



DECENT WORK AND GENDER: A STUDY OF GIG WOMEN WORKERS IN URBAN INDIA

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Abstract: *The rubric of work serves as a critical domain of inquiry into the human question. Decent Work is one of the compelling concerns of our times and the sector of gig economy is a significant site for the same.*

The gig economy is seen as a welcome and inevitable development creating new contexts of work and transforming the very nature of work. In India this sector has grown as urban Indians increasingly go online to access a range of services such as Urban Company—an app-based salon service.

Our paper explores the growing popularity and possibilities of this sector from the perspective of the doubly marginalized category of workers—lower rung and women—caught in the intersectionality trap of class and gender. These workers are invariably in the economic frontline to suffer the consequences of structural inequality and precarity. We examine whether Urban Company's promise of agency and financial autonomy for lower middle-class women workers in urban India is accompanied by trade-offs such as harassment, lack of safety, and absence of unionization. We bring the International Labour Organization's (ILO) standards of 'decent work'—that serves as a framework for ILO's 'country programme' in India—to bear upon 'women labour.'

Key Words: *Decent Work, Gender, India, Urban Company, Empowerment.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

Labour Reforms are underway in India. The Union Ministry of Labour and Employment is working on a policy to roll out four new Labour Codes. In 2019 and 2020, the Ministry revamped and amalgamated a set of 29 federal laws — four laws in the Wage Code, 9 laws in the Social Security Code, 13 laws in The Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, and 3 laws in the Industrial Relations Code. The benefits of these four Labour Codes will be available to workers of both organized and unorganized sector. (1) Out of these, the only code applying to gig and platform workers is the Social Security Code of 2020. (2) In a recent meeting (3) the Ministry proposed to ask aggregators and platform-running firms to ensure registration of all gig workers on the Labour Ministry's *e-Shram* portal which is the first national database of informal workers, including migrants, gig workers and agricultural labourers. The government is all set to roll-out the social security cover for gig workers. The codes, however, are yet to take effect because not all states have framed rules under the codes, as is required (4).

In India this sector has grown as urban Indians increasingly go online to access a range of services. The NITI Aayog, (5) describes gig workers as those engaged in livelihoods outside the traditional employer-employee arrangement. They can be classified into platform and non-platform-based workers. The former are those whose work is based on digital platforms. Non-platform gig workers are generally casual wage workers and own account workers in



the conventional sectors, working part time or full time. According to the NITI Aayog, in 2020, 21.77 lakh workers were engaged in the gig economy; this workforce is expected to expand to 2.35 crore (23.5 million) workers by 2029-30 (6).

The rubric of work serves as a critical domain of inquiry into the human question. Future of work is one of the compelling concerns of our times and the sector of gig economy is a significant site for the same. The gig economy is seen as a welcome and inevitable development creating new contexts of work and transforming the very nature of work. In India this sector has grown as urban Indians increasingly go online to access a range of services such as Urban Company—an app-based salon service. Since liberalization, the beauty industry has expanded and corporatized considerably. The market for beauty-enhancing products, beauty advice and services has grown in scale. This industry, on board the apps like Urban Company, is an interesting site for examining the transformed nature of work in the sector of gig economy.

Our paper explores the growing popularity and possibilities of this sector from the perspective of the doubly marginalized category of workers—lower rung and women—caught in the intersectionality trap of class and gender. These workers are invariably in the economic frontline to suffer the consequences of structural inequality and precarity. We examine whether Urban Company's promise of agency and financial autonomy for lower middle-class women workers in urban India is accompanied by trade-offs such as harassment, lack of safety, and absence of unionization. We bring the International Labour Organization's (ILO) standards of 'decent work'—that serves as a framework for ILO's 'country programme' in India—to bear upon women labour.

This paper is based on our research conducted in Delhi-NCR in May-October 2019 among female beauty workers—a subset of gig workers—in the Urban Company. We employed structured questionnaires and in-depth unstructured interviews with 27 workers; accessed media reports, websites to source secondary data. The study—from the perspective of female workers—focuses on the challenges, constraints, hurdles, opportunities for women in this sector.

