, Perampalam and Senanayake (2017).

This paper mainly considers our qualitative work for the purposes of comparison between India and Sri Lanka.

### 3.3 Limitations

We could cover just two population centres in Sri Lanka and five in India. While our qualitative data is useful in identifying recurring trends, it is not nationally representative in either country. Due to practical constraints, we restricted the online freelancers we studied to those working on dedicated platforms such as Upwork, Fiverr etc. and those obtaining work via other online means, including social media sites. We could not include gig workers on platforms such as Uber.

## 4. Findings

We saw no major differences between the Sri Lankan and Indian responses regarding gender. Therefore, we considered both countries' data together.

### 4.1 Women's attitudes to freelancing

Most of the women interviewed had a positive attitude towards online freelancing. A common report was that female homemakers liked balancing online freelancing with childcare. This is due to the time and location flexibility of online work. "If I am not sleepy [...] I can work. If the kid is sleeping in the afternoon I can work. If I don't have to cook, I can work," one Indian female homemaker told us. Hence, online freelancing also helped combat boredom and pass "down-time" at home. A Sri Lankan female freelancer who was married with a baby explained that she would rather do online work from home than go to a physical workplace. Another Indian female homemaker commented that her family does not allow her to leave home to work, so doing online work helps overcome that restriction – "why should I become a dump sitting at home?" – implying that she would be wasting her time and potential by not working. One Sri Lankan female respondent (unmarried at the time of the interview) opined that online work might be preferable to fulltime work for women after marriage and having children:

*"I actually do not like for a girl after marriage to do a big profession. I mean like when we have a family and when we have children we need to be connected to them. [...] Either mother or a father must be with the children."*

Many stated that online freelancing gave them confidence and some financial independence. "The most important benefits which we have gained by working as freelancer is that we become very confident. Now we

are independent,” a female Indian freelancer declared. Others pointed to the opportunity online freelancing afforded them to earn money for themselves and their families. One Indian female freelancer told us that she did not tell her husband about her online work, even editing her project history to hide it – “I don’t want to share my money with my husband, I want to invest, [for] my future investment.”

However, this does not mean that online freelancing is always a perfect substitute for regular work. One Indian female homemaker said she sometimes felt frustrated with her online job because she felt cooped up at home – “Sometimes I don’t like what I’m doing. I want to go out.” In addition, online freelancing cannot completely overcome the restrictions of childcare responsibilities, despite flexible work time. We learned from a Sri Lankan female homemaker that a young child constrains the kind of work one can do because of how time-consuming childcare is. Therefore, she only takes smaller projects like creating logos and visiting cards but avoids bigger projects like brochures. She also usually works around 1:00-4:00am, which is not always an easy working time.

Interestingly, we saw one inversion of the traditional gender dynamic. One male freelancer said that he freelances fulltime, but his wife has a regular fulltime job. He noted, “I have flexibility because my wife is working in a proper organization.” Since he has flexible hours, he stated that he is more involved with childcare, including picking his child up from school. In fact, having to take care of his child was one of his motivators behind taking up online freelancing.

We did not observe gender-based differences in the attitudes to online freelancing of male and female students or those engaged in fulltime freelancing or other fulltime work.

#### **4.2 Family attitudes**

One of the most prominent findings was that the women’s families tended to approve of their freelancing. Online freelancing was seen as good work for women because they could work from home and balance work with family responsibilities. “[My family is] happy that we are not going out and working from home,” an Indian female freelancer told us. An Indian female student explained that her family was proud of her for balancing her work and studies. Due to financial difficulties at home, she found her earnings from online freelancing helpful in financing her studies.

This was in marked contrast to family attitudes towards male freelancers. “[My family] think[s] I am unemployed,” one Indian male freelancer reported. Several Indian male freelancers noted that men were seen as family heads, and that freelance work was deemed irresponsible. Many men attributed this to traditional societal expectations of what a “proper” job is – 9-to-5 hours in an office with a regular monthly salary. A Sri Lankan female freelancer explained, “For a girl of course staying at home and doing these types of work is not a problem because no one is going to ask us why we are staying at home. But if you take a boy, it differs.” Hence, the man-as-breadwinner and woman-as-homemaker stereotype still influences how the appropriateness of online freelancing is seen for both genders.

