

Digitally-enabled work opportunities and women's empowerment¹

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1 Introduction

The technological advancements of the recent decades, including the expansion of the gig economy have given rise to increasing numbers of opportunities for flexible work for both men and women across the globe. Opportunities range from ridesharing to online freelancing to running home-based businesses with the help of social media and logistics platforms. The growth in opportunities for digital work have expanded considerably after the advent of the Covid-19 Pandemic (ILO, 2021). Flexible work arrangements – such as those offered by the gig economy—have long been argued as an enabler of women's increased and sustained participation in the labour market. This is particularly pertinent for countries like Sri Lanka, which have tussled with low female labour force participation (LFP) rates over the years. Many have argued that these opportunities are especially advantageous for women, enabling flexibility in terms of time, location, and the conditions of work, allowing for greater LFP and wide opportunities for socio-economic empowerment (OECD, 2018; Silim & Stirling, 2014; World Bank, 2019).

This paper seeks to explore the impact that such opportunities are having on women's empowerment in Sri Lanka. The paper takes a broad approach to empowerment, based on Kabeer's framework of empowerment. Empowerment can be viewed as the process of change leading to an improved ability to make strategic life choices (Kabeer, 1999), that is choices which affect important aspects of an individual's life, such as whether to work, where to work, whether to get married, etc. Kabeer articulates three dimensions through which empowerment takes place: improved resources and improved agency, ultimately leading to improved achievements or outcomes (i.e., the end goal). The end outcomes are

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mediated through ‘structures of constraint’ such as norms and institutions. Section 2.3 further elaborates on the framework.

This paper presents evidence of empowerment in the form of improved ‘achievements’ through improvements in resources and agency. The paper is based on qualitative research conducted in 2021 among women engaged in digitally mediated earning opportunities in Sri Lanka. For example, women participating in paid work, running successful businesses of their own, not just in traditionally ‘feminised’ sectors (i.e., overcoming gender segregation in these sectors), but also those where women have generally been absent, such as transportation, tech and others. The paper also examines changes to the ‘structures of constraint’

However, there is also evidence of instances where existing gender inequalities and norms in the labour market are actually being reinforced through digitally enabled work. This includes norms relating to women’s mobility, distribution of care work, skills and earnings gaps, inter alia. This paper will provide evidence of such instances, and attempt to provide recommendations as to what might be done to counter some of these, to ensure more balanced labour outcomes for women from the digital economy.

The balance of this paper is organised as follows: Section 2 provides an overview of the context of women and the labour market in Sri Lanka, gender norms and the platform economy, and introduces the empowerment framework on which this paper is framed. Section 3 summarises the methods used in conducting the research that the paper is based on. Section 4 presents the findings. Section 5 concludes.

2 Literature and context

2.1 The Sri Lankan labour market context: Inequalities and norms

Despite achieving gender parity in education at primary, secondary and tertiary level, Sri Lanka’s gender outcomes in economic participation are sub-par. In 2023, it ranked 115th (out of 146) on the Economic Participation and Opportunity sub-index of the World Economic Forum’s Gender Gap Index (World Economic Forum, 2023). Women are increasingly absent from the labour market. Women are under-utilized and disincentivized to participate. Sri Lanka has grappled with a low and declining female LFP rate for many years now. Women’s LFP has lingered between 30 and 35% over the past two decades, compared to men’s, exceeding 70% (World Bank, 2023); the most recent estimate is 33% (World Bank 2023a). Women who *do* participate in the labour market have

consistently been more likely to be unemployed over time, with unemployment rates of 79% in 2021 compared to 3.8% for men (World Bank, 2023); young and educated women are among those more likely to be unemployed (World Bank, 2018). Those who *are* employed, are more likely to be in low productivity, low quality jobs, often non-waged, or earning less than men in similar jobs often in the informal sector. In 2021, 49.7% of employed women were in the informal sector in Sri Lanka (Department of Census and Statistics, 2021).

Women's lack of participation has been attributed to several factors, including the domestic care burden falling onto women, skills mismatches, and gender discrimination in- and outside of the labour market (UN Women, 2022). The lack of childcare resources in most workplaces is another limiting factor (UN Global Compact, n.d.).

Furthermore, women are discouraged and restricted from participation by labour laws which limit the number of hours women can work at night, and which restrict overtime work for women; the absence of laws which adequately address sexual harassment is another deterrent (Bakmiwewa, 2021). The absence of labour laws which recognize part-time and flexible work also acts as a barrier, limiting the availability of such work opportunities, which are more often sought out by women for greater work-life balance. Recent data indicates that women in Sri Lanka are twice as likely to engage in part-time work than men (Advocata Institute, 2022). As such, those engaged in non-standard employment (including gig workers) are not covered by the legal protections afforded to those in full time employment, and are at greater risk of exploitation (Bakmiwewa, 2021). While calls have been made to update the legal framework to enable such arrangements (*Sri Lanka to change laws*, 2017; *Incorporate flexi-work*, n.d.), to date little substantive progress is evident.