Our analysis is divided into five sections. *Section 1* discusses the evolution of the concept of decent work since its first formulation by the ILO in 1999 and its subsequent embeddedness in the MDGs and SDGs. We also refer to the literature that examines its application to the gig economy. We also recount ILO's decent work programme in India. In *section 2* we outline key features of Urban Company and profile the female service partners. (7) In *section 3* we use the profiles to analyze the impact of Urban Company work for female service partners. The *concluding section* is a critical examination of whether that even though Urban Company falls short or fails to live up to the decent work standards, it has opportunities for women where they use this opportunity to empower themselves. This must be understood in context of Indian realities.

SECTION 1: THE CONCEPT OF DECENT WORK

At its one hundred and eightieth session held at Geneva on June 21, 2019, the ILO Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work was adopted. Keeping in view the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) the Declaration, recommended a human-centred approach to the future of work realized through investing in skills, jobs and social protection; institutions of the labour market ensuring adequate wages; limited working hours and safety and health conditions; supporting gender equality; and creating an enabling environment for sustainable enterprises, economic growth and decent work (8).

From its inception in 1999 till present, the concept of decent work has remained in the estimate of the ILO a critical measure for fulfilling its mandate. The ILO's conceptualization of decent work in 1999, (9) proposes securing decent work for women and men everywhere as its primary goal. It is considered as a global demand confronting political and business leadership worldwide, and a most widespread need, shared by people, families and communities in every society, at all levels of development. The Report, aiming to focus the energies of the ILO on this major problem of our time, seeks to reach this goal by fostering co-operation among three constituents viz. governments, workers and employers. Four strategic objectives at the heart of the decent work agenda are a) set and promote standards and fundamental principles and rights at work; b). create greater opportunities for women and men to decent employment and income; c). enhance the coverage and effectiveness of social protection for all; d). strengthen tripartism and social dialogue (10).



In 2007, decent work was added as an ‘afterthought’ to MDG Goal 1 to eradicate hunger and poverty. It was also seen as contributing to the achievement of other 8 MDGs in global fight against poverty.

In 2016 the ILO launched its 2030 Agenda. Outlining three dimensions of sustainability—economic, social and environmental—this lists 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal 8 of the Agenda, highlights the importance of decent work to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”. (11) It is recognized that decent work can serve the international community as a critical framework for tackling the many challenges confronting humanity, including those in the world of work.

The context in which decent work is assigned this responsibility is one of transformative changes in the world of work brought about by technological advances—artificial intelligence, automation, robotics—and the ensuing job losses and gains; obsolescence of old and creation of new skills, changes in demographics, the expansion or contraction of youth and aging populations impacting labour markets and social security systems (12). ‘Work-related technologies’ in form of gig work create ‘not there’ employment that leads to job fragmentation, precarisation, depersonalized accountability and new forms of app-based control via systems of ‘rating and tracking’ (13).

The characteristics of decent work are as follows: employment, social protection, workers’ rights and dialogue (14). The apparent clarity of four features of decent work is deceptive, not easy to operationalize as the category of labour itself has become more varied and disaggregated whereby the older concepts of formal-informal are not enough to capture the nature of the variedness. Any understanding of the decent work cannot take place without an understanding of the worker; and the category of the worker has transformed. Our study examines how these characteristics pertain in the work conditions and experience of UC women workers.

The concept of decent work figures in the State and Corporate Sector via the ILO. The ILO clearly has that programme in India (decent work country programme). The ILO’s DCWP—five-year duration—was adopted by the Indian state in 2007. Currently the fourth DCWP is running in India. It is crucial to bear the specificities and heterogeneity of the labour markets that shape the deficits and success of decent work, its appeal to workers, divergence of outcomes of decent work programmes (15).

At the heart of ILOs conceptualization of decent work are issues of development that feature a gender dimension. Thus, the strategic objectives of the decent work agenda are entrusted with the responsibility of realizing gender equality, social security, elimination of gender discrimination and gender justice.

In the Indian context, the gender dimension of decent work is reflected in a growing body of scholarship on economic development (16). Kelkar’s paper examines the lack of ‘decent work’ in context of women’s incorporation in global chains in Asia. She identifies two issues for advancing the ‘struggle of women workers for decent work’: confronting and changing the skill-based gender differentiation of labour force and an equitable sharing of household work through boosting infrastructure and sourcing efficient energy (17).

SECTION 2: URBAN COMPANY AND FEMALE SERVICE PARTNERS

India has emerged as one of the foremost countries in adopting digital technologies poised to revolutionize the eco-system and nature of work (18). Going by the spurt in the number of startups, India is doing well to translate the gains of a digital advancement into a vibrant gig economy. This can be attributed to the synergy between technology, digital economy and workforce (19). The supporting grid of the gig economy is the connectivity between consumers, workers and business via a tech-enabled platform (20).

