

Fairwork

BEYOND TECHNO-SOLUTIONISM

Gender and Platform Work



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Executive Summary

Fairwork's 2023 Gender and Platform Work report is based on research into working conditions on online platforms spanning four years, 38 countries, over 190 unique platforms, and interviews with more than 5000 platform workers. It finds that:

- Commonplace practices in the platform economy—such as failing to guarantee a living wage, safe working conditions, and failing to tackle gender-based discrimination—risk widening the gender pay gap, reducing workforce participation rates of women and cementing gender inequality.
- Though many women and gender minorities want to participate in location-based digital platform work (such as delivery and ride-hailing), few feel they can do so because of entrenched gender-based discrimination, harassment, and abuse.
- Women's participation in the platform economy is highly visible in beauty, care, and domestic work. Historically, this kind of “feminised” work has taken place within private homes. Yet many platforms fail to successfully account for and fully monetise this work, leading to workers conducting unpaid work, and being inadequately protected from workplace harassment and abuse.
- When confronted with deep-seated social issues like gender discrimination, many platforms deploy technological solutions such as unilaterally banning female workers from doing perceived ‘unsafe jobs’ and working at night, as well as subjecting them to intrusive and uncompensated surveillance measures to monitor their work. These quick-fix technical solutions can decrease earnings and increase platform control, while doing little to keep workers safe or providing them with ownership over their work.

The report concludes that platforms need to be more responsive to women and gender minorities. At a minimum, they should formally consult worker associations and institutionalise measures such as conducting client ID checks and allowing workers to rate and flag clients as well as appeal bad reviews left on the platform about them. Fairwork's principles—fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management, and fair representation—are a guide for how platforms can do better.

Introduction

On the landing page of the Deliveroo UK website, if you scroll down past the restaurant logos, you eventually arrive at an image of a rider. This rider is a black woman. She smiles cheerfully, her eyes not quite meeting the camera, clad in the iconic green Deliveroo jacket and helmet, bicycle shorts and a backpack slung effortlessly over one shoulder. Behind her is a soft, bokeh-effect laden night-time urban scene. The delivery rider is the only person in the picture, but she looks happy, relaxed and safe. This impression is heightened by the text on the photo which reads “Ride with us” and in smaller font goes on to say “The freedom to fit work around your life. Plus great fees, perks and discounts.”

It’s a perplexing message, on top of a perplexing image. Why would work involve fees and discounts instead of fair wages and guaranteed entitlements? Why, for that matter’s sake, would a woman be happy, relaxed and safe carrying a delivery bag on one shoulder at night, in an urban setting, where she is, apparently, alone? Such an image is especially incongruous, when you consider that in London (presumably the setting of this photograph) almost half of women do not travel at night because of safety concerns, and that just over a quarter of people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds experience hate crimes and harassment.¹ Both the message and image are clearly aspirational for Deliveroo workers but fail to acknowledge the realities of platform work. They are however not unique to this platform, and similar images and messages are used by a variety of digital labour platforms to attract women into platform work. Through such images, platforms, across the world, perpetuate two aspirational myths: 1) working through platforms is not the same as working for an employer; instead, the worker is their ‘own boss’ and the platform merely a service that allows them to increase their earning power while meeting their life needs; and 2) that such work is inclusive, safe and fulfilling. Women are central to the perpetuation of these myths; it’s assumed that they have

familial responsibilities of care that they can balance with this type of work. This image, with the woman doing her work happily, sells the message that such work is inclusive and accepting of all types of workers.

This report shows that despite platforms’ public relation campaigns, we see over and over again that platforms operate on the assumption that the worker is an independent, efficient, mobile, digitally engaged man without family responsibilities and other considerations. Such a worker is assumed to be solely working to maximise their short-term gains and can easily be incentivised to act in a predictable manner. This predictability, in turn, is at the heart of the platform economy’s ability to access a large workforce of easily interchangeable individuals managed by algorithms that precisely calculate when and where to deploy them. Difference from the archetypal platform worker, whether it be in the form of gender, sexual orientation, or other socio-cultural characteristics, is for the most part ignored, leading to platforms that are effectively ‘gender blind.’ Such gender blindness effectively institutionalises barriers to women and gender minorities from accessing and doing work on platforms, thereby cementing a gender divide in the types of work that are feasible for them.² In doing so,

it rolls back hard-fought gender-based entitlements that have been traditionally enshrined in standard employment relationships.

This report draws on the findings of the Fairwork Project. The report examines digital labour platforms that aim to connect individual service providers with consumers of the service through the platform interface. This research does not cover platforms that mediate offers of employment between individuals and employers (whether on a long-term or on a temporary basis). For more information on the platforms covered in this report please see Appendix I.

In this report, we consider gender through an intersectional lens, recognising that experiences of being a woman or a gender minority are shaped by people's race, caste, age, location and other demographic characteristics. The report

explores location-based platforms' gender-blindness in their policies and practices.³ We discuss the discriminatory consequences of these platforms' technological architectures and algorithmic limitations resulting from often-tokenistic approaches to address inclusivity. We also inspect what happens when platforms venture into the spaces of what is traditionally considered 'women's work.' Throughout the report, we illuminate the ways in which women and gender minorities subvert and combat gender blindness to create better working conditions, in lieu of meaningful platform support.

With little regulation around gender, workers have come up with their own strategies as members of collective worker associations. Throughout this report we will be sharing snapshots of such worker-led initiatives



Gender and Platform Work: Methodology

This report draws on Fairwork's research⁴ into working conditions on online platforms, over the last five years and in 38 countries. Fairwork has conducted research with over 190 unique platforms, many of which operate across multiple countries. We have interviewed over 5000 platform workers about their working conditions and experiences in platform work. Additionally, over the past four years, we have conducted legal reviews of over 441 individual platforms' contracts and the terms and conditions which govern their relations with workers. We have also engaged with multiple platform managers, pushing for changes to improve working conditions. We continue to conduct in-depth desk research on all the platforms that we research. The scope of this research gives us a wide-ranging and detailed understanding of working conditions in the platform economy. In this report, we focus on gender and platform work as a central theme of analysis.

The findings of this report come from a two-part methodology. First, we conducted desk research on gender and platform work across the world, including through Fairwork's country-specific reports. Second, we held in-depth interviews with members of the Fairwork network who have specific research experience in the area of gender and platform work. They include Fairwork researchers from India, Argentina, Paraguay, Nigeria, Brazil, Serbia, Egypt, the US, Belgium and Bangladesh. Profiles of these network members can be found in the Appendix II.

The network members interviewed for this report cover all five regions (Africa, Americas, Asia, Europe, and Middle East and North Africa) of the Fairwork project. Their expertise captures not only the current conditions of gender in the platform economy but also how it has evolved since 2019. Interviews covered topics such as an overview of the national platform economy, the representation of women and LGBTQIA+ workers within it, gendered experiences of work, discrimination and harassment, platform responses to gender, and workers' reasons for joining and staying on in the platform economy. These interviews were further triangulated with a review of secondary literature (including Fairwork reports, blogs and local media articles) and scholarly literature on gender and platform work.

Throughout the report we apply an intersectional approach to understanding the relationship between gender and platform work. Intersectionality is a framework for understanding the

multiple forms of inequity that individuals face, that create specific obstacles which cannot be captured in conventional ways of thinking. This is important for understanding the particular experiences that platform workers face, according to, for example gender, race, class, caste, disability and sexual identity.

We know that in many places, platform work in ride-hailing and food delivery is dominated by men while women are much more visible in the "feminised" sectors of beauty, care and domestic work. A report by the International Labour Organisation which surveyed platform workers in 2019 and 2020 found that in 12 countries only nine per cent of delivery riders and five per cent of ride-hailing drivers are women. Through this report, we shine a light on the experiences of women workers across all areas of platform work. Attempts to reach out to members of the LGBTQIA+ community who work within the platform economy have been especially challenging. In many countries, there are laws banning homosexuality, and identifying workers based on sexual identity would place workers at risk. Even in places where homosexuality is not banned, there are taboos around identifying and asking about gender and sexual identity. While we discuss some LGBTQIA+ experiences in this report, we hope that it will spur more research focused on gender minority experiences of platform work.

Towards Decent Labour Standards in the Platform Economy

Fairwork evaluates and ranks the working conditions of digital platforms. Our ratings are based on five principles that digital labour platforms should ensure in order to be considered to be offering basic minimum standards of fairness.

We evaluate platforms annually against these principles to show not only what the platform economy is today, but also what it could be. The Fairwork ratings provide an independent perspective on labour conditions of platform work for policymakers, platform companies, workers, and consumers. Our goal is to show that better, and fairer, jobs are possible in the platform economy.

The Fairwork project is coordinated from the Oxford Internet Institute and the WZB Berlin Social Science Centre. Our growing network of researchers currently rates platforms in 38 countries across 5 continents. In every country, Fairwork collaborates closely with workers, platforms, advocates and policymakers to promote a fairer future of platform work.

Fairwork countries

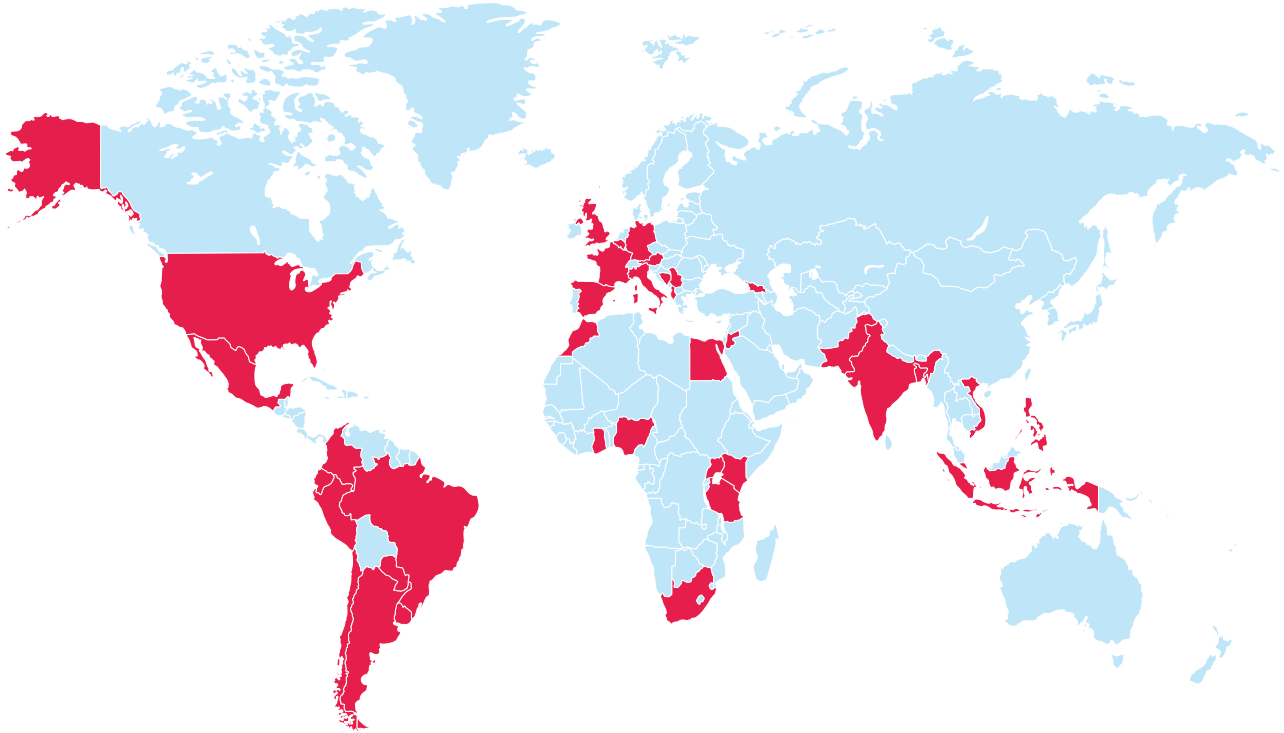


Figure 1. Fairwork currently rates platforms in 38 countries worldwide.