Seneviratne (2019) observes “that women have been drawn into the workforce through falling fertility rates, rising tertiary education, and declining income effects among younger generations, but other factors have undermined this positive trend. Educational attainment reduces married women's labor supply except at the tertiary level, consistent with social stigmas associated with married women in non-white-collar employment.” In a recent study for UN Women, Gunatilaka and Chandrasiri (2022) pointed out that “the gender-based segregation of the labour market on sectoral and occupational lines powerfully conditions the relative demand for female labour. The relatively high demand for low-skilled workers seems to be influenced by the occupational structures of subsectors in manufacturing and services and the relatively low capital, R&D, and possible technological

intensity, of their operations. Subsector-specific factors also seem to underlie the high demand for female workers in the finance and banking, education, health and social services subsectors” (p. 95). Occupational segregation often happens as a result of gender-biased norms and attitudes as well as laws which limit the jobs and sectors that women can work in; this leads to women being limited to occupations with low pay, higher levels of precarity and low growth prospects (ILO, 2018); the domestic and care work sectors are examples of ‘feminized’ sectors.²

Women also face mobility and safety concerns, including transport and getting from one place to the next. A 2015 United Nations Population Fund Survey contained the sobering finding “that 90% of the female respondents were affected by sexual harassment in public buses and trains at least once in their lifetime” (UNFPA 2018, Foreward). Most of the respondents in the study also used public transport to reach places of education and work (UNFPA 2018, p.17). Given that public transport is a crucial infrastructure in getting people to work, high levels of sexual harassment could potentially serve as a barrier or deterrent to women working. Hence, remote work may be seen as a more appealing option since it can be done from the safety of the home. A recent IFC study on “Women and Ride-hailing in Sri Lanka” observed that ride-hailing had opened up increased opportunities for women’s mobility; for instance: “ Fifty-one percent of women riders said that they are able to work more frequently thanks to ride-hailing; 64 percent said that they can access more job opportunities or better jobs; and 88 percent said ride-hailing gives them access to new places” (IFC 2020, p.9). However, these benefits are not evenly distributed; “men continue to cite these benefits at even higher rates than women” (p. 9).

Human capital mismatch for women is a further issue, where “Although higher education is even more strongly associated with increased chances of female labor force participation (FLFP) than it was a decade ago, it also is associated with a decline in women’s acquisition of medium-skill and especially high-skill jobs. In other words, the gender gap in education as an avenue to obtaining higher-skill jobs expanded between 2009 and 2015 to increasingly favor men” (Solotaroff et al. 2020, p. 60). In other words, while women’s education levels are rising, this is not necessarily translating into employment opportunities in higher skilled jobs.

Women’s participation in the digital economy has improved significantly since pre-pandemic times. For example, by 2021 Sri Lankan women were only 7% less likely to be

² <https://lac.unwomen.org/en/stories/noticia/2022/09/el-trabajo-domestico-y-de-cuidados-conforman-un-sector-feminizado-con-alta-informalidad-y-bajos-salarios>

online than men, compared to 34% less likely in 2019 (LIRNEasia, 2019; LIRNEasia, 2021). However, deficiencies and gender gaps digital skills needed for a meaningful internet experience are lacking. For instance, 42% of women online (compared to 32% of men) were unable to install an app independently (or at all); 47% of women (and 41% of men) were unable to set up an account and passwords for a service online; and 80% of women online (and 78% of men), did not know how to complete a payment or transaction online (Galpaya & Zainudeen, 2022).

