Domestic work and platformisation in India and South Africa:

a look at enablers and barriers

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Article

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GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON WOMEN,
WORK AND DIGITAL LABOUR PLATFORMS

Introduction

Globally, the domestic work sector is both highly informal and highly feminised. This article will compile learnings from the domestic work sector in two countries of the Global South — **India** and **South Africa** — concerning the emerging digital economy and its effects on workers. To do so, it will explore the rise of the platform economy in the context of a digital gender divide and highlight initiatives from India and South Africa seeking to improve access to the opportunities offered by digital platforms as well as empowering platform workers through the development of platform cooperatives.

In **India**, while official data states that the country has 4.75 million domestic workers, of which 3 million are women, these are predicted to be gross underestimations. Researchers and experts have suggested that there are probably about 50 million domestic workers in India (WIEGO 2014). The regulatory environment, including wage policies, social protection, and occupational health and safety, has largely excluded domestic workers. Furthermore, India has not ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention No. 189 on Domestic Workers.

In **South Africa**, there are currently 856,000 domestic workers (Stats South Africa 2021). Of these, 96.4% are women and the overwhelming majority are Black, the majority population in South Africa. Domestic workers make

up 6% of the total workforce and 13.4% of the female workforce and although covered by the specific labour law, Sectoral Determination 7 for Domestic Workers, issued in terms of the Basic Conditions of Employment Act, No. 75 of 1997, it could be argued they remain one of the most poorly paid,[1] unorganised, and disempowered sections of the workforce.

In both countries, the disadvantaged bargaining position of domestic workers in the employment relationship and conditions of poverty compel them to accept unfair labour practices, including unduly low wages, late payments, underpayment or non-payment of wages, extremely long hours, and, sometimes, more extreme forms of abuse and exploitation.

The digital gender divide

According to the GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report 2021, there is a 19% gap in women's mobile device ownership in South Asia (GSMA 2021). In **South Africa**, about 60% of adults use a smartphone while 95% use a mobile phone of any type — providing basic empowerment tools that can facilitate better organisation among especially precarious workers. Globally, in low- and middle-income countries, women are 15% less likely than men to use mobile internet. This gap has reduced from 27% in 2017 (Ibid.).

The rise of platform work

The digital platform economy represents a further 'disruption' that has significantly impacted how work is organised in some sectors, by offering the possibility of remote access to a practically unlimited range of services. The Covid-19 pandemic has further facilitated this digital transformation, including through an acceleration of e-commerce. However, given the digital gender divide in smartphone ownership and access to the internet, this has also led to a widening gap between passive users of technology and those able to use it to improve multi-level access (Research ICT Africa 2020).

In **India**, the growth of digital platforms in the domestic work sector has been substantial — order books of digital platforms providing domestic and care work services were reported to be growing by up to 60% month-on-month in 2016 (Rathi and Tandon 2021). Furthermore, catalysed by the pandemic, the consumer market is increasingly shifting online and prioritising convenience, marking the digital economy on a growing trend (Puri 2022).

In **South Africa**, although the platform economy is in its formative stage, growing numbers of workers have gravitated towards platform work, especially in blue-collar services such as transport, food and delivery (Genesis Analytics 2019).

These digital platforms have effectively taken the place of middle agents in the domestic work sector, operating in various styles and forms — as online marketplaces, digital placement agencies and on-demand platforms. Across these operating styles, platforms use algorithmic management methods to match workers with employers, based on their requirements and preferences. Wage negotiations, complaint management and salary disbursement are all functions that the platforms continue to play through the life-cycle of the work arrangement, all while (mis) classifying workers as 'independent contractors' (Rathi and Tandon 2021).

Self Employed Women's Association's (SEWA's) research, based on pilots and secondary research in conjunction with the International Domestic Workers' Federation (IDWF), shows that workers value the benefits these platforms promise to provide such as flexible working hours, finding work closer to their home, and the potential to earn more income. These aspirations led to many domestic workers signing up to 'Uber-like' platforms for domestic work in the Chinese and Korean markets in early 2015.

Studies commissioned to understand the impact of this rise of platform-matched work revealed that domestic workers end up working extreme hours, to fulfil all their

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[1] A recent submission by domestic worker trade unions is arguing for the inclusion of domestic workers in the National Minimum Wage.

orders or risk 'punishment' for rejecting orders. In summary, the rise of platforms has led to more control over worker behaviour, which has had consequences on their health, and the shift from informal markets to formal platform-matched work has not necessarily translated into better social security outcomes.

Women's journeys on existing platforms and barriers to entry

During a one-year pilot study in 2018, SEWA Delhi shared the data of 25% (10,000) of its union members with the digital platform Helpers Near Me[2] to help them sign up and gain access to more and higher quality opportunities. The year-long study, including multiple attempts at worker onboarding strategies (calling card distribution via union organisers,[3] information and onboarding through SEWA centres, proactive telephone calling and full-time staff helping with registration), has helped us consolidate insights into women's journeys on existing platforms as well as the barriers to entry they face:

1. **The mobile access gender digital divide makes it very difficult to contact women for onboarding to online platforms.** Most women in India do not own a mobile phone so when calls are made, they are usually received by family members. Also, there is a lot of invalid data due to manual error or, in most cases, the fact that many workers regularly change their mobile SIM cards meaning registered contact details are often out of date.