AFRICA

Egypt, Ghana, Kenya, Morocco, Nigeria, South Africa, Tanzania, Uganda

ASIA

Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Jordan, Lebanon, Pakistan, Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam

EUROPE

Albania, Austria, Belgium, Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Georgia, Germany, Italy, UK, Serbia, Spain

SOUTH AMERICA

Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay

NORTH AMERICA

Mexico, USA

The Fairwork Framework

Fairwork evaluates the working conditions of digital labour platforms and ranks them on how well they do. Ultimately, our goal is to show that better, and fairer, jobs are possible in the platform economy.

To do this, we use five principles that digital labour platforms should ensure to be considered as offering ‘fair work’. We evaluate platforms against these principles to show not only what the platform economy is, but also what it can be.

The five Fairwork principles were developed through multiple multi-stakeholder workshops at the International Labour Organisation. To ensure that these global principles were applicable in the UK context, we have subsequently revised and fine-tuned them in consultation with platform workers, platforms, trade unions, regulators, academics, and labour lawyers.

Further details on the thresholds for each principle, and the criteria used to assess the collected evidence to score platforms can be found in the Appendix.



Gendering the Fairwork Principles

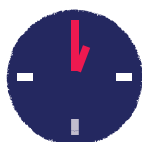


Fair Pay

Workers, irrespective of their employment classification, should earn a decent income in their home jurisdiction after taking account of work-related costs. We assess earnings according to the mandated minimum wage in the home jurisdiction, as well as the current living wage.

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has long recognized that minimum wages disproportionately benefit women as they tend to work in low-paying jobs.⁵ As such, minimum wage laws are a particularly effective tool in narrowing the gender gap in pay.

A living wage is a basic right required for dignified working conditions. As most platforms do not ensure or guarantee living wages, Fairwork's research indicates that workers are forced to work long hours with many of our respondents reporting that they regularly put in over 50 hours a week to make a viable living. In these harsh conditions, the essential but unpaid work of living – such as cooking meals, raising children, and taking care of the elderly – disproportionately falls onto women, who end up effectively doing a second shift of work, outside their long hours on the platform. In other cases, male platform workers' female partners and family members end-up taking on more than fair share of the work of living, due to existing patriarchal roles that confine the woman to the home. This does not just negatively impact the home, but also prevents women from entering the workforce. That said, the long hours required mean that those women who work in the platform economy often have to make trade-offs between earning a living and their caregiving responsibilities, or end up being dependent on others' incomes. It is no wonder, then for many women location-based platform is a 'side job,' rather than a viable fulltime career.



Fair Conditions

Platforms should have policies in place to protect workers from foundational risks arising from the processes of work, and should take proactive measures to protect and promote the health and safety of workers.

A failure to provide safe working conditions by mitigating risks and guaranteeing the right to a social safety net, represents a reversal of rights available in formal employment, such as safe work conditions, parental leave, sick pay and insurance. While these issues affect all workers, the high degree of risk associated with platform work and the lack of a social safety net are known to be disabling factors for women to enter the workforce. By perpetuating these conditions, platforms are effectively undoing decades of work around women's participation in the labour market. Platforms should actively encourage gender inclusivity by prioritising worker safety and putting in place measures to facilitate worker access to entitlements around parental leave, sick pay and insurance.



Fair Contracts

Terms and conditions should be accessible, readable and comprehensible. The party contracting with the worker must be subject to local law and must be identified in the contract. Regardless of the workers' employment status, the contract is free of clauses which unreasonably exclude liability on the part of the service user and/or the platform.

Many women and gender minorities who work within the platform economy hold intersecting identity positions, leaving them particularly vulnerable to exploitation. Fair contracts, which are clear and transparent, are thus

necessary. Contracts that impose unfair terms such as excluding platform liability and passing it on to workers, or which place contracts under the jurisdiction of international courts, effectively prevent workers from holding platforms to account. Women and gender minorities, particularly, are more likely to be economically marginalised and face gender bias and stereotypes in accessing legal systems like courts and worker tribunals. This is especially true for cultural settings where platform work is considered to be “masculine” work that is inappropriate for women to undertake. They are thus less likely to be able to fight the platform around unfair terms, effectively allowing for a discriminatory system that disproportionately exploits these groups.



Fair Management

There should be a documented process through which workers can be heard, can appeal decisions affecting them, and be informed of the reasons behind those decisions. There must be a clear channel of communication to workers involving the ability to appeal management decisions or deactivation. The use of algorithms is transparent and results in equitable outcomes for workers. There should be an identifiable and documented policy that ensures equity in the way workers are managed on a platform (for example, in the hiring, disciplining, or firing of workers).

A critical factor differentiating platforms that are more accessible to women and gender minorities, is the presence of effective, human-led support systems and processes. Such systems are often absent for workers on platforms that work in feminised sectors, who normally require the worker to directly enter into a separate agreement with the client and thus are not provided any support from the platform. Moreover, across sectors, platforms rely on rating systems to make decisions around deactivations and pay calculations. Such rating systems are not neutral. Indeed, they are known to reflect and amplify social biases, especially for women and gender minorities who face high degrees of social stigma.⁶ It is thus imperative that such bias is accounted for and that platforms provide avenues through which workers can dispute ratings and provide their own ratings and reviews for clients. This, alongside meaningful anti-discrimination policies, is necessary to

provide equity in the management process and combat discrimination.



Fair Representation

Platforms should provide a documented process through which worker voice can be expressed. Irrespective of their employment classification, workers should have the right to organise in collective bodies, and platforms should be prepared to cooperate and negotiate with them.

Collective voice is instrumental in improving workers' conditions, particularly for platform work, where processes are opaque, and it is difficult for an individual worker to assess whether they are being unfairly treated. This is a challenge for women and gender minorities who often face systematic and structural gendered discrimination while doing platform work, which can only be identified through consultation with each other. Unfortunately, the gendered nature of this discrimination means that they can end up isolated if the stigma is shared by fellow workers as well as clients. It is not enough to ensure that there are mechanisms available for collective voice, but that these are accessible to all workers, including those who are marginalized.

Further details on the Fairwork Scoring System are in Appendix I.

SECTION I

Gender and location-based platform work

Accessing work

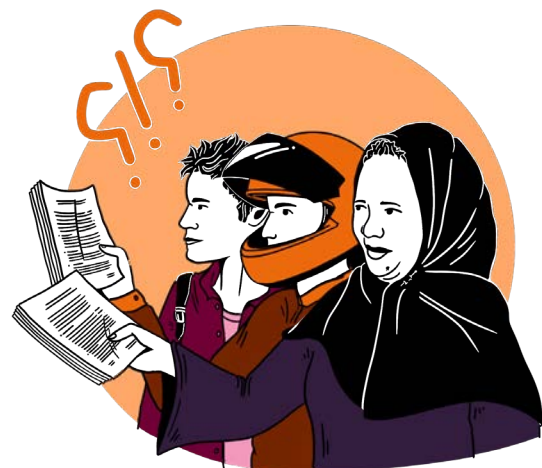
Experiences of gender play out differently across regional contexts, making it difficult to generalise. Instead, gendered experiences within platform work are determined by a combination of factors such as cultural norms, the demographic profile of the person involved, their support network, government policies around platform work, as well as the presence of non-profit actors who can enable the entry of women and gender minorities into this economy.

Around the world, a narrative has emerged around platform work's lower barriers to entry; the sign-up process is usually automated, and its 'gig work' nature, normally allows both workers and platforms to make fewer commitments, for example on the number of hours worked. This makes it the preferred choice of those excluded from more formal types of employment.⁷ In countries like India and Bangladesh, the Fairwork network members we spoke to have found that local stigmas around divorce or single motherhood make platform work the natural choice for women in non-traditional family structures. Meanwhile, in Belgium, Argentina, and Egypt, Fairwork network members have found that refugees and migrants without the legal right to work find that platform work is one of the few options to earn a livelihood. Globally, workers with child- or elderly-caregiving responsibilities, and those who are minorities because of their gender identity (as well as race, caste or ethnicity) turn to platform work because it has comparatively lower barriers to entry. As such, platform work attracts workers who are already precarious and vulnerable. In this setting, while platforms can offer much-needed opportunities to their workers, they are, undeniably, also positioned to exploit those workers who are disproportionately dependent on them. Mounika Neerukonda, of the Fairwork India team, observes:

"Sometimes they're single mothers, sometimes they're divorced, sometimes they're just dealing with a really bad partner or parents. Sometimes they just really have traumatic experiences from home, and they just have, you know, moved away. And they're trying to make their livelihood in a completely new city with the help of this one platform."

Individual platforms navigate this tightrope between offering opportunities and being perceived as exploitative with differing levels of success. Entrenched gender blindness, where platforms fail to consider how gender may shape their workers' experiences, however, limits platforms' ability to effectively combat any tendencies towards exploitation.

This is evident from Fairwork's research, which suggests that while women and gender minorities globally are seeking entry into multiple forms of platform work, they often experience multiple barriers in doing so, particularly where platforms are not responsive to their social conditions.⁸



Access to platform work is mediated through pre-existing gender relations, and by not considering these factors, platform policies often end up inadvertently excluding women and gender minorities. The gender digital divide is one clear aspect of this; in countries like India, Bangladesh and Egypt, a large portion of women do not have unrestricted access to smartphones. Instead, these devices are shared with male family members who control when and how women use them. Digital skills and literacy also play a role in restricting access to these devices. While some platforms actively teach women workers digital skills and provide women with their own smartphones, these are exceptions, and most platforms assume that all workers have access to their own smartphones (or digital bank accounts) without considering how this prevents women and gender minorities accessing their work.