2.2 Gender norms, work and the platform economy

Feminist theory has long been concerned with the role of women in the world of work, from women's experiences in the workplace to the kind of paid and unpaid labor in both the workplace and the home women have been expected to undertake. As Rahman et al. (2023) point out, "Feminism has always been preoccupied with work; the early demands of the women's movement had to do with better working conditions and fairer wages, and in some contexts, even the right to work outside the home. But one might argue that those early demands were still predicated on the structures of work as defined within patriarchal norms" (p. 19). Both the first and second waves of feminism were concerned with "how to handle the public/private split of capitalist societies in which women's reproductive functions have either limited their work to the home or created a "second shift" problem of unpaid housework and childcare as well as waged work" (Ferguson et al. 2023). Even while some of the barriers to women working have diminished and more and more women enter the workforce, cultural norms where women are traditionally expected to take on unpaid care and housework still continue to pose challenges to women's income-earning activities. This has been particularly prevalent in South Asia (Das and Desai 2003; Desai and Jain 1994; Das 2006; Göksel 2013; Jaeger 2010; Panda 1999; Klasen 2018), where in addition to religion and geography, caste plays a role in the cultural expectations of women (Sharma, 1985). However a dichotomy is seen in the Asian context, where women of wealthier families who are bound by traditional gender roles (Desai and Jain 1994) whereas those from less privileged backgrounds (including low income, low caste, etc.) are more likely to participate regardless, out of economic necessity (Eswaran et. al, 2013).

Similar norms are also evident in Sri Lanka (Gunewardena 2015; Gunatilaka 2013). While some point to a lack of nationally representative data on this in the Sri Lankan context (e.g., Perera, 2017), reports suggest that the burden of unpaid care work disproportionately increased for women during the during the Covid-19 lockdowns in Sri Lanka (Centre for Poverty Analysis, 2020; Salman, 2021).

Therefore, we may argue that platform work, rather than alleviating the problem of gender inequality in the realm of work, has simply shifted the issue into a new domain. As Gerber 2022's above quoted analysis found, there is still an undervaluing of women's work (women are more represented in the share of lower income work). The challenges increase when one factors in other socioeconomic factors such as poverty, which may be particularly pertinent to the developing world. As observed by Beneria et al. (2003, p. 27), "The connection between gender justice and economic justice, even if not always direct, is not difficult to trace. It is often poor women who are most affected by restricted reproductive rights and rich women who most benefit from increased representation and openings in the political arena. Similarly, the negative effects of poverty for women can be intensified as the result of unequal gender-related distribution of resources within the household." Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic appears to have severely impacted working women, including through increased caregiving responsibilities at home (Bateman and Ross 2020). Recent US Department of Labor research has quantified the impacts of care giving on mothers' lifetime earnings; according to the research, in the US, a mother's lifetime earnings are 15% less on average due to care giving, not accounting for reduced retirement income (Johnson, Smith & Butrica, 2023); one could surmise that the impact may be greater in the Global South where larger shares of women work in informal sectors (UN Women, n.d.).

In principle, the online platform economy has the potential to be a "social equalizer" (Hoang et al. 2020), by opening up new opportunities for marginalized groups, including women, to earn an income. Although one might expect that the remote, flexible nature of platform work may draw women, who often are in the position of having to balance care work with income earning, the picture is more complicated. Populations who have been disadvantaged traditionally are often disadvantaged in online spaces as well (Lutz, 2019). For instance, in a study on female platform workers in the United States and Germany, Gerber (2022) found that "Female survey participants earned a greater share of an overall lower income through crowd work. They more often reported feeling economically dependent on crowd work, working flexible hours, and having atypical or no other employment aside crowd work. While voicing a stronger desire for alternatives, they were also more likely to perceive crowd work as a long-term option." While online spaces can provide new ways of working, underlying traditional norms around women and work appear to still be pervasive.

Despite these implications, the effect of gender on platform work has been relatively understudied (Kampouri 2022), which provides an opportunity for new research. In particular, there is a dearth of studies on female platform workers in the Global South. Some qualitative work has been done on the experiences of female online freelancers in Sri Lanka and India (see for example Bandaranayake et al. 2020), and other Global South countries (Dewan and Sanyal, 2023). The present study seeks to present further insights and analysis on the situation in Sri Lanka.

We can make several observations based on the above literature review. Even though women are increasingly able to access higher levels of education, this has not necessarily translated into higher labor force participation in Sri Lanka. Traditional norms and expectations that women be primarily responsible for housework and childcare have limited their ability to participate in the workforce, especially after having children. Sexual harassment on public transport continues to be a widespread issue, and while ride-hailing has opened up more transport opportunities for women, the benefits still seem to accrue more to men.

While there is hope that platform work may help reduce some of these inequalities, it appears that some of the inequalities that exist in the offline world have simply migrated to the online world. The literature on gender and platform work is still sparse, especially in the Global South. Our study will contribute to bridging this gap in the literature.