However, not all families disapprove of men freelancing. Some men noted that as long as they earned money from their freelancing jobs, their families did not object. One Sri Lankan male freelancer told us that while his family did not initially support his freelance work, but changed their minds when he started making more money. Nor is there universal family approval for female freelancers. One Sri Lankan female freelancer explained that her mother was not comfortable with her doing Information Technology (IT)-related work.

Likewise, another Sri Lankan female freelancer (who held a fulltime job) told us that her husband and daughters thought that freelancing was “useless and [...] a waste of time. [...] When I’m at the computer, they don’t think that I’m working. They think that I’m watching films and listening to music.” One Sri Lankan female freelancer also recalled that when she used to produce short films and music videos, she felt judged for not doing socially respectable work for a girl. She felt that now that she has taken up a teaching job, she gets more respect. Therefore, while we did see a narrative of generally more positive perceptions of female than male freelancers, this was certainly not absolute.

#### **4.3 Gender disparities in online freelancing**

Our qualitative data did not reveal major differences in how men and women are treated in the online workplace, as reported by female freelancers. One female freelancer from India believed that women could be

more at risk for payment denial by clients because of perceptions that women are more reluctant to fight back. Another Indian female freelancer commented “But yeah, sometimes men [clients] do try to have explicit talks just because you’re a girl.” However, while these statements are noteworthy, they did not represent recurring trends in the data.

However, we did find that online work is largely male dominated. Most of the freelancers we encountered in our qualitative research were young, male university graduates. A Sri Lankan female homemaker told us that she knew men who worked on online platforms, but no women. In both India and Sri Lanka, we were able to recruit far more male than female freelancers. Furthermore, our quantitative data from Sri Lanka showed that women are less aware of online freelancing than men (21% against 32%), and females were less willing than males to work online (8% against 14%). However, we also found that 71% of the women who were aware of online freelancing were willing to do online work, suggesting that lack of awareness was a significant barrier to women doing online freelancing.

## **5. Discussion**

Female online freelancers from different walks of life have used freelancing to supplement their income, gain financial independence, and navigate restrictions or family obligations placed on them. Women who engage in online digital work are generally satisfied with the opportunity to work, even in a constrained environment, as they can take on work remotely and as and when it suits them, make use of their education and skills, and contribute to household income. Additionally, wider social perceptions of this kind of work for women appear to be largely positive in these countries.

There are still barriers to getting women involved in online freelancing and even bigger barriers to closing the gender gap in labour force participation in both countries. One of the initial barriers is the gender gap in internet use. These accessibility gaps need to be addressed first to increase female participation in the online workplace. Secondly, there are limitations to the empowerment online freelancing offers. While online freelancing can give women, especially homemakers, some kind of financial independence, this is still often within a relatively controlled environment in which their families expect the women’s main priority to be family responsibility and prefer them to work at home rather than take fulltime jobs. While online freelancing may give them some freedom in the digital space, they are still largely constrained to their homes physically. Larger cultural constraints, in which the expectation that the bulk of family responsibilities fall on women, are still present.

## **6. Conclusion**

Through online freelancing, women’s labour force participation could be bolstered. This will not only have implications for Sri Lanka and India’s GDP growth, but can also assist in achieving many of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that both countries have committed to. In fact, MGI estimates an increase of 26% to global annual GDP if women’s contributions to the labour force were on par with men (MGI, 2015). The same report states that India would benefit the most through a significant rise in GDP if the gender gap in labour participation was bridged.

For this to happen, however, women’s access to and awareness of online work needs to be improved. Nor can online freelancing be wholly relied on to close the labour force participation gender gap. Online freelancing can be a good “stop-gap” measure to include more women in the labour force in the short term. However, in the long term, larger structural and cultural changes need to occur so that the burden of caregiving on women is distributed more evenly, and women are recognized as workers, and not solely as caregivers.

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