Similarly, Fairwork's research shows that many of the platforms that women and gender minority workers want to join – such as beauty platforms, ride-hailing or car-based delivery services – have high upfront costs. The cost of a car, car insurance or beauty kits (which can easily cost several months' pay), are daunting barriers to women and gender minorities and most workers must turn to family and friends to afford them. The same barriers to formal work, which discriminate against women and gender minorities, also prevent workers from raising these funds. Olayinka David-West, of Fairwork Nigeria, comments "There's ... the contract barrier of women and access to finance regarding identity, ownership of collateralized assets, etc. In some cases, some lenders might say ... "Oh, where's your husband or dad?" Gender minorities also struggle to access loans from formal financial institutions like banks; as in the case of Meghna Sahoo, who is believed to be India's first hijra ride-hailing driver. She was denied a loan when she decided to do platform work, and had to get her father to take it for her.⁹

Increasingly, platforms are offering loans for these upfront costs, and while this is a positive development, these financial instruments effectively lock in workers, who end up having to keep working for a platform to pay off their loans. Once again, the vulnerable position of women and gender minorities makes them particularly prone to this type of exploitation. Such fears of exploitation are real. Platform debt—where platform workers, especially in ride-hailing, have higher costs than earnings—is a tangible concern, as detailed in the reports from Fairwork Bangladesh 2021 and Fairwork Pakistan 2022.¹⁰ This effectively makes such jobs for workers a source of debt and further marginalisation,

notably for those who are trying to gain independence from their families or who have limited resources.

Although a number of platforms have encouraged women and gender minorities to join them, these efforts alone are rarely adequate to deal with the structural issues of the gender digital divide, socio-cultural constraints, high upfront costs, and difficulty in obtaining financing that impede access to work. For instance, in a blog post, Swiggy, an Indian food delivery platform, acknowledges that most women do not have access to motor vehicles or driver licenses, impeding their ability to work on the platform. While a blog post is not an official policy document, it encourages women who use bicycles to apply to be couriers. Yet this post does not acknowledge that couriers using cycles have limited earnings due to the lower number of jobs they can complete in a day.¹¹ Nor do they mention that cycling in India is typically done by men, with the 2011 Census finding that only 4 percent of cyclists are women.¹² While their attempts to make their work more accessible to women should be applauded, these initiatives are operating amongst gender-based restrictions that have the potential to impede their effectiveness, unless these are considered and addressed. The rest of this report looks in greater detail at how gender blindness, where platforms fail to consider how discrimination takes place along gender lines and limits women and gender minorities' participation within the platform economy.

Gender Segregation

In most countries, the most visible platform workers are delivery couriers who use a bike or motorbike to make short-distance deliveries. Such workers are overwhelmingly cis-gender men.¹³ As Cheryll Ruth R. Soriano, Fairwork Philippines, observes: "There aren't a lot of women. I would say this industry is still very much male-dominated, especially the ride-hailing, and food delivery." Such observations are emblematic of the findings of the 38 Fairwork Country teams, with our research finding evidence of a clear gender segregation between platforms that operate within public spaces (like transport services – dominated by men) and private spaces (like domestic, beauty and care work – dominated by women).¹⁴ While such gender divisions are historically and culturally rooted, they continue to be perpetuated due to consumer preference for certain tasks to be conducted by specific genders. Janaki Srinivasan, Fairwork India, describes how this plays out in India:

We do have to also acknowledge that drivers, for example, in India have traditionally been male [but] consumers

are comfortable with having [beauty] services provided by female workers...They [platforms] are not employing women because they want to provide opportunities. They're employing women [in beauty platforms] because that's what they need to do to let the business run.

As such, consumer preference effectively cements divisions between feminised and masculinised work.

In some services, such as cleaning, these preferences are more elastic. For instance, the platform Urban Company in India offers cleaning services that are primarily performed by men.¹⁵ While such work has traditionally been done by women in India, Urban Company has successfully packaged its services as "intense cleaning" requiring machinery that needs to be wielded by professionals in uniforms, gloves and masks. In this instance, the professionalization of cleaning services is effectively masculinising what, in the Indian context, has been a traditionally women-dominated service. Yet examples of the inverse, where historically male-dominated services are primarily conducted by women are less visible, despite multiple platforms in ride-hailing and courier services offering women and LGBTQIA+ workers incentives to join them. Although there exist several platforms which offer women drivers for women passengers, these tend to be smaller platforms, or subsets of bigger ride-hailing companies such as Didi, Uber or Grab. The Fairwork Mexico report (2023) discusses how such initiatives can also effectively limit women drivers' earning capabilities, as demand for these services tends to be low.¹⁶

When Urban Company effectively masculinised their cleaning services, it did so by changing the service offered (using machinery in a traditionally low-tech industry), how it was monetised (clients book specific services, rather than hiring a cleaner for a number of hours), how it was marketed (giving workers uniforms) and putting in place professional equipment standards (workers have safety equipment like masks and gloves). For the most part, platforms do not make similar efforts to make male-dominated services accessible and attractive to women, perhaps because there is a historically rooted prejudice against women performing certain types of work.¹⁷ In other words, there is no evidence that platforms are financially incentivised to meaningfully open traditionally male-dominated work to women, and attempts to make such work accessible to women tend to not result in similar fundamental shifts in platforms' work practices and business models.

In terms of markets and viability, platforms entering the

space of feminised work are overall more unstable and can often fail to emerge as consistent presences in the platform economy. These platforms struggle to monetise traditionally unpaid work (such as care), struggle to attract both workers and clients, and (given that care tends to involve long term relationships) also struggle to remain relevant for workers and clients once the initial matching service has been provided. Workers, across countries, reported that they were regularly asked to perform additional unpaid tasks, and that they resent the high commission fees paid to platforms for their work. In platforms where workers feel that the company is not looking out for them – either in terms of their own safety or how their work is being valued – they are more likely to circumnavigate the platform system entirely and engage in a direct relationship with the client, despite platforms' efforts to ban such arrangements.

This inability to be relevant was apparent in one Brazilian domestic work platform where workers reported that they received no jobs through it. The short-lived platform predictably closed, and its' workers used a combination of traditional word-of-mouth contacts and online tools such as Facebook marketplace to find domestic work. In this ecosystem, platforms need to offer both clients and workers additional benefits for them to use and stay on their platforms and provide commission. Currently, a number of platforms are introducing new business models and work practices through which to quantify, itemise and monetise care, domestic, and beauty tasks. In both Serbia and Germany, for instance, there are platforms which require clients to state exactly what services they require and ask for specific details such as how many windows need to be cleaned and how big the space is that needs to be cleaned. Platforms have also started to adopt a subscription-based payment model, partially because of the recognition that in care and domestic work there is value in a long-term relationship of trust between the worker and the client. Thus, they can offer clients the ability to book workers over an extended period rather than for a one-off cleaning job and in some cases, incentivize such bookings by charging lower commissions for repeat bookings.¹⁸ They additionally try to build trust for both workers and clients by requiring background checks and identity card verification from both parties. This, along with human-led support systems (often through third-party apps such as WhatsApp), allows workers to feel more confident entering private spaces such as clients' homes when such support is responsive and proactive in handling their concerns.

Yet many of the means by which platforms enter feminised sectors end up excluding or further marginalising women and gender minorities. Some platforms try to masculinise work (as with Urban Company), thereby excluding women from work that was traditionally done by them. They can place women under extreme levels of surveillance, effectively controlling their movements as detailed in section IV of this report. Platforms can also encourage workers to form relationships based on care and dependency with clients, leading them to voluntarily conduct unpaid work. This is apparent in Fairwork USA's findings on one care work platform, which tells their overwhelmingly female workforce: "Make a difference in your community, [by] earning money with flexible part-time work on your own schedule. Learn how you can be a pal to an older adult, support working families, and more."¹⁹ From this description, it appears those working for this platform are primarily social workers paid to take care of the elderly and disabled (an impression compounded by the fact that the service is paid through Medicare or Medicaid – two government insurance schemes). Fairwork's research in the United States finds that many of these workers feel compelled to take on more work than the platform requires, feeling guilty at the prospect of saying no to a client who the platform encourages them to consider as an elderly parental figure. Mishal Khan, Fairwork USA, describes:

For [a platform].. cleaning is not required. But they [the workers] would do it anyway. And they would say, that's just how I was raised. [They were not asked to do it by the client] and [the platform] had to send out a memo saying, you don't have to do it... No one ever said that [the platform] demanded it. But they were just like, I just do it anyway although they told me not to do it. But I would do it for my mother.

Similarly, the Belgium platform Ring Twice, encourages workers and clients to consider each other as 'neighbours' who are helping out with the chores of cleaning, babysitting and other such household services, rather than taking part in a commercial transaction. Reviews of workers and worker profiles stress how caring and trustworthy they are, rather than focusing on criteria like efficiency or price.²⁰ However, as the Fairwork and ResPecTMe projects find, the narrative of neighbours helping each other masks how "care platforms tend to disregard existing regulation" by moving care workers from the traditional government-run voucher-based system to a series of informal arrangements.²¹ These examples show that the emphasis on social relations within this work, makes it difficult for workers to be adequately compensated for their unpaid work and emotional labour. Hence, working conditions within these feminised industries of care, domestic work, and beauty can become exploitative, due to the immense degree of emotional labour they require and their extremely precarious conditions.

Women's Initiatives: LOWAN, Nigeria: The Importance of Women's Networks in Masculinised Platform Work

The Ladies on Wheel Association of Nigeria (LOWAN) is the first registered women drivers' association in Nigeria. Its members include women commercial drivers, including those who drive for ride-hailing platforms such as Uber and Bolt.²² LOWAN's aim is to enable a support system for women in a co-learning environment, including social media chat groups and social activities for women to meet and form networks. Given that ride-hailing work is predominantly carried out by men, it is much more difficult for women ride-hailing workers to form networks. As Olayinka David-West, Fairwork Nigeria, told us:

"Women's networks are more limited ... it's somewhat easier when you have somebody that does the type of work that you do, that you can sort of collectively share knowledge with them and you know, look and brainstorm for ideas ... they find solace in being able to come together support one another."

This support is particularly important when women are faced with gendered issues such as husbands or fathers not wanting them to work. Networks such as LOWAN serve as support systems where women can come together and work through transitions as a community. As of June 2023, LOWAN does not have legal backing and is not officially recognised, so cannot it enter into meaningful dialogue with platform management.²³ However, we hope with official recognition from government and platforms, LOWAN's efforts can be amplified.