2.3 An empowerment framework

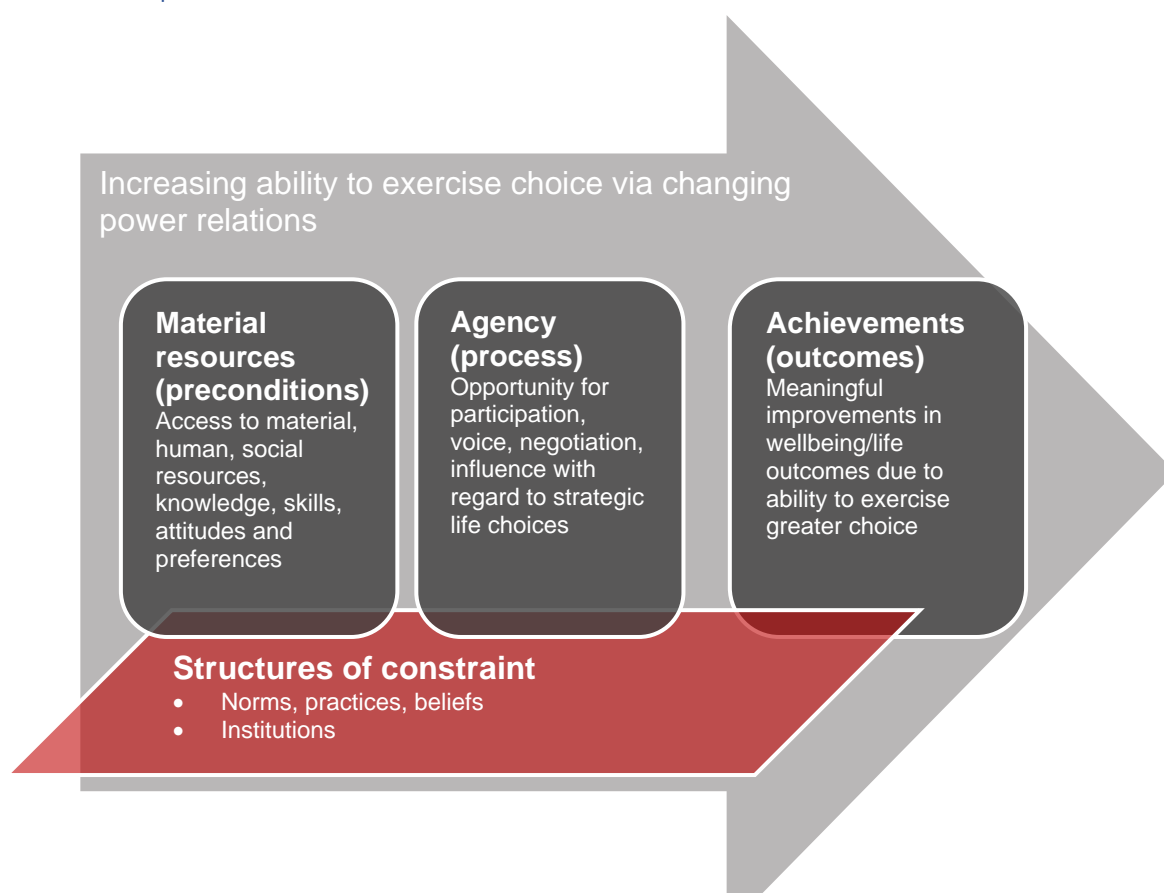


Figure 1: Framework for empowerment

Source: Author's illustration based on Kabeer (1999).

Kabeer's definition of women's empowerment relates to the 'processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability' (1999; p.437). Kabeer notes some defining aspects, that firstly the process entails change (starting *from* a disempowered position), and secondly, that the notion of *choice* implies the 'possibility of alternatives' or the ability to exercise meaningful choice (p.437). Thirdly, Kabeer limits the concept to choices of greater significance which can affect their lives – these include *strategic* life choices such as whom to marry, choice of livelihood, etc – all which have the potential to transform the parameters of an individual's life. A further elaboration conceives women's empowerment as the changing of power relations such that women's experiences and outcomes change with regards to three factors: (1) their access to material resources; (2) their agency; and (3) the achievements which result from being able to exercise choice (1999; Figure 1). Kabeer argues that the end outcomes are mediated by 'structures of constraint' which include norms and institutions which are often inherently gendered, and thus impact the process of empowerment, and shape the end outcomes. A further caveat is the need to distinguish between differences in choices versus the inability to exercise choice, perhaps both leading to the same visible outcome, or achievement.

2.4 Digitally enabled work opportunities and empowerment

In the context of this framework, this paper tries to answer two questions:

1. Are digitally-enabled work and earning opportunities changing women's access to material resources, agency and achievements?
2. Are digitally-enabled work and earning opportunities changing the 'structures of constraint' that affect empowerment outcomes?