One such start up, Urban Clap, now Urban Company (21) was started by Abhiraj Bhal, Varun Khaitan and Raghav Chandra in 2014. In a short period of 5 years, by 2019 it was valued at around \$ 480 million. It had drawn investments—to the tune of \$1.6 billion—from Accel partners, SAIF Partners and Ratan Tata, the chairman emeritus of Tata Sons. It was already serving in 18 cities in India, and Australia, UAE and Singapore by 2019 (22).

As of 2021, it is valued at \$ 2.8 billion. Backed by Prosus Ventures and Accel, the company is clocking 2.2 million average monthly orders with an average order value of Rs.1290. The company functions within two categories: 1). beauty and wellness that includes spa services and salon along with laser hair reduction; 2). home repairs and maintenance, comprising plumbing, electrical work, carpentry, cleaning, pest control, appliance repair and painting (23). The revenue model of urban clap is based on commissions on the fee paid to service professionals and the sale of beauty products used by the professionals.



Earlier this year in March 2024, the company announced its fifth ESOP (Employee Stock Ownership Plan) secondary sale programme worth 203 crores. In June 2024, Dharna Capital invested Rs 400 crore in Urban Company by acquiring shares from the at-home service platform's employees and shareholders in an ESOP liquidity plan. It is serving in 18 cities in India and three international markets—UAE, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and Singapore. In 2022, Urban Company had exited Australia after operating there for three years. Urban Company claims that the earnings of its service partners had increased 13-18% in the October 2023 over the same quarter of 2021. Currently the company has around 57,000 active partners on its platform with an average monthly income of Rs.24,845 (24).

Nine years down the road, the Urban Company is present in 4 countries and 63 cities. It has created opportunities for more than 55000 Service Partners to be part of a formal economy; it has served 10 + million customers globally (25).

Khaitan, one of the co-founders of Urban Company, is upbeat about the prospects of the gig economy; its impulse to draw people into the rural-urban migration stream, ring in democratic and inclusive work opportunities and formation of the middle class. From the point of view of type of worker, the gig economy is viewed as enabling the informal labour force of unskilled, semi-skilled and skilled workers to surmount the entry barriers into the 'formal' labour segment.

Urban Company has more than 52,000 workers across Indian cities, one third—36%—of whom are women. Based on an internal survey, the company claims that its service partners in the central and western regions of the country have seen the highest monthly net earnings with female service partners earning 15% more than men; one of the key drivers being the company's commitment to partner enablement through training and upskilling (26).

Urban Company's pay-to-work model provides 'independent partners' with a customer base and professional training. In public perception and media discourse, Urban Company has secured its position as a reputed go-to platform for services; but, since 2021, it is in the eye of protests from its female service partners—an indicator of workers' dissatisfaction with the company.

More than 100 women working with Urban Company as beauticians went on strike outside its Gurugram office against the company in 2021 on the issue of low wages, high commissions collected by the firm and poor safety working conditions, the hike in commission charges to 35%; lack of insurance benefits and assignment of night work coupled with the company's mandate that these women purchase highly priced beauty products from the company instead of the market. They allege they are charged Rs. 2000 if they do less than 30 jobs in a month (27). Reportedly over 300 women who went on strike faced 'targeted action by either having their accounts 'shadow blocked' or deactivated (28). In a first nationwide labour action by female gig workers in India, thousands of Urban Company's female employees, backed by the All India Gig Workers' Union took to streets in July 2023 in about half a dozen Indian cities to protest unfair responses and rating requirements that led to their accounts being blocked. Last year the platform rolled out new rules that workers maintain ratings of 4.7 or higher out of 5 and accept 70 % of job leads with only 4 cancellations allowed in a month to avoid getting blocked (29). The workers incur multiple costs before they qualify for jobs, including training fees, onboarding fees, product fees and a monthly subscription fee to get a guaranteed quota of jobs, averaging about 50,000 rupees (about \$600). Additionally, for every job, UC also takes a commission fee of up to 25% in service charges and taxes. Workers are not compensated for travel costs or vehicle rents (30).