SECTION II

Unsafe work: Discrimination, violence and harassment

Multilayered vulnerabilities in feminised work

Much has been written about the emotional labour required in feminised industries.²⁴ In platform work, this kind of labour is compounded for women and gender minorities due to the discrimination, violence and harassment they can encounter on the job. For many, the experience of this work is characterised by an abiding sense of fear and uneasiness. Mounika Neerukonda, Fairwork India, observes, based on her annual interviews with workers, that she finds those who work within the private homes and workspaces of clients are inherently vulnerable position. She comments:

A lot of cab drivers ...talk about when you're doing a late-night delivery or a late-night ride at like 2 am in the morning ... you [may be] mugged by someone or you're going to be held at knifepoint... Those are the extreme cases. I think with women, it's a bit of a different situation; Every time you enter a house, you're literally debating whether it's a good customer or a bad customer. So, it's every service that you go to, you don't know which side of the customer you're going to get.

Thus, while everyone worries about working at night or in unsafe neighbourhoods, those working in feminised industries may experience this worry as a more pervasive and generalised fear.

Although some platforms contend that they are just a marketplace enabling workers and clients to find each other, the inherently unequal power dynamics of feminised

work means that they are not neutral actors in this setting. In Serbia, Jana (not her real name) told us that her anxiety around work is heightened by a lack of knowledge about the conditions she is entering into: “you come to someone’s flat without any information about them. It does not have to be an assault, but it is still scary.”²⁵ The (lack of) information that platforms provide to both clients and workers, along with factors such as the rates of commission/client fees they charge, the grievance processes they put in place, and their policies around safety nets such as insurance and social security, all work towards either empowering workers in this setting, or tacitly aiding their exploitation. As Batoul Al Mehdar, Fairwork Egypt, observes:

Other than the common things of fatigue, there's the risk of facing sexual harassment ...the risk of being accused of theft, the risk of overwork. [...] Plus, no social insurance, no health insurance, no medical insurance, nothing.

Vulnerability, thus, operates on multiple dimensions, and when platforms fail to provide policies guaranteeing fair working conditions, they amplify the risks involved in taking part in this type of work allowing for the exploitation of an already highly precarious workforce.

Those platforms that do acknowledge that women workers are vulnerable tend to respond through so-called protective policies such as allowing workers to choose the sex of their clients, or leaving a client’s home when they feel unsafe. Such responses essentially advocate and enforce gender-based segregation, but they do not necessarily keep women safe, while at the same time effectively reducing their earning

opportunities. For instance, during Fairwork's research in the United Kingdom, we came across a worker at a beauty platform who was sexually harassed by a male client. She reached out to the platform's support and shared her experiences. While they were sympathetic, they encouraged her from now on to only go to female clients. She took this advice as them implying that she was sensitive and not cut out for working with men, even though she had been working with male clients with no issues before. The worker not only blames herself for being sensitive but now has fewer jobs to choose from as she has limited herself to only women clients.

The platform's informal advice that the worker was too 'sensitive' is a form of victim-blaming that genders threats to her as coming from male clients. Platform policies and practices encouraging women to stick their own gender are rarely sufficient on their own to make workers in feminised industries feel comfortable and safe in their working environments. Mounika Neerukonda, Fairwork India, comments that in interviews with women workers, they share more reports "of women customers, harassing and abusing

women service people. [As these customers] just assumed that they have sort of a right over these particular workers... They'd be either physically abusive or verbally abusive."

In such cases, workers ought to be able to turn to platforms for support with abusive clients. Yet, only a few platforms provide workers with the option to rate and flag clients who harass them. In some cases, even when workers can flag clients, they see jobs from the same client reappearing on the app – suggesting that their original complaint was ignored, and leading to the belief that they are not heard. Fewer platforms are proactive enough to ask for official IDs from the clients, even though most platforms subject workers to extensive background checks. Yet such measures, according to Ainan Tajrian, Fairwork Bangladesh, are identified by workers as crucial for them to feel more confident in their working situations, as they believe that these initiatives act as a deterrent for clients misbehaving.

In the absence of effective policies from the platform, workers often undertake personal strategies to keep



themselves safe. In the UK, one worker told us how she purposefully charges a lower rate than the platform-recommended amount to keep her clients happy and head off aggressive clients. There are also cases of workers who reported that they lowered their rates, after clients asked them in their initial meeting as a condition for employment. In one case, a woman worker agreed to lower her rate as much as by half, simply because she felt sorry for the client, who had limited options for finding another worker in time; but mainly because she had travelled a considerable distance and not agreeing to the job would then mean she would not only lose the job opportunity, but also be out of pocket for the travel costs to the job location. This means, however, that workers can end up earning less than they should be getting – effectively undercutting other workers on the platform, lowering the amount they can earn as well.

This worker, as with many other workers, also has her partner track her movements while she undertaking work as she does not trust the platform to intervene if she gets into trouble. In more extreme cases, as reported by some respondents in the United States, some women workers will go to a client's home only if their partners can accompany them. While the woman worker does the cleaning, the partner waits for her in the car and will intervene if something goes wrong. Such self-imposed safety measures effectively pay one person's time despite two people's time being tied up in the job; the one who does the cleaning and the other who looks out for her. Of course, this hardly enables workers to gain independence from their family members, but instead contributes to a scenario where women workers need to be protected and watched. This is particularly problematic for those workers who are in abusive familial situations, or who are seeking financial independence from their families.

The gendered spectrum of discrimination

When asked about gender-based discrimination in platform work, Janaki Srinivasan, Fairwork India, mused that “We know ... pay disparities are not so black and white. It's not enshrined in a contract that [pay] is very explicitly unequal. But it's about how it pans out, given how gender works.” Srinivasan's comment is evidenced by a survey conducted by Rest of the World in 2021 with almost 5000 gig workers across 15 countries. This survey found that women were less likely to be working in higher-paying forms of gig work, and when women were doing the same work as men, they earned less overall.²⁶ However, it is rare to find contracts

that explicitly state that women or gender minorities will be paid less. Instead, as this section of the report argues, the discrimination these groups face is what effectively marginalizes them and prevents them from engaging in work that is compensated fairly.

As mentioned before, in ride-hailing and courier services, all genders report experiencing discrimination and feeling unsafe, especially when it comes to working at night and going to neighbourhoods that are perceived to be dangerous. However, a reoccurring narrative in the mainstream media is that of the platform worker, (particularly the male, brown or black, ride-hailing driver) as an untrustworthy potential sexual predator who embodies a racialized threat to the (female) client. Platforms allow this narrative to inform their daily operations, typically upholding the client's account of harassment over the worker's.²⁷ The presence of women and gender minority workers is absent in this narrative of male workers versus female clients, but sexual harassment can go in the other direction – a 2022 Focus on Labour Exploitation percent of women and non-binary respondents performing app-based deliveries experienced sexual harassment.²⁸ Most platforms do not explicitly put in place safeguards for or promote the hiring of women and gender minorities. For instance, Fairwork finds that less than 20 percent of the platforms that we have looked at (81 of 442, in the last four years), can evidence meaningfully providing equity in their management processes. When platforms do discuss gender issues in relation to their workers, there is a tendency to represent women as being at risk – and react to this by limiting the access these groups have to their services. For instance, some platforms take measures such as unilaterally banning women from working after dark or in client-facing roles as a way to reduce the level of risk they face (see section III on Techno-solutionism for more details about these measures).

Through such measures platforms perpetuate the idea that the experience of women platform workers is primarily characterised by lack of safety. This is also apparent in some platforms' public relation campaigns; For instance, Uber in its 2023 International Women's Day news release highlighted the “women rider preference” feature which allows women and non-binary drivers to pick up only women riders as a way in which it is “advancing gender equality” by providing these workers “additional peace of mind”.²⁹ Such gendered depictions of platform work being unsafe for women can paradoxically increase the barriers that women face in doing this type of work in some cultural contexts; As Olayinka

David-West, Fairwork Nigeria, comments “A woman, [when] she gets married, her husband might now say, ‘Oh, stop working, or do I don’t want to do this type of work because it’s dangerous, you’re susceptible to sexual harassment.’” This emphasis on safety as a gendered issue effectively makes such work stigmatised for women. Again, in Nigeria, Lawal Ayobami, a female ride-hailing driver quoted in the Premium Times, discusses how “A fellow woman like you will see you on the wheel and the next thing that comes to her mind is that you are wayward.”³⁰ In this case the word “wayward” signifies that she is sexually available, and she goes on to recount that “Sometimes when you pick a man or woman, he or she will be staring at you via the mirror and the next thing he is asking you to go to a hotel with him.” Lawal Ayobami experiences this as disrespectful and harassing behaviour, suggesting that as a woman doing so-called man’s work, she is somehow breaking social taboos on appropriate female behaviour and can thus be preyed on.³¹ Men and gender minorities also have to deal with stigmas attached to the fact that this type of work is understood be ‘masculine’ and feel compelled to change their behaviour and appearance to fit cisgender stereotypes. For instance, in Mexico, one ride-hail driver shared with Fairwork s, prompting him to consider cutting it.

Moreover, such a framing of safety as a gendered issue misses the fact that both men and women are at risk from crime, abusive clients and sexual harassment. Both in the Philippines and Argentina, male ride-hailing workers told us about being solicited for sex by male passengers. These encounters are experienced by most workers in the interviews as incidents of sexual harassment but also said that they feel powerless to report them to platforms which are generally unresponsive to their issues. Moreover, it places them in a difficult situation where they fear if they refuse the passenger in a way that leads them to take offence, they will get a bad rating (see Section IV on inflexibility for a more detailed discussion on the consequences of bad ratings). From Fairwork research, it seems that most workers do refuse these passengers but at least in one incident a driver told us that he felt compelled to say yes because he needed the additional earnings. This, again, points to both how being paid a living wage is necessary for platform workers and that there need to better mechanisms through which to report sexual harassment.

Instead of assigning who is safe and unsafe into the binaries of male and female, it is more accurate to think of vulnerability as a spectrum, with certain identities being

more vulnerable. Mishal Khan, Fairwork USA, exemplifies this approach:

A lot of people [in our interviews] talked about being really worried and feeling very unsafe going into neighbourhoods where there were no lights, for example. And I know that in the South... people are actually worried about being shot. ... Like if you’re a black woman, and you go into a white neighbourhood in the middle of the night, and there’s no streetlights, and there’s no porch light or anything like that. That’s a huge security issue for both men and women. But I think women feel even more vulnerable in those kinds of settings.