For the purposes of this study, digitally-enabled work is considered to include work and other income-earning opportunities that are mediated through a digital platform. A broad

definition of digital platforms is used to include on one end of the spectrum general/multi-purpose platforms such as social media, messaging platforms, delivery and logistics platforms, and on the other end of the spectrum digital work platforms such as ride hailing platforms and online freelancing platforms. The types of work that women were seen to engage in loosely fell into three categories:

1. Location-based work (e.g., uber driving, beauty services), where the worker's physical presence is required at the location where the good or service is provided
2. Non-location-based work (e.g., online freelancing, microwork) where the job can be performed remotely
3. Digital businesses (e.g., home baking, handicraft production, etc.) where the good or service being sold is marketed and sold via digital platforms including social media.

3 Method

This paper is based on qualitative interviews with over 41 women in Sri Lanka engaged in various forms of digitally enabled work ranging from driving on ride-hailing platforms, to providing remote transcription services, to providing online tutoring, and selling home-produced items (baked goods, jewellery, etc.). The sample was largely made up of digitally enabled micro-entrepreneurs and non-location-based service providers (Table 1), from different age, socio-economic and ethnic groups. Only a small number of women providing location-based services could be included due to the difficulty in finding them; this is perhaps reflective of their prevalence in the population. Other than for those providing driving services on ride-sharing platforms, most of the respondents accessed their clients through social media and offline networks, as opposed to sector-specific platforms. A small number of men (six) were also sampled to help understand specifically which aspects of the findings are gendered in nature.

Table 1: Primary category of work of female respondents

Digital entrepreneurs	Micro-entrepreneurs	11
	Creative entrepreneurs	7
	Home chefs/food entrepreneurs	7
Non-location-based service providers	Micro-workers / online freelancers	8
	Online tutors	2
Location-based service providers	Transport/delivery/logistic workers	4
	Beauty worker	2

Total women sampled	41
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Interviews with 11 platform companies were also conducted, including ride-hailing platforms, online freelancing platforms, and marketplace platforms; these interviews provided some insight into the types of work that women engage in on their platforms, and how they engage with the platforms.

The research was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic (between April and July 2021), which expanded opportunities to work remotely for many, also pushed many to find new ways to supplement household income. Interviews were conducted remotely –either by phone call or video call—in Sinhala, Tamil and English (depending on the respondent’s preference).

4 Findings

The research findings section delves into the examination of two research questions within the framework presented in this paper. Firstly, it explores the impact of digitally-enabled work and earning opportunities on achievements through improvements to material resources and agency. Secondly, it investigates whether these digital opportunities are reshaping the norms, practices, beliefs and institutions, that have traditionally constrained women’s achievements through improved material resources and agency. Through an in-depth analysis of qualitative data, this section sheds light on the transformative potential of digitally enabled work opportunities in the context of women’s empowerment.

4.1 Impact of digitally enabled work and earning opportunities on material resources

Improvements in access to material resources were seen in terms of increasing incomes, access to market information, improved skills and experience, as well as improved social networks.

Digitally-enabled work led to many instances of women’s increasing incomes. Some reported being able to earn higher incomes than what was possible in other jobs. For example, one taxi driving digital worker reported earning far more operating her taxi on platforms than she did in a regular job working in a canteen. An online freelancer said she was able to renovate her house with her earnings. Both of these cases were in spite of the Covid-19 pandemic. However, when the the 2022 Sri Lankan economic crisis unfolded,

many lines of these work were affected due to inflation, stagnation in demand and lack of products/raw materials.

Access to market information was improved for many through access to platforms. This was mainly in terms of information on work opportunities – both location and non-location based work. Access to market information has been enhanced through various online platforms for non-location based workers. Several platforms provide details of professionals, who provides specific services. A digital marketer mentioned “when it comes to my work, I may need voice artists, I may need to know some people of that sort. Then I go on [the respondent mentioned several online platforms] and check who is there”. The digital marketer connects with professionals through the information available on platforms.

Some reported improving their skills and products through the increased use of social media (e.g., new mehindi designs and formulae being learnt from Instagram), while others reported that the digitally enabled work that they engaged in gave them the necessary experience as a stepping stone in their career path. For example an online tutor indicated that the teaching experience gained online would help her to obtain a job in the education field, for instance University lecturing or a job at Ministry of Education. .

Improved professional-social networks have also been seen for example through collaborations among digital entrepreneurs to boost online social media profiles. Those that would conventionally be considered as competitors, are more often seen as peers, who online sellers and entrepreneurs find community in. These kind of collaborations can be mutually beneficial.

Professional relationships were also seen to be developed with delivery services. Some have been successful in developing customer networks, leveraging on for example old school networks, other family member’s networks, etc. One entrepreneur that uses social media platforms to promote her coconut husk business reported that these platforms had led to her being able to expand her business and gain access to international customers also.