SECTION 3: URBAN COMPANY FEMALE SERVICE PARTNERS AND GIG WORK

In the shifting work landscape, it is difficult to categorize app-based platform work. For example, is platform-based work a job in a traditional sense, is it a part time job, is it a 'new form of activity' should it be categorized as 'income-generating' work? (31). Our question is not how common this work is; but why is it 'attractive' to women? In what ways does this work reshape their working lives and families?

There are some obvious benefits. As Urban Company service partners, women get access to public spaces in ways in which these women were not doing earlier. For example, they learn to walk alone, negotiate the outside world unescorted by a male. Being in the public is an empowering act for these women, the import of which gets magnified when it is viewed as an exercise of citizenship rights (32).

As Urban Company service partner no. 25 said, "I overcame my hesitation in talking to a male stranger on my own." Empowerment for these women comes in various forms, it is also about the escape from the drudgery of domestic work and monotony of domesticity. Urban Company service partner no. 3 spoke about how she looks forward to being in the ladies' compartment of the metro railway where she enjoys chit chats and glances. Empowerment also comes in the form of transitioning from the secondary status of wife/daughter/sister to thinking of oneself as a role model. UC



service partner no. 7 said that woman in her neighbourhood expressed their admiration for her enterprise and envied the flexible nature of her job (33). This point is also echoed in the experience of most Urban Company workers.

This Urban Company work creates contexts for interactions beyond the family and kinship networks thereby facilitating the possibilities of modern forms of relatedness: in a matter-of-fact tone Urban Company service partner no. 19 disclosed that she met her fiancé at the Metro station. On a similar line, Urban Company service partner no.11 confided that she uses the excuse of Urban Company work to go on dates with her boyfriends.

The women's salary in lower middle-class families is not the secondary wage (34). Urban Company has raised the status of women's wages from secondary to primary wage status. The primary source of empowerment for the Urban Company female worker is her income. This combined with her new-found consciousness gives her greater confidence to claim her income as her own: Urban Company service partner no. 15 said, "I don't submit my earnings to husband or mother-in-law. Why should I, I work so hard, and I know my rights. Yes, I do spend on my family, but I decide for what and where the money must be spent. I am not selfish. I am doing the right thing. My father-in-law and mother-in-law no longer fight with me over the money issue." Financial autonomy allows her to be a decision maker: Urban Company service partner no.14 is proud of the fact that she independently took the decision and spent money to upgrade her nine-year-old daughter from a local government school to 'an expensive English medium school' in which her five-year-old son is enrolled. Similarly, although married, Urban Company service partner no.12 is financing her younger sister's studies in a polytechnic.

It is evident that married Urban Company female service partners are inclined to direct their gains of financial independence were not just towards self-consumption but for the family and the household. The unmarried Urban Company service partner, while contributing to the family income, is more inclined to spend money on herself. The money is spent in consuming accessories such as cosmetics, shoes, jewellery and new models of cell phones. Urban Company service partner no. 21 spoke about a sense of achievement and joy that she experienced while buying a long woollen sweater (at a discount) at Shopper's Stop—a shop that was inaccessible to her not too long ago. Urban Company service partner no. 16 plans to use her savings to complete her bachelor's degree through distance education. Three years ago, she had to withdraw from college to work because of her family's financial crunch. Some of these Urban Company service partners do not see themselves working as gig workers for long. They have plans for which they are saving money to be entrepreneurs—such as pizza corners, beauty salons—to free themselves of the dependence on the client's 'whimsical' ratings on which the Urban Company managers give them work.

The above gains for the Urban Company female workers come at a cost, at times a higher cost, whereby the gains become a chimera. Becoming an Urban Company worker does not mean a complete escape from the drudgery of domesticity. As is the case with most women in other sectors, Urban Company employment has not reduced the housework for most women; housework continues to be primarily her responsibility and a double burden. Urban Company service provider no. 8 rued the fact that while her mother-in-law and husband appeared to appreciate her financial contribution to the household, they continued to expect her to perform the household chores with the same diligence and efficiency: "...can't they see I am tired? Can't they make me a cup of tea?"

While mobility and flexibility have their advantages, the absence of a permanent physical workspace has many disadvantages. Almost all Urban Company service partners complained of the difficulty in accessing toilets in client's homes and the absence of clean public toilets. Most clients are reluctant to allow Urban Company workers to use their toilets. Some have refused bluntly; others have allowed them to do so reluctantly. Accessing the toilet in the client's residence is most uncomplicated, easy if there is a 'servant quarter.' Urban Company service partner no. 3 shared her embarrassment: "the madam screwed up her nose while allowing her to use the toilet. After that incident I make sure not to drink too much water although this tires me." This problem is faced by all Urban Company service partners. Some of them have tried to circumvent it by accessing public conveniences; Urban Company workers operating in NOIDA spoke about the cleanliness of pink (public) toilets.