This example highlights the need for platforms to track and inform workers about the infrastructural gaps in an area so that they can make an informed decision when deciding whether they should take jobs in a particular area. Moreover, platforms should leverage their considerable clout with city and local governments to advocate for better neighbourhood infrastructure and improved safety, particularly for minorities.

Part of the reason women and gender minorities feel vulnerable is due to them being isolated at work because of their gender identity. Janaki Srinivasan, Fairwork India, describes this:

We have seen that [worker] hangout spots become where people learn how to better ply their trade and work better women are not often part of these hangout groups. [There was] this woman [in an interview, who] basically said she felt very unwelcome. And by her colleagues, this is not from the management, but her colleagues were pretty much like, “Why are you doing this?” and it was the opposite of morale boosting... And she felt uncomfortable, she didn’t feel part of that group.

As this quote shows, discrimination from fellow workers can lead to women being isolated and actively impedes their ability to learn from other workers on how to maximize their earnings. It can cement inequalities between male and female colleagues, as well as effectively lead women to leave the platform.

Moreover, such isolation effectively prevents women and gender minorities from forming part of a collective group. Eduardo Carrillo, Fairwork Paraguay, reflects that social media groups set up for workers end up being “use[d] for

different purposes, like ... a group of friends. They [male riders] use it for ...social activities, but then they also share a lot of porn.” Carrillo commented that women do not feel welcome in such spaces. Similarly, Rafael Grohmann, Fairwork Brazil, comments that workers in ride-hailing and courier services tend to be socially conservative around LGBTQIA+ issues, making these spaces fraught for gender minorities. This isolation of women and gender minorities effectively reduces their ability to get traction with platforms and get their needs met.

Fairwork research has shown that few platforms (on the order of around 81 of the 441 platforms we scored over the last four years) can evidence that meaningful anti-discrimination policies are implemented. In some cases, anti-discrimination policies may overlook workers’ need to prioritise their own safety and security while undertaking jobs. One line from Uber’s anti-discrimination policy tells drivers and couriers that: “Intentionally refusing or cancelling requests solely for the purpose of avoiding a particular neighbourhood due to the characteristics of the people or businesses that are located in that area is not allowed.”³² While such a statement may be well-intentioned, it misses the point that workers may feel unsafe in certain neighbourhoods, and this might be due to their own identity and demographic characteristics.

It is important to acknowledge that across the world, there are platforms anxious to prove that they are an “anti-racist company” (Uber), that they “celebrate difference” (Deliveroo) or that they are “committed” to increasing women couriers (Swiggy). However, increasingly, it appears that platforms are more responsive to those allegations of discrimination and poor treatment that have media coverage, but few marginalized workers can command this attention.³³ Platforms’ lack of action in meaningfully tackling discrimination makes their work unsafe for all their workers. Their tendency to see gendered identities as discreet categories of being (non)vulnerable places their workers at risk and make their work harder for women and gender minorities to access and conduct. As such they end up cementing gender divides and inequalities.

Women’s Initiatives: Lady Ride-hailing Association: Instituting Safety in lieu of platform support

In the Philippines, women ride-hailing drivers that ride motorbikes, as a minority, rarely raise issues such as sexual harassment with platforms. In lieu of structured support from platforms, as Cheryl Ruth R. Soriano, Fairwork, Philippines, explained, these workers often think ‘what would platforms really do ... it would just be faster if we acted on it’. As a result, the Lady Ride-hailing Association in the Philippines created a holder to attach to bikes that passengers could hold on to, to avoid passengers holding on to their waists:

[T]hey managed to contract a cheaper cost for installing that thing where the passenger can hold. So, it’s very simple solution. But it was a solution that was achieved because of the mutual aid of these lady riders that realised the struggle, but then also realised that the platform is not going to do anything in relation to those very specific struggles that they as women riders are experiencing.

This not only highlights the importance of safety equipment for women ride-hailing workers but indicates that dialogue between platforms and workers can enable workers to share the specific struggles that they face and how to overcome them with simple solutions.

SECTION III

Techno-discrimination and techno-solutionism

Techno-discrimination

Amplified by already deep-rooted societal inequities, gendered inequalities emerge through platforms' technological operations and infrastructures, built into the very way that they function. This can give rise to multiple forms of discrimination faced by workers when platforms are actually used. These discriminations are hugely detrimental, often leading to inequities in access to work, adequate safety measures, and customer discrimination.

As many platforms allow workers' pictures, names and gender to be displayed on the platform's application or website interface, customers' social prejudices on gender as well as other characteristics can shape their decisions and preferences on the platforms, such as cancelling orders. Such customer actions can have drastic effects on workers. For example, in Fairwork research in Nigeria and the Philippines, women ride-hailing workers have reported frequent cancellations. As Olayinka David-West, Fairwork Nigeria, explained when discussing women ride hailing workers' experiences in Nigeria, some people believe that women are bad drivers and will think "Oh, it's a woman driving, then cancel the ride" (Interview with Olayinka David-West, Fairwork Nigeria). Similar experiences are had by women in North America.³⁴ And while platforms may respond to these cancellation rates by removing or masking names, pictures and other details from customers who are booking services, workers can continue to face discrimination when interacting with customers. As Cheryl Ruth R. Soriano, Fairwork Philippines, explained, while relaying a worker's story:

A worker also told me that the customer asked them, "do you want me to drive instead? You're a lady; do you want me to drive instead?" ... she seemed very annoyed about that.

In Indonesia there are similar reports of some women having almost half of their ride-hailing bookings cancelled by customers once they realised it was a woman driver. One woman who was a motorcycle driver felt a requirement to ask passengers that were men at the beginning of a trip whether they were okay with her being a woman, and if they would prefer to drive themselves (which many men did).³⁵

Such social prejudices act as a vicious circle, further deterring women from taking up this work. And while some platforms offer payments to workers for cancelled jobs, often this does not amount to what workers could have earned, if they were able to take up the work.

Gender minorities also face discrimination from customers who expect cis-gender workers. As reported in Fairwork's Paraguay Report 2022, one worker's platform account was blocked for two weeks after a customer complained to the platform that the worker was transgender.

And while platforms can certainly mask workers' gender details from customers, this will not eradicate gender-based discrimination altogether—a gender minority domestic worker who was interviewed for Fairwork's Argentina research told of the discrimination they faced when a customer refused to allow them to enter the property to carry out the work. Not only does this kind of discrimination have huge effects on the mental health of workers, but it also generates high opportunity costs for the time and money workers spend on travelling to jobs.

Gendered discrimination on platforms is also amplified by other forms of social oppression. Some platforms institute models whereby clients choose workers themselves based on worker information (name, picture, ethnicity, age, expertise etc.). In Egypt, one domestic work platform

allows customers to choose between Egyptian or Sudanese workers. For platforms that allow names and pictures to be displayed, many elements of a worker's social identity (including race, gender, ethnicity) can easily be read. Across platforms, research has shown that social identity often determines whether workers are chosen for jobs or not.^{36 37}

In the UK, a worker on the beauty platform, Secret Spa, explained to us that as a black woman she experiences racism when it comes to hair and make-up treatments, which affects her ratings and comments. Given that the platform operates using a model through which customers choose workers from a list of possible options, public ratings and comments play a significant role in customers' decisions. In some cases, customers will complain to the platform that they are unhappy with the service months after it has taken place, and request a full refund, resulting in complete non-payment for the worker. On some platforms, workers might be asked to repeat the service with no compensation, either for the job itself or travel time.

We also see gendered differences in earning potentials on platforms. In the US, for example, research by Cook et al. (2021) has indicated a gender pay gap among Uber ride hailing workers.³⁸ Many digital labour platforms have dynamic pricing models, whereby rates for services are highly flexible and regularly changing. For example, in ride hailing work, there are numerous factors that contribute to deciding the price of a trip. As Uber has said themselves, "[W]e now have advanced technology that uses years of data and learning to find a competitive price for the time of day, location and distance of the trip."³⁹ Part of these models include accounting for increasing demand, during which prices surge and workers can increase their earnings per job. However, given that surges often happen in the evening and at night, women, who often have safety concerns, are often less able to access the benefits of surge prices. Mishal Khan, Fairwork US, told us that many women avoid working at night in ride hailing work:

A lot of men said that that's how they do it, they just go out whenever there's a surge. And women ... don't have that sort of luxury to do that. Nobody wanted to deal with drunk drivers... some women, however, compromise their own safety and discount risks of the job because their priority is making money.

Given that dynamic pricing models compensate workers based on demand rather than safer working times, women will have to weigh up risks with earning potential. As

discussed in the previous section, risks will be further amplified for particular women, for example based on their race, ethnicity or class, and will be required to weigh up these additional risks.

To check that workers are who they say they are—although it still shows a significant failure rate, and there is an ongoing legal case in the UK against Uber Eats due to the failure of its facial recognition app in recognising a black worker.⁴⁰ A study by MIT Media Lab's Civic Media group found that there was an error rate of 34.7 per cent for dark-skinned women in a similar version of the Microsoft FACE API software.⁴¹ The implications of inaccurate facial recognition systems can be fundamental when it comes to access to work, with hugely detrimental potentials for brown and black women workers.⁴²

The fallout of technological discrimination via cancellations, deactivations, ratings, comments, complaints, refunds, dynamic pricing, and facial recognition further exacerbates gendered inequalities in platform work. And while some platforms put mechanisms in place to resolve these issues, they often fall short of meaningful change, or worse, amplify gendered inequalities.

Techno-solutionism

Technological solutions are often inadequate in solving inequities that emerge in platform work, being designed around "simplified use cases rather than complex abuse cases."⁴³ This inadequacy stems from the fact that social problems emerging in platform work have long histories rooted in uneven power relations that pre-date digital platforms. Quick fix technical solutions—so-called techno-fixes—risk enhancing these problems, rather than solving them.

When it comes to gender and platform work, techno-fixes tend to reify gendered divides, even when positioned as attempting to remedy them. For example, many women, across the world, experience threats of sexual and gendered violence, particularly at night. In platform work such as ride hailing or food delivery, workers are required to drive around cities, facing the possibility of lack of safety in their interactions with customers or in the areas that they are servicing. Numerous reports continue to illuminate lack of safety for women workers on platforms across the world.⁴⁴

^{45 46}

In Fairwork's research we have found numerous examples of platforms instituting technological solutions as safety

measures to protect women workers from experiencing sexual harassment and violence. In India, food delivery platform Swiggy previously introduced a measure which automatically stopped women workers using the platform after 6pm. Positioned as a “safety measure”, this not only forced women to reduce their earnings as a result of being barred from using the platform at the dinner peak between seven and eleven at night, but it also reinforced a gendered narrative that women should be kept off the streets at night, with the effects of this faced by women workers.