These all prove useful in building confidence, trust, and also leading to more sales/earning opportunities.

4.2 Impact of digitally enabled work and earning opportunities on agency

Improvements in agency can come in the form of improvements in an individual's ability to affect their 'strategic life decisions' through improved opportunities for participation, voice, negotiation and influence. In this regard, improvements in intangible factors such as confidence, and status (social and within the family) can contribute toward a woman's ability to affect those decisions.

Improved social mobility could be seen among women who came from lower socio-economic classification groups, whereby businesses have helped in this mobility. One woman gave an example where she had been invited for various community programs and conferences for small business owners based on her experience. Another respondent related how she had seen an improvement in the social recognition of her profession after posting videos of her work online:

“At the start we were not given recognition as people said that coconut husk business is not a respectable work but after I started posting videos in social media I was given respect. People in my area have seen my videos and they praise me, they won't know what is happening inside the factory as they don't visit my factory, as they are careless on what is happening, but there are outside people who have visited my factory and seen our inside work, the school I work for requested my permission to bring the school students.”

- Micro entrepreneur, 34, female, Sri Lanka

Other interviews revealed where women had seen their stature had improved in the family; a home-baker spoke of her family members being impressed she was able to do things by herself after starting her business. Improvements in social status (with the wider community) was seen more in rural settings, while improvements within the family were more likely to be seen in urban settings.

Another example through which agency can be improved is through improved confidence, as seen among some respondents to go forth and do new things, or things that they were previously not confident to do. One 21 year old micro-trader who had built a successful bulk clothes distribution business through social media in Jaffna stated that earlier she would require her father to accompany her out of the house whereas now she had the confidence to go by herself. She also had the confidence to counsel and advise young women who made-up her distribution network on their personal issues; she noted that they now looked up to her as a kind of role model.

There were examples of some women who were now – as a result of their work-- more involved in household decision making, or consulted when there are problems in the household, due to her personal growth. One woman stated that “...[in the past] on anything I used to ask my family [opinion]. But now my dad and brother always [tells] me to take the decision. They say that now I’m matured enough, hence decision making is left to me”. This confirms that increased confidence and maturity can lead to active role in household decision-making.

4.3 Impact of digitally enabled work and earning opportunities on achievements

The interviews conducted with workers revealed their achievements through the income derived from digitally enabled work opportunities. One prominent outcome reported by the workers is the attainment of financial stability. One food producer, highlighted the reliability of her income, stating that it consistently remained above a certain threshold, even during periods without high number of orders. This financial stability has provided these workers with a sense of security and confidence in meeting their basic needs.

A ride-hailing driver spoke about her platform income covering diverse financial obligations, including vehicle leasing costs, loan payments, household expenses, her child’s education, and emergency savings. As the primary breadwinner for her family, her income has become indispensable in ensuring her household’s financial well-being. The income has enabled individuals to pursue personal goals and aspirations. Another respondent engaged in data entry, for instance, directed her earnings primarily towards her child’s education, emphasizing the transformative impact of digitally enabled work opportunities in making meaningful investments in the future.

Digitally enabled work opportunities have facilitated the diversification of income streams for workers, reducing their reliance on a single source of income. A young online freelancer involved in multiple platforms, shared how she earned substantial income from both Upwork and online tuition work. This diversification has not only strengthened their financial security, but also provided greater flexibility in managing their finance needs.

It was evident that the workers’ earnings vary significantly. Some workers expressed that their income was not stable like a regular worker, and it fluctuates based on different periods, nature of their work, their customer base, and external factors such as pandemic. Some find it to be a stable and fulfilling source of income, while others face challenges in managing their finances or experiencing fluctuations in their earnings.

Digitally enabled work and earning opportunities have fulfilled diverse achievements for the workers through their income. For instance, a content creator has successfully established a smooth payment process for her business, ensuring financial stability. Through efficient handling of transactions, she has achieved a secure financial position. Further, she takes pride in supporting her family at a young age through her earnings. A 25 year old working simultaneously as an online tutor and a counsellor, has found a balance by combining her teaching job with personal classes, which allows her to earn significantly more and work towards her long-term goal of becoming a licensed therapist. By diversifying her work, she achieves financial stability and aligns her career aspirations with her earnings.

The interviews also revealed respondents' achievements for example, in terms of attaining goals, independence and self-efficacy. This was commonly expressed as achieving financial independence, and not having to be a burden on others. With this, some were able to contribute to their own costs, as well as contribute to their household and children's expenses – which they previously could not.