Another problem that will impact both the short term and long-term health of these women is erratic eating on the go, skipping meals, make-do with snacks. from street vendors since they are not comfortable in eating alone in public park benches or metro benches.

Urban Company privileges the clients over the service partners. The latter are hostage to the ratings by the clients which at times is arbitrary. UC workers also complained of frequent cancellations of appointments. Urban Company service partner no. 9 shared "it often happens that the clients cancel although within the given time duration, it upsets my schedule. For example, if I am now free for one hour due to cancellation, I can neither go home to rest nor take another appointment. At that point of time, I miss the physical workspace." While the clients' complaints are addressed, their own grievances go unaddressed by Urban Company. In addition, there is no provision of sick leave or maternity leave.



One downside of Urban Company work is loneliness in the ‘workplace’: “I miss my colleagues who became my friends in the salon where I worked. It was a great de-stressor; I could share my problems of family and often the clients’ or boss’ behaviour,” said Urban Company service partner no. 12.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the Decent Work compliance by the UC company of its women employees must be undertaken by acknowledging the historical context of a neoliberal economy and its consequent impact on the role of the state and social structure.

The liberalized economy is not worker friendly. The prosperity of the neo-liberal economy leads to the precarity of the worker. Our research shows that Urban Company work is the ‘freeing’ of women to be out in the public to have financial autonomy and a sense of well being and empowerment albeit diluted. Patriarchy has allowed the above freedom for women to do Urban Company work not out of a belated recognition of women’s autonomy but because of the economic compulsions imposed by the neoliberal economy on the lower middle class. The traditional expectations of the family from their daughters/wives/sisters have been bent only in so far and as long as they provide financial benefits to the family.

Despite these limitations women are glad for the Urban Company opportunity. They see this as a social mobility—temporary reprieve from housework, as an opportunity for social mobility. For the Urban Company female service partner, the transition from a housewife to a working woman is significant. An Urban Company service partner regards herself as a professional. This gives her self-esteem. This is not to deny the dark underbelly of neoliberalism and the creation of the precariat to which the Urban Company service partners easily belong. In such a case Urban Company work is not a context of celebration from the service partners’ point of view. However in the face of inevitability of the neoliberal state seceding from its welfare and social justice responsibilities in a global south country, Urban Company work’s unintended consequence is the light at the end of the tunnel which these women have managed to dig with their grit, perseverance, ambition, desire as well as a sense of love and a sense of responsibility toward their family so as to rescue it from the dire financial conditions.

The above grit and ambition of the Urban Company female service partner is also significant because most of them come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds equipped with minimum and basic education where career opportunities are limited. The significance of Urban Company work while still denying to them a white-collar seat in an airconditioned office, takes them beyond the realm of the work of domestic maids and nannies. She has moved a step forward by moving out of unpaid domestic work into paid non-domestic work (and not paid domestic work), a degree closer to the corporate offices of the highly paid white collar.

It would be a mistake to see this as an occasion of a euphoric celebration of a woman finally breaking the shackles of domesticity and working in the public realm as a professional worker. We say so as there is a danger that these gains remain ephemeral moments of celebration of a satiated illusory consumerist lifestyle.

The case of Urban Company’s female service partners is interesting because our study shows that despite suffering negative impacts, the woman worker or the Indian lower-class worker uses her ingenuity and uses Urban Company as an escape route to empower herself in limited, relative ways. The Urban Company world is not the desired utopia for women workers, and neither was this the intention of the Urban Company despite its proclamations.

The patriarchal structures remain intact, but the value of these women workers is that it will likely impact the life chances of the girl child in the following generations. This, at the moment appears to be the only possible long-term impact on the change in the status of women. The daughters of these women are likely to surpass them in educational attainment.

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33. The significance of a 'work's' flexible nature is a key enabling factor for women. This point was underlined in the McKinsey and Company report *Women and the Workplace 2023*. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/diversity-and-inclusion/women-in-the-workplace-2023>
34. The income of the Urban Company female worker ranges between Rs. 40,000–80,000. This is a wide range because of the flexible nature of work.