2. **Most platform registrations were of younger, relatively inexperienced workers or those unemployed at the time of registration.** Around 40% of registered members were between 30-35 years of age, which is not representative of the wider SEWA Delhi membership. Around 70% of those registered on the platform were not working at the time of registration. Most SEWA members who did take the calling cards did not register themselves on the platform due to mistrust. As expressed by one member, "We get told a lot of times to call a number for work, but such numbers usually end up taking money from us".

3. **Workers look to platforms primarily to find work closer to their home, and to earn more income.** Most domestic workers said they wanted to work within 4.02 km of their home when asked by the platform to set work location preferences. This geographical definition is misleading in densely populated urban areas, where workers use distances as a proxy to define their hyperlocal areas, most aptly defined by selecting areas. Sadhnaben, the first worker matched with a work opportunity on the platform, declined to go because she did not want to travel outside her local area. Many workers are motivated by the idea of being matched with work that pays more and reduces the workload of multiple households down to just one, or at least a smaller number of households that are near to each other.

4. **Connecting with newly matched customers includes many steps that can cause fear for women workers.** The platform made police verification of worker identity mandatory to gain

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[2] Helpers Near Me is a digital platform based in India, which, according to its website, "enables millions of underprivileged and unorganised blue-collar workers to find local employment, free of cost, directly from nearby employers, and without middlemen."

[3] This calling card served as a simple advertising tool. SEWA union organisers would distribute the card containing information for a helpline number and a referral code. Any interested SEWA members or members of their families could call the number and receive assistance to onboard onto the platform. During onboarding, when asked who referred them to the platform, the worker could mention the code written on the card. Helpers Near Me set up a dashboard for SEWA Delhi to identify the number of workers who called the helpline number through the union effort and understand how many of them got work opportunities through the platform.

access to work opportunities. Most SEWA Delhi domestic workers in the area of New Ashok Nagar are migrants, sometimes disputed, from West Bengal, India or Bangladesh and are extremely hesitant to go to the police for fear of harassment. Also, when matched to an opportunity, the first visit to a stranger's house in an unknown area can be uncomfortable for some women, causing them to travel there for the first time with their husbands or friends. These visits may not result in paid work and cause an added out of pocket expense. This is because the platform only facilitates matching the customer and the worker and does not play any role after it has taken place.

5. **Customers on the platform were mostly young professionals, without children, living in affluent neighbourhoods.** In India, this demographic was still the primary user of smartphones seeking services through apps in 2019. They were primarily looking for convenient matching with service providers, trained/experienced workers, good service quality and fixed prices. One disconcerting trend was of customers expressing dissatisfaction with workers matched via the platform and expressing interest in being matched with workers of a certain gender or religion.

Organising for empowerment: are platform cooperatives a viable alternative?

As well as efforts to help workers overcome barriers to enter and onboard digital platforms, there have been domestic worker initiatives in **South Africa** and **India** that have attempted to empower them by combining cooperative principles with platform work. These initiatives have respectively explored models that enhance the benefits of platform technology as both a source of and marketplace for dignified employment on one hand and social security on the other.

The following section summarises key learnings from two such initiatives, the Social Law Project in South Africa and the SEWA Cooperative Federation in India, that have been ideating and implementing platform-based models with women workers and their cooperatives/collective enterprises.

Creating an alternative platform model: lessons from South Africa

The Social Law Project is a unit at the Centre for Transformative Regulation of Work at the University of Western Cape that conducts applied research focused on marginalised workers. In 2020, due to sectoral research and the recognition of the innovative potential of labour platforms, the Social Law Project, focusing on domestic workers and supported by the domestic and migrant worker unions, initiated the development of a worker-owned platform, We Care — Digital Platform Cooperative Project (DPCP).

The DPCP employs a cascading model development approach, involving the training of future trainers, and consists of 60 domestic workers from the urban centres of Cape Town and Johannesburg. It has the objective of building a platform cooperative from scratch. The project is the first platform cooperative in South Africa and is distinct from private commercial platform offerings in several ways.

First, the platform is redistributive in nature and not a for-profit enterprise, though it is economically viable. The 60 founding members are involved in the co-design of all processes, which has led to worker-focused features. These include the inclusion of geolocation factors and the setting of a minimum duration of hours for each service to ensure the time spent commuting is worthwhile for the workers. The second major difference is that employers, as well as workers, will have to go through a vetting process, to help protect platform workers from unsafe working environments. Another key difference is that all workers on the platform will be classified as workers, which means they will be afforded all the requisite rights that come with the classification, such as a minimum wage, holidays, and access to social security benefits.

The project Is still working to answer key questions, such as the nature of the legal entity it will become and how it will manage the employer/employee question. The project's constitution, currently being drafted and due to launch in 2023 will enshrine the answers to these questions as well as the nature of the project as outlined above. The platform's back-end technical side should be ready to launch for testing with the 60 founding members in the second half of 2022.