“...but I feel I have taken a weight off [my parents]. If I was doing nothing, I have to ask money from them. But now its isn't needed. I feel I've taken a weight off my mum.”

– 21 year old entrepreneur, Jaffna

Other examples of women achieving a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction include being able to create their own brand, seeing themselves grow, being “mentally and financially relaxed,” enjoying the work that they do, being able to use their artistic skills/express their creativity, as well as being able to travel, live healthier, and so on.

4.4 Structures of constraint

The previous sub-sections highlighted the improvements to women's conditions toward empowerment due to their engaging in digitally-enabled work and earning in Sri Lanka, as per the framework outlined in Section 2.3. The interviews also yielded examples of where digitally enabled work and earning opportunities affected the 'structures of constraint' which according to Kabeer (1999) constrain resources, agency and achievements; i.e., mediate the empowerment process. Such structures of constraint in this context can include the norms, practices and beliefs around women's participation in the labour market, and can also include institutional factors, such as how platforms are designed and operated. This sub-section examines these factors in further detail.

4.4.1 Perceptions and attitudes toward women's mobility

Mobility norms especially in the South Asian context tend to preference women staying within the home, so that they can attend to domestic and care (unpaid) responsibilities, but also to avoid having to use public transport (due to safety concerns, as noted earlier) and possibly to avoid social stigma. Many women spoke about a key advantage of digitally enable work opportunities being the ability to work from home. This perception, that working from home is a 'good' option for women, stems from the idea that they don't have to travel outside the home to be able to work; women themselves spoke about this as an advantage, and some also indicated that their families encouraged them to take up these kinds of opportunities. Most believe it is a good career choice that they can continue with even once they get married, and have children. One respondent's parents had actively discouraged her from attending an interview for a job that would take her out of the house. The option to work from home through digitally enabled work opportunities thus reinforces these mobility norms.

While platform-enabled work opportunities such as ridesharing and delivery provide women with the *opportunity* to break such mobility norms, the evidence suggests that this doesn't happen on a large scale; the wider social stigma associated with to taxi driving is a barrier to more women taking up these types of jobs – as reported by women as well as a major ride-hailing platform that was interviewed for the research.

4.4.2 Burden of unpaid care work

As much of the literature on women's work points toward, social norms in much of South Asia place the bulk of the burden of unpaid domestic and care work on women—as is the case in Sri Lanka (Gunewardena 2015; Gunatilaka 2013), leading to time poverty (UN Women, 2019). The interviews with women revealed that although women were taking up more earning responsibilities through digital opportunities, they felt that they were still expected to take on the unpaid domestic and care work roles. Given the flexible nature of the work, there is an implicit expectation to adjust, slot things in etc. and manage the 'triple burden' of unpaid domestic and care work, and paid labor. The appeal of flexible work, enabled by digital platforms thus increases for women with domestic and/or care responsibilities. Women increasingly taking up this kind of work has several important implications related to empowerment outcomes:

1. Women are increasingly engaged in informal work, often under precarious conditions, with no access to labor market protections and entitlements associated with full time formal employment. While digitally enabled work and earning opportunities provide them with opportunities to participate, these forms of work are not helping women to move into stable well with better working conditions.

*“It is not like a full-time job where I go and work somewhere even though I put a sick day I would get paid for that day so, it is bit of a difficult – not a nice ride I would say.”
“I got fever during that time and had to quarantine for 14 days... That was a challenge during that time – if I don’t do anything for the 14 days, I will lose my customers...”*

2. Due to the triple burden that many women face, together with relatively easy access to flexible work opportunities through digital means, it is evident that some women are working below their skill level. In order to avail of flexible work which allows them to balance their unpaid domestic and care work with paid work, they may select low-skilled tasks, as evidenced by one interviewee: a highly qualified MBA-holding mum of toddlers taking on low-cognitive demand translation and transcription services as a strategy to manage her triple burden. Women with fewer care responsibilities (often younger, unmarried women) were however able to spend time to advance their skill levels, keep up with digital marketing trends and so on, and progress to higher levels of achievement. But women with more care responsibilities can potentially stagnate and fall behind in terms of career progression, no different from women who may settle for lower-skilled, lower paying work in the ‘offline’ labor market after taking breaks for childbearing, and so on.
3. As a result of women choosing to work below their skill levels, taking on smaller, less cognitively demanding, lower pay jobs, this can potentially impact on their earnings capabilities online, compared to men’s, and over their lifetime. This happens due in part to self-selection into lower pay work, but also due to women not having the time to upskill or spend time on a digital marketing strategy that can boost business; this is where men and women with fewer care responsibilities go forward, making it harder for others to compete. Evidence from the US indicates that a mother’s lifetime earnings are 15% less on average due to care giving, not accounting for reduced retirement income (Johnson, Smith & Butrica, 2023); one could surmise that the impact may be greater in the Global South where larger shares of women work in informal sectors (UN Women, n.d.).