Similarly, the same platform, when starting its grocery delivery service, assumed that groceries were too heavy for women to carry and therefore did not offer these jobs to women. Later they received feedback from women delivery partners that this is hampering their opportunities to earn (Interview with Mounika Neerukonda and Janaki Srinivasan, Fairwork India). Both measures, which stopped women workers working at night and accessing grocery delivery jobs, were later removed but demonstrate the ways in which platforms’ quick-fix technological solutions can radically change workers’ abilities to earn, and thereby reify social divides such as earning potentials between men and women workers.

In Indonesia, Grab introduced a programme called “Lady Grab” which blocked its women workers from receiving ride-hailing bookings, directing them instead to package and food delivery orders. This was a ‘safety’ measure instituted to ensure that women workers could avoid longer contact times with customers. Beyond its unfortunate name, this measure failed to account for the significant income earning opportunities that are lost through inaccessibility of ride-hailing work.⁴⁷ The logic behind this initiative, which puts the burden of earning loss on women as a safety measure, is also reflected in Grab’s customer-oriented gender safety initiative “GrabCar for Women” which was launched in Indonesia in March 2023. The service charges a premium to travel with driver-partners that have passed a “psychological evaluation that assesses their personality traits, including any proclivity towards engaging in sexual violence or other criminal behaviours.”⁴⁸ Not only does the platform insinuate that harassment and violence can be read through traits without providing any detailed information on how the psychological evaluation process is conducted, but they also reinforce the idea that ride hailing workers, who are predominantly working-class men in Indonesia, are necessarily dangerous. In addition, they profit from this very idea as women customers are charged more to access ‘safe’ rides. We do

not see similar initiatives offered on the platform tailored to protecting workers, particularly women ride hailing workers, who are instead restricted from ride-hailing work altogether.

Some platforms put in measures to track workers’ whereabouts, but these can sometimes be ineffective as safety measures. Helen (not her real name), a UK-based platform beauty worker, told us that:

[Y]ou have like three different steps on the app. So you click “on way” so the client has a notification when I’m on the way. And also they have a notification when ... I’m on the way. And also then as soon as I arrive there I click on “check in” so the platform and client get a notification, and then I set the same when I’m leaving the client, so I press “checkout”, so if I don’t press checkout, after like a few hours they should have a warning or something so they should contact me to make sure I’m okay. So should work in this way.

When we asked her whether the platforms follow up if a worker does not “check out”, Helen told us that “it happened twice that I forgot. Once they called me and another time, they didn’t call me”. These kinds of measures only work if platforms have clear follow-up processes to check workers’ safety. While the mechanism in this case was there, it was at least once ineffective, which could potentially mean a worker having their safety compromised for a significant amount of time. Similarly, while many platforms have SOS or panic buttons built into their functions, these should also be checked by platforms or third-party organisations for effectiveness. That said, as Yoon and Ma⁴⁹ point out, this measure can sometimes miss the point as an overwhelming amount of harassment is much more subtle, and involving law enforcement could potentially aggravate an already dangerous situation.

Relatedly, many platforms, particularly in ride-hailing and food delivery, track workers’ movements using GPS data, sharing this data with customers. This kind of tracking is often passed off as a safety measure⁵⁰, but what it does in practice is allow a worker’s movements to be continually traced. As Mounika Neerukonda, Fairwork India, explained

[I]t’s for the customer’s benefit ... to make sure that a particular worker is coming to their desired location at the particular time that was promised ... So for example, like for Uber or for, you know, food delivery, companies [are] starting to ...track your worker location. Where you can see, as a customer, where

your particular worker is. And sometimes that means you end up seeing which locality they're coming from which again, hinders safety, especially for women workers.

Having the ability to track the exact movements of workers as they move through the city can put workers at risk as they can be targeted at any time.

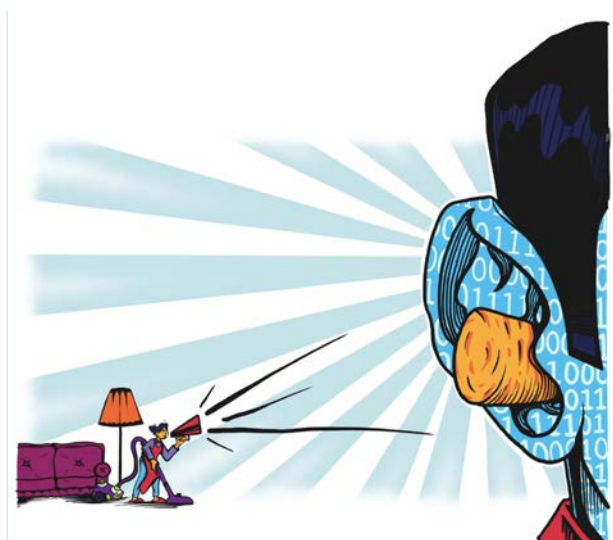
Some platforms offer human support to workers who experience unsafe situations. In Egypt and Bangladesh, some home services platforms allocate work not through algorithms or any automated function, but through back-office humans. As a result, in the Egyptian context when workers raise concerns to office managers, they fear it will lead to being allocated less work. As Batoul Al Mehdar, Fairwork Egypt, told us:

One of the workers we interviewed also said that if they raise a lot of complaints or a lot of concerns, a lot of the time the platform will just start side-lining them and will start giving them fewer orders ... so they just avoid raising concerns in general.

Similar to algorithmic and automated modes of work allocation that can result in punitive outcomes for workers, some human representatives can also discriminate against workers who raise concerns, deterring them from doing so.

Safety functions of platforms, whether SOS buttons or human response, should be checked by platforms for effectiveness.

Finally, the techno-solution of quality control via rating systems also falls short in protecting women workers. Giving a disproportionate power to customers, these automated reward and punishment systems can serve as metrics to determine work allocation, which must be navigated carefully by women workers.⁵¹ While the following section discusses the inflexible nature of these systems vis-à-vis gender, it is important to note here that research has pointed to biased ratings results for women workers on platforms, mirroring similar discriminations seen offline.⁵²



Women's Initiatives: Circulo Violeta, Mexico: A support network in the absence of platform accountability

Círculo Violeta is a WhatsApp group of 90 women platform ride-hailing drivers in the state of Yucatán, Mexico. The group is an offshoot of a larger mixed-gender ride-hailing driver support group. It provides both practical logistical help and a safe space for its drivers. This practical help includes the real-time tracking of drivers' movements to ensure that they are safe. They also collect information on each woman such as her blood group, ID numbers and emergency contacts that they can use if she is involved in an emergency. Moreover, the group has evolved to be a space where women can share their frustrations with the misogyny that they encounter in their workers. In some cases, this misogyny includes abusive encounters with clients, that leave women shaken and powerless. It has become an important site where workers can affirm the validity of their work and their right to be respected.

The rise of this group both points to the failure of platforms to provide basic working conditions and security to their women drivers as well as the difficulties encountered by women drivers operating in this industry. As such, the presence of this group, while a crucial resource for the women within it, is also indicative of the mental and emotional costs that platform work imposes on women, particularly when platforms are unresponsive and fail to support their drivers against bad clients.

SECTION IV

One-sided flexibility: A gendered take

“A parent who needs a flexible work schedule due to childcare responsibilities. An aspiring entrepreneur who does side gigs in her spare time while hustling to make it big. A retiree who wants to stay engaged by working whenever he feels like it. Anecdotes like these abound as more people are drawn to the gig economy due to the flexibility that this form of work offers.”⁵³

Grab, 2021

This quote is taken from the website of multi-service (ride hailing and delivery) digital labour platform, Grab. It is the beginning of an article which attempts to show the benefits of so-called flexibility to its workers, based on survey data collected by the platform. Digital labour platforms have been touted as offering greater flexibility to workers, employers and customers.⁵⁴ But the promises of “[drive] when you want, make what you need”⁵⁵ (Uber) and “doing work that fits around your life”⁵⁶ (Deliveroo), which centre time as the key component of flexible work, fall short when we examine worker experiences.⁵⁷ Through a gendered analysis, we show here how platform work can result in inflexible conditions for women platform workers. Indeed, workers are constrained by various elements of platform work which limit the amount of freedom they have in choosing work timings. Not only does inflexibility result in inequity in terms of access to work and earnings, but it also negates a history of legislative wins in formal work sectors in many contexts. Benefits including maternity, care and sick leave, and workplace discrimination laws against protected categories, are examples of employee entitlements that platforms do not have to provide or adhere to if they operate self-employment models—as many do. As many platforms will argue that they are not responsible for providing benefits to workers who are not their direct employees⁵⁸, women and gender minority workers are left

without a basic safety net, compounded by the gendered inequalities that result from inflexibility in platform work.

Cancellations and Ratings

While platforms claim that workers are free to work when they want, in reality many workers experience inflexibility in accepting jobs, bound by the possibility of a high cancellation rate which will determine how much work they are allocated in the future. Mishal Khan, Fairwork US, told us that women ride-hailing workers who may experience unsafety in cities sometimes take extra safety risks or minimise safety threats, for example by going into unsafe areas, because they are worried about cancellation rates and how they may affect their overall standing on the platform. Platforms collect different kinds of metrics for workers cancelling jobs which affect workers differently. Many workers report, from their experiences of navigating platform work, that cancellation rates affect access to work or that it's not clear whether. This can affect workers to such an extent in the US, that some workers will choose to remain in unsafe situations rather than cancel jobs. Khan explained that some platforms' language around cancellation mechanisms are blurry:

[T]he mechanism is quite limited. It's just, “we won't penalise you if you cancel this job”. That's really it. But it's not clear if it affects your cancellation rate ... some people said it did, and some people said it didn't. So, I never heard anyone clearly articulate, we are completely empowered to leave a situation. There's always a sort of ambivalence about it. So, I feel like there's a very limited way for them to engage with the platform if something is happening.