Key lessons from the DPCP include a clear need to help workers develop the skills that will empower them to take advantage of the innovative potential offered by labour platforms. These include the digital skills required to run the platform itself but also more traditional education and training to enable workers to access the employment the platform will offer. Another key lesson relates to the professionalisation of the domestic work sector through the grading of workers based on skill and work experience.

Domestic work requires different skillsets depending on the task (e.g., care, cleaning, cooking, driving). The platform can both help set professional standards and facilitate access to work through onboarding training. Finally, a key lesson from the project is that most workers simply want jobs and are not interested in becoming entrepreneurs. The labour attached to domestic work is taxing enough without having to think about yourself as a business. Finding workers interested in the project and sustaining their interest and engagement over time has been a challenge.

Creating an alternative platform model: lessons from India

Members of SEWA Homecare [4] a 12- year- old cooperative in Ahmedabad city, expressed an interest in creating a digital platform to facilitate both market linkages and enterprise management. Through a series of workshops conducted by the SEWA Cooperative Federation, members articulated their design preferences for such a platform, summarised here:

1. **Transparent information systems for workers to access customer profiles:** While traditional platforms have a way for customers to see workers' profiles, cooperative members expressed a need to view customer profiles too.

2. **Female worker identification documents:** With the domestic work sector being so highly informal, domestic workers usually have no form of identification as workers. Cooperative members saw digital identification, offered through their platform, as being useful for enabling domestic workers to have some documentation marking their work status.

3. **Facilitating new member onboarding:** Cooperative members saw an opportunity to bring more domestic workers into their collective by creating an easy way for potential worker-members' information and contact details to be passed to the cooperative manager.

4. **Expanding platform management tools:** Digital platforms also allow for the automation of various management functions such as leave applications and approvals, meeting notifications, worker replacement, salary notifications and more. SEWA Homecare believed that by incorporating these systems, they would make their management more efficient.

5. **Using social media and other marketing platforms to increase customer outreach:** SEWA Homecare members saw potential in the power of social media, particularly for marketing. They were eager to share workers' voices, customer stories and other information through social media to grow their visibility as a women-owned cooperative and increase their outreach.

Recommendations

Experiences highlighted in this article show that an alternative model for precarious workers in the digital economy requires partnerships and support. Particularly, in a sector like domestic work that predominantly employs women who are low-skilled and disempowered in an environment dominated by patriarchy and patronage. Creating an enabling environment requires the necessary investment in skills

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[4] A cooperative of domestic workers in Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

development for the digital economy, as well as access to connectivity and infrastructure.

Key lessons from these collective experiences also form the basis for the recommendations below, which may be useful for policymakers (locally, nationally and internationally), workers' cooperatives and civil society organisations that support such cooperative ventures:

- **Organising and mobilising workers for empowerment is key** to any sustainable, viable livelihood generation. Worker cooperatives and collective enterprises act as conduits that link workers with decent work and social protection, facilitate knowledge and technology transfers and give workers decision-making powers.

- **Investments in women-owned cooperatives and collectives** can enable these small businesses to grow. Worker-owned collectives can register as contractors on online platforms, which will increase worker bargaining power and bring focus to developing features that will address worker requirements.

- **There is a need for meaningful digital inclusion**, including access to technologies, access to the internet and capacity-building in the productive use of technology through digital literacy programmes.

- **Research and evidence-building** on the role of women-owned enterprises in creating strong local economies, contributions to the national economy and reducing inequalities.

- **Voice and representation** of women workers in policy spaces to ensure that their voices are at the centre of design and implementation of programmes.

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Fairuz Mullagee is the Coordinator of the Social Law Project (SLP) in South Africa and was part of a South African research team contracted by the ILO to facilitate the national discussion on the Future of Work, in preparation for the International Labour Conference in Geneva in 2019. She is also the Project Manager of the WeCare — Digital Platform Co-operative Project aimed at building an alternative model for the domestic care sector in two pilot centres, Cape Town and Johannesburg, in South Africa.

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The Social Law Project (SLP) was established in 1993, on the eve of South Africa's watershed first democratic election, as a unit in the University of the Western Cape Law Faculty. It was formed to strengthen the movement for social and workplace justice through knowledge production that enhances institutional capacity and facilitates dialogue, giving voice to especially marginalised workers.

See: https://www.facebook.com/Social-Law-Project-932379126831391/

The Centre for the Transformative Regulation of Work (Centrow), incorporating the Social Law Project, was established in November 2020 as an area of academic excellence focusing on the intersection between law and new forms of work in a rapidly changing environment, both in South Africa and globally.

See: https://law.uwc.ac.za/entities/centrow

About the authors

SEWA Bharat, formed in 1974, is a national federation that has promoted SEWA organisations in 14 states, incubated and supported 15 collective enterprises, advocates for informal economy women workers on a national and global scale, and supports multilateral organisations with scaling their work at the grassroots level.

See: https://sewabharat.org/

SEWA Cooperative Federation helps collective enterprises, owned, managed and used by informal women workers grow and scale. For the past 30 years, the organisation has promoted 110 collective enterprises across different sectors of the economy.

See: https://www.sewafederation.org/