While it can be argued that in the absence of alternative earning opportunities – in particular when faced with job loss due to the pandemic and the Sri Lankan economic crisis of 2021 – these should not be discounted; however, the differential outcomes are reflective of the constraints faced by women.

4.4.3 Working in traditionally ‘feminized’ sectors

This study was not representative of women engaged in digitally enabled earning opportunities, nor was it meant to be. However, it was evident from interviews with women as well as interviews with digital work platform companies, that there is a clear gender divide in terms of the types of sectors that women versus men almost present in.

Similar to the offline labour market women were more often found in 'feminised' sectors such as food and catering, beauty work, online tutoring, etc. but prominently absent from sectors such as transport and logistic services.

Although digital platforms can facilitate women's participation in traditionally male-dominated sectors, as seen with the ride-sharing and delivery example, the wider social stigmas still act as a larger barrier. Women engaged in these kinds of work might do so at the displeasure of their extended family, or might hide their occupation from their neighbours. However, one ride-sharing woman interviewed indicated that once her income reached a certain level, her family members no longer minded that she engaged in this kind of work.

4.4.4 Low labor force participation in the long run

While opportunities for women –in the form of flexible, remote work—have expanded rapidly with the growth of the platform economy. Many respondents related experiences where accessing a digital platform – even a social media platform – allowed them the space to monetize a skill or passion that they had at a relatively low cost. However, it was observed that many of these ventures have been short-lived, either taken over by newer ventures, or shelved when an unexpected disruption to the household or family is experienced – such as sudden illness or even a pregnancy. This is especially true for time-poor women. While in the short run, there is potential for women's LFP to increase, it is questionable how sustainable and long-lasting this participation will be. In fact, the stress of balancing paid work on top of unpaid work, in the flexible set up can lead to taking on too much work, as indicated by some respondents; this can lead to overload, physical and mental health issues, and eventually burn-out in some cases. These can lead to women withdrawing from the labour force altogether, thus not having much of an impact on their labour force participation, and in turn achievements in the medium-long term.

5 Concluding thoughts

The research reveals that women, who engaged in digitally enabled work have empowered through improved access to material resources and improved agency; these factors have helped them to achieve financial stability and independence, to meet their financial responsibilities, as well as improve their skills and knowledge, confidence, and so on. Digitally enabled work opportunities have opened up opportunities for these workers to be empowered, however, largely stemming from the pre-existing norms and inequalities seen in the 'offline' labour market, structures of constraint tend mediate these outcomes.

An important implication of the research presented in this paper is that women can not be considered as one homogeneous group. Interviews with platform companies showed that platform companies mainly consider women participants on their platforms to be stay at home moms. The evidence shows that women with different levels of care responsibilities, and of different socio-economic groups face a different set of challenges. Companies need to take a broader view in how they perceive women, and design for them. As such, digital platforms – including digital work platforms, marketplace platforms, social commerce platforms – need to proactively disaggregate the data that they collect to better understand gender dynamics – e.g., which categories of women earn more, take on higher value work, spend more time working than others, etc.

The larger question, however is how can women's longer term engagement in the labour force be supported? While digital work and earning opportunities offer great potential for women to be empowered, as this paper has shown, these outcomes can be considered sub-optimal given the structural constraints that work in the opposite direction. A key reason for women to opt for online opportunities is their remote and flexible nature. As Dewan states: "a woman's choice to work from home is not entirely free; it is a constrained choice contingent on several factors including socio-cultural considerations" (2022, p.8). Sufficient work opportunities where women are not bound by these constraints in the 'offline' labor market do not exist for women to make real choices. Safe transportation, affordable child care, legislation that recognizes part-time/flexible work and extends entitlements and protections to those engaged in this kind of work, are some of the changes that are needed.

At the same time, efforts to help women to move to higher skill, higher pay jobs in the digital labour market are needed, through support in digital skills, financial literacy and other forms of support to help them grow and sustain their businesses. These kinds of efforts need to be designed for different categories of women (based on education/skill level, time poverty, at a minimum.), taking into account their specific needs and constraints that they face, in order to be effective.

A larger question is how do we shift the underlying social norms and stigmas which act as structures of constraint? These are indeed harder and larger problems to solve; but as in the case of the ride-sharing interviewee mentioned earlier, perhaps when they pay-off is great enough, the norms and stigmas might be overlooked.

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