In other words, it is not clear what non penalisation means, as some workers state that it may affect their cancellation rate, which could thereby affect their ability to access future work which itself is a form of penalisation. Khan added that feelings of inability to cancel are intensified by the fact that without clear guidance from platforms, some workers will

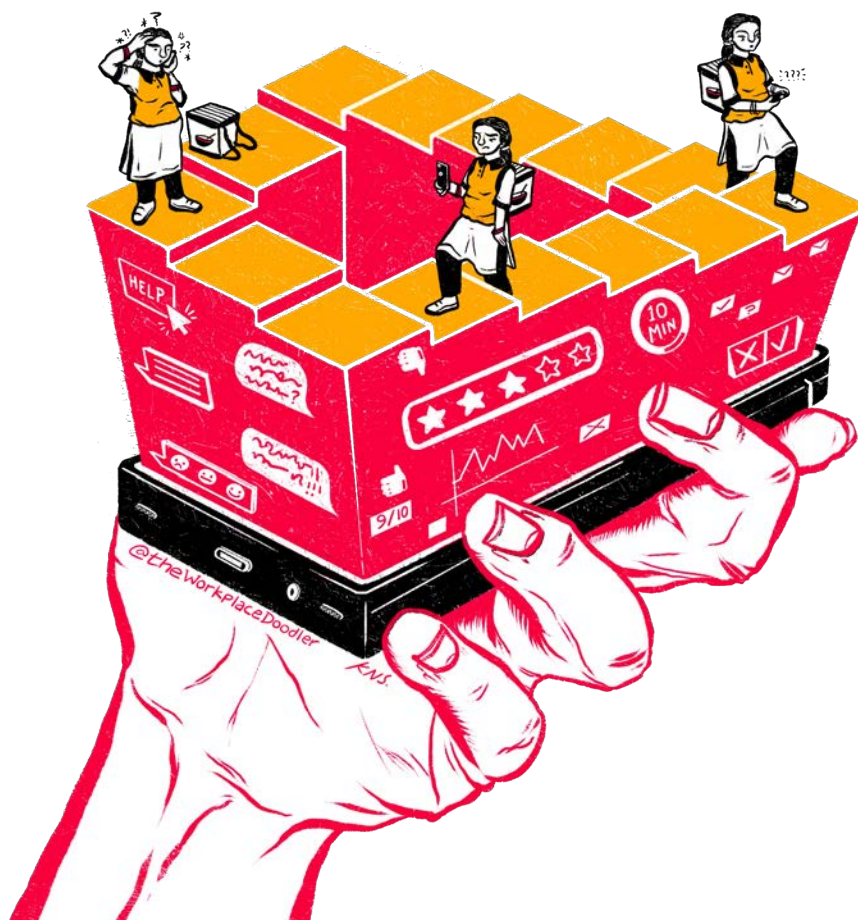
second guess intuition, questioning whether the situation is unsafe or not, as well as having to consider lost income if they leave. Some will take up their own safety measures such as carrying self-defence weapons or being prepared to fight (some had martial arts training).

The fear of cancellations affecting access to work can be felt less acutely among workers with higher ratings. A study on beauty workers on multi-service platform Urban Company in India found that women with higher ratings have more scope to cancel bookings, without experiencing many effects. However, we know that ratings often reflect social prejudice⁵⁹ ⁶⁰ ⁶¹ and do not always accurately represent workers' behaviour.⁶² This means that workers who experience lower ratings as a result of their identity positions (religion, caste, race, class, gender etc.) are even more restricted when it comes to cancelling jobs.

Fairwork's India team found that on Urban Company, some beauticians will go to a customer's house for a pre-booked beauty service, but once there, will be requested to do other forms of work, for example, cooking. Workers are constrained

from declining such work because it can affect their ratings. While Urban Company mandates that all additional work should be formally included as an "add-on" on the platform itself, this does not always happen. In some cases, the platform doesn't have the add-on clearly included on their app. For example, as one worker reported, during a leg wax a customer asked for their legs to be pressed as part of the service. Yet the pressing of legs is not an add-on that the worker can bill for in the app. Fairwork India reported that many workers will end up carrying out these extra tasks to avoid low ratings, even if they take extra time or are unpaid. These workers include migrant women from the northeast of India, who already experience multiple forms of marginalisation.

It's worth noting that these beauty workers already engage in at least 5 to 10 minutes of unpaid quality control work per shift as mandated by the platform. Workers are required to purchase all beauty products from the platform itself, and at the beginning of every trip they are responsible for, as Mounika Neerukonda, Fairwork India, explains,



[T]aking a selfie of the face, taking a selfie of the uniform, taking a selfie of the laid down product, and then tracking and scanning. Every product has a scanning code. So she scans it, and then the amount gets updated automatically, but there's a huge chunk of work that she has to do before starting the service itself.

This kind of platform surveillance results, over time, in multiple hours of unpaid work for workers.

Ratings can also affect workers' ability to work at the times they want to work. Some time ago, Urban Company as well as two other Indian platforms, Zomato and Swiggy, introduced slot-booking systems whereby workers must book work slots, several days ahead of time. Higher-rated workers had access to more choices in slot bookings, whilst lower-rated workers were left with fewer slots to choose from (Interview with Mounika Neerukonda and Janaki Srinivasan, Fairwork India).

Similarly, workers are sometimes required to carry out timely, unpaid work as a result of customers underestimating the amount of work required. On domestic cleaning platforms in Egypt with predominantly women workers, customers are required to state the size of rooms among other details of cleaning jobs in advance of the price being set by the platform. However, customers consistently underestimate the size of rooms and the amount of work required per job, leaving workers overworked and underpaid (Interview with Batoul Al Mehdar and Eisha Afifi, Fairwork Egypt). Similar findings are reported in Fairwork's US research. While some workers do not state ratings explicitly for the reason of taking on extra and unpaid work, in an environment where ratings determine whether a worker is chosen for a job, or

if ratings feed algorithmic systems which determine work allocation, the need to please customers is a theme we see across platform workers. As workers navigate rigid rating systems, they are unable to freely and flexibly choose when to work, and this experience is amplified for workers in more marginalised positions.

Debunking Digital Universality

In some contexts where smartphone ownership and digital literacy is less universal, platform workers experience the inflexibility smartphone-hosted platforms.⁶³ On one domestic work platform in Egypt, women workers did not always own a private smartphone. As Fairwork's Egypt team explained, in one case, a worker's whole family had access to only one smartphone which was managed by the worker's son. This worker did not have the digital literacy required to navigate on-demand work, for example, seeing a job on the app, accepting the job, and navigating GPS data to direct themselves to the relevant location. Instead, they relied on being given the location in advance by the platform's administrative staff, relying on their feature phone for communication. As a result, it often takes a substantial time for this worker to reach a service location, as they must continually ask members of the public for directions along the way and navigate transport systems accordingly (Interview with Batoul Al Mehdar and Eisha Afifi, Fairwork Egypt). The time it can sometimes take to navigate platform work signifies the inflexibility of the platform to adjust to diverse gendered cultures which determine working class women's digital ownership, access and literacy. Adjusting platform communications to different kinds of devices (e.g. calling workers to explain directions via different modes of transportation), could significantly reduce the time women spend on journeys to work.

Inflexibility beyond the worker and beyond the work

The inflexibility of platform work for women workers resonates beyond the workers themselves. As discussed earlier, given the lack of meaningful safety measures provided by many platforms, some domestic cleaning workers travel to work locations with partners or husbands as a safety measure, who wait in the car while services are completed. As Mishal Khan, Fairwork US, asserts, we should also consider



[T]his element of also utilising another human being's labour for one person's pay. He could be earning money instead of going out and sitting in the car while she does a cleaning job.

As an ad hoc security measure to fill in for the lack of meaningful safety measures for domestic cleaning workers, who work in the not-publicly-visible private households of customers, this provides an even larger opportunity cost for workers' family incomes, as a result of spending two people's time on one job. Khan explained that this was not a one-off instance, and was not only limited to home-based work but also extended to delivery work. Workers reported taking husbands and mothers with them if working at night and one worker reported that their husband will go and check out a neighbourhood ahead of jobs to ensure it is safe.

Finally, it is important to consider that workers in the platform economy are highly precarious, requiring their weekly earnings for survival, or experiencing high levels of debt. All of this determines their ability to not choose when to work. In the Philippines, workers will often set daily earning targets and will not finish their daily work unless those targets are met (Interview with Cheryll Ruth R. Soriano, Fairwork Philippines). South African domestic work platform SweepSouth have conducted multiple surveys with domestic workers, some of whom work on their platform. In their 2022 report, they found that many domestic workers report high levels of debt and feel 'hopeless' that they can pay back

their debt.⁶⁴ The report found that over half of South African respondents reported having debts with shops and stores. This again marks an inflexibility that workers experience as a result of their structural positions outside of the work itself, determining how the work is conducted.

As many of the examples in this section show, platforms' promises of freedom and flexibility in work timings fall short. Inflexibility in platform work is acutely experienced by women across contexts, who for different reasons, spend extra, unpaid time in navigating this work. This is compounded by the fact that, as discussed in earlier sections, many women platform workers report feeling unsafe working at night, and already regulate their working hours according to this. Gender minorities who fear discrimination on platforms and through platform work will also likely regulate work accordingly, although this is not something we heard about directly, given our limited sample of gender minority workers across the Fairwork countries.

Women's Initiatives: Señoritas Courier: Platform Co-operativism

In response to the pressure women and gender minorities face in commercial delivery companies, we see platform co-operatives being organised.

An example of this is Señoritas Courier, which was created in 2019 in the city of São Paulo, Brazil. They offer rider services by bicycle. The co-operative's key objective is to challenge labour precarity by organising to ensure decent work. This was a challenge for women, who would often go to job interviews elsewhere and be faced with questions such as "who's going to stay with your daughter when you're working?" or would be positioned as "too weak" for bicycle deliveries. The co-operative wanted to respond to these forms of structural gendered inequality by instituting more inclusive solutions for women and gender minorities.

While the co-operative aims to have its own platform, currently they operate through an online forum and a social media chat to manage orders with delivery workers. Their members as of 2022 were six women and one trans man. Notably, most members of Señoritas Courier are Latina and black women.⁶⁵

Recommendations for platforms, policymakers and consumers

This report demonstrates that left unchecked the platform economy defaults to perpetuating and amplifying gender divisions. Platforms' tendency towards gender blindness leads to the exclusion and marginalisation of women and gender minorities. As such, the growing reach of platform work risks undoing decades of work on improving worker participation and narrowing the gender pay gap.

Platforms must be more accountable to all their workers by guaranteeing fair pay, conditions, contracts, management and representation. Concretely, we recommend the following:

- Platform pricing structures such as dynamic pricing effectively institutionalise a gender pay gap as women and gender minorities are not always likely to be able to work during surge times. Moreover, few platforms can evidence paying workers above a living wage after costs (65 of 441 platforms we evaluated over the last four years). This constrains women and gender minorities from entering platform work full time, lowering work participation rates and perpetuating a gender pay gap. **Platforms should to pay all workers a living wage after costs and ensure consistent earnings between all genders.**
- Platforms fail to provide safe working conditions if they do not mitigate work-related risks and guarantee the right to a social safety net. **Platforms can encourage gender inclusivity by prioritising workers' safety and putting in place measures to facilitate workers' access to**

entitlements around parental leave, sick pay and insurance.

- **Platforms should prioritise worker safety in data collection and sharing information through their user interfaces.** Displaying workers' pictures, names, gender and other characteristics may enable clients to discriminate against workers based on their identity. **Some platforms do mask worker details from clients while they are booking services and offer compensation for cancelled jobs.** Yet this is not enough to combat those clients who cancel the job once they see the worker in person (even if the worker has already completed part of the job), nor does it offset lost earnings. **Platforms that manage the assigning and cancelling of services should:**
 1. **Conduct audits on cancellation rates to capture cases of clients who have a repeated pattern in cancelling jobs based on the worker's gender identity.** These clients should be reviewed and warned, and if the pattern continues removed from the platform. Similarly, clients who have stated that they cancelled the job because of a worker's identity or appearance should be treated as behaving in an abusive manner and be banned.
 2. **Have a clear cancellation policy and use those funds to reimburse workers for costs and lost earnings in cancelled jobs.**

3. Arrange counselling and support for affected workers, recognising that experiencing discrimination is traumatising and lowers self-esteem. Larger platforms can consider hiring an in-house counsellor for this.

4. Never give clients the ability to select workers based on their ethnicity, nationality, caste, religion or other identity characteristics. Some platforms allow workers to choose the gender of clients, and vice versa. While we recognise, for safety considerations, these services are important for both workers and clients, such offerings do not combat broader patterns of gender-based harassment and they limit clients' access to such services and lower workers' earning power. **In the short term, platforms should make such offerings available but recognise that it should be just one of a series of measures to combat harassment against women and gender minorities as well as compensate workers who take part in such schemes for lost earnings.**

- Few platforms (81 of the 441 platforms we evaluated over the last four years) can evidence meaningful anti-discrimination policies. All platforms should have anti-discrimination policies that safeguard workers from harassment. Platforms should institute mechanisms that test these policies for effectiveness by regularly seeking worker feedback on their experiences of discrimination.
- Women and gender minorities are often isolated in platform work. Platforms should enable interaction among women and gender minorities by setting up social media groups for workers (without managerial oversight) and organising in-person events which they can attend. They should reach out to existing women and gender minority-led collectives, associations and trade unions, as well as recognise and bargain with them.

Given, that some existing practices of platforms inadvertently lead to discrimination and further isolation of women and gender minorities:

- We caution against platforms placing workers

under extreme levels of surveillance. Measures such as sharing GPS tracking with customers, are ineffective safety measures that put workers at risk as they can be followed by clients. Platforms should institute processes to check workers' safety. Similarly, SOS or panic buttons should be checked by platforms or third-party organisations for effectiveness. Harassment can be difficult for workers to discuss. Platforms should train management to sensitively discuss these issues with workers. Evidence from Fairwork's research in Bangladesh and Serbia with platforms like Uradi-zaradi suggest that such human involvement makes it easier for workers to raise concerns and leads to safer conditions.

- Platform's technological solutions to safety issues are often inadequate. In general, platforms should evaluate whether technological solutions decrease workers' abilities to earn and compensate for this loss.
- Some platforms use so-called protective policies such as allowing workers to choose the gender of their clients. Such responses enforce gender-based segregation and reduce earning opportunities. Instead, workers ought to be able to turn to platforms for support with abusive clients. Yet, only a few platforms provide workers with the option to rate and flag clients who harass them. Fewer still ban clients permanently from their app or pursue these clients legally. These are simple measures that every platform should implement.
- Relatedly, even though some platforms urge workers to cancel jobs if they feel unsafe there's little clarity amongst workers on how this affects their ability to get jobs in the future. Platforms need to clearly communicate and explicitly assure workers that they will not be penalised for cancelling jobs because of safety concerns by being offered fewer jobs or being placed in lower payment tiers.
- Moreover, ratings reflect social prejudice and do not always accurately represent workers' behaviour. It is thus imperative that such discrimination is accounted for and that platforms provide avenues through which workers can

dispute any ratings without penalty.

Platforms should also consider how to make their work more accessible and better compensated for women and gender minorities.

- **The (lack of) information that platforms provide to clients and workers leads to increased vulnerability, particularly for work that requires entering private homes. The workers we spoke to prefer those platforms that build trust by requiring background checks and that undertake identity verification of both workers and clients. All platforms should adopt these measures.**
- **The gender digital divide restricts access to platforms. Some platforms actively teach women workers digital skills and provide women with budget smartphones or data packages as part of their onboarding process. Such measures should be more widely implemented.**
- **High upfront costs are a barrier in accessing platform work. Platforms' loans must have reasonable interest rates and not lock in workers to keep working for that platform through a debt trap.**
- **Platforms can struggle to monetise all forms of work that workers might be requested to complete by clients. Platforms should train workers on exactly what they are required to do and provide them with a communication channel to report cases where they are requested to do more than the contracted work. Platforms should ban clients who are repeat offenders. They should also inform clients that workers will only do the stipulated tasks and that repeatedly requesting additional work could result in them being banned from the platform.**

The regulatory environment plays a crucial role in supporting better working conditions for women and gender minorities. Yet, most countries lag in regulating the platform economy. While platform work thrives on worker arrangements under the rubric of so-called independent contractors or self-employed workers, the lack of social protection allows for conditions of informal, exploitative work to flourish, which disproportionately impacts women and gender minorities. Platforms are often built with an archetypal worker who

is assumed to be a cis-gender man, with apparently no constraints of family, disability or other marginalised identity characteristics. Yet in propagating this image, other workers are effectively made invisible. Policy makers should consider the experiences of women and gender minorities as well as other minority groups. Concretely, they should do the following:

- **Require platforms to share gender disaggregated information on the number of active workers they have. Currently, the lack of data on platform workers allows platforms to operate with little transparency and limits the ability of governments to hold them to account for their treatment of workers. Gender disaggregated data is a crucial starting point towards understanding which sectors have barriers towards women's workforce participation.**
- **Much of the European Union and the United Kingdom require large employers to report their annual gender pay gap data. Similar requirements should be put in place for platforms who have a comparable number of active workers. This data should be further contextualised by information on the hours worked and whether algorithmic management practices disproportionately discriminate against women and gender minorities.**
- **Occupational health standards should be updated to account for platform worker's realities where they are often going from one private home to the next. Platforms should be liable for accident reporting and those platforms involved in assigning, monitoring or being compensated in any way (including subscriptions, commissions and one-off fees from workers) should be required to provide adequate safety gear for active workers.**
- **Platform workers should be granted access to existing worker tribunals and legal mechanisms around workplace discrimination and harassment particularly around unfair platform policies that constrain women and gender minorities' earning potentials.**
- **Consult and incorporate the advice of women and gender minorities workers collectives and trade unions in platform work-related regulation**

initiatives at all stages.

- **Enshrine rules around providing workers fair pay, conditions, contracts, management and representation as basic protections against exploitative working conditions. Fairwork's Global Manifesto: Fairer Platform Work provides further insights on how policy makers can ensure a fairer platform economy for all.**⁶⁶

Finally, consumers are uniquely positioned to advocate and pressure for better working condition for all workers. For institutional consumers, this can be achieved through the Fairwork Pledge. This pledge leverages the power of organisations' procurement, investment, and partnership policies to support fairer platform work. Organisations like universities, schools, businesses, and charities who make use of platform labour can make a difference by supporting the best labour practices, guided by our five principles of fair work. Organisations who sign the pledge get to display our badge on company materials.

The pledge constitutes two levels. This first is as an official Fairwork Supporter, which entails publicly demonstrating support for fairer platform work, and making resources available to staff and members to help them in deciding which platforms to engage with. A second level of the pledge entails organisations committing to concrete and meaningful changes in their own practices as official Fairwork Partners, for example by committing to using better-rated platforms where there is a choice. Meatspace Press have become official Fairwork Partners in the UK.

At an individual level, consumers should consult Fairwork country scorecards while making consumption decisions. Doing so sends a strong signal to platforms that consumers do care about how workers are treated and will not tolerate those platforms that exploit them.

There is nothing inevitable about poor working conditions or entrenched gender inequities in the platform economy. Despite their claims to the contrary, platforms have substantial control over the nature of the jobs that they mediate. Workers who find their jobs through platforms are ultimately still workers, and there is no basis for denying them the key rights and protections that their counterparts in the formal sector have long enjoyed. Our scores show that the platform economy, as we know it today, already takes many forms, with some platforms displaying greater concern for workers' needs than others. This means that

we do not need to accept low pay, poor conditions, inequity, and a lack of agency and voice as the norm. Nor do we have to accept gender-based discrimination in the way in which platforms operate. We hope that our work – by highlighting the contours of today's platform economy – paints a picture of what it could become.

APPENDIX I

Fairwork Scoring System

Which companies are covered by the Fairwork principles?

The International Labour Organisation (ILO) defines a “digital labour platform” as an enterprise that mediates and facilitates “labour exchange between different users, such as businesses, workers and consumers”. That includes digital labour “marketplaces” where “businesses set up the tasks and requirements and the platforms match these to a global pool of workers who can complete the tasks within the specified time”. Marketplaces that do not facilitate labour exchanges - for example, Airbnb (which matches owners of accommodation with those seeking to rent short-term accommodation) and eBay (which matches buyers and sellers of goods) - are excluded from the definition. The ILO’s definition of “digital labour platform” is widely accepted and includes many different business models.

Fairwork’s research covers digital labour platforms that fall within this definition that aim to connect individual service providers with consumers of the service through the platform interface. Fairwork’s research does not cover platforms that mediate offers of employment between individuals and employers (whether on a long-term or a temporary basis).

Fairwork distinguishes between two types of these platforms. The first is ‘geographically-tethered’ platforms where the work is required to be done in a particular location such as delivering food from a restaurant to an

apartment, driving a person from one part of town to another or cleaning. These are often referred to as ‘gig work platforms’. The second is ‘cloudwork’ platforms where the work can, in theory, be performed from any location via the internet.

The thresholds for meeting each principle are different for location-based and cloudwork platforms because location-based work platforms can be benchmarked against local market factors, risks/harms, and regulations that apply in that country. In contrast, cloudwork platforms cannot because (by their nature) the work be performed from anywhere and so different market factors, risks/harms, and regulations apply, depending on where the work is performed.

The platforms covered by Fairwork’s research have different business, revenue, and governance models, including employment-based, subcontractor, commission-based, franchise, piece-rate, shift-based, and subscription models. Some of those models involve the platforms making direct payments to workers (including through sub-contractors).









How does the scoring system work?

The five Principles of Fairwork were developed through an extensive literature review of published research on job quality, stakeholder meetings at UNCTAD and the ILO in Geneva (involving platform operators, policymakers, trade unions, and academics), and in-country meetings with local stakeholders.

Each Fairwork Principle is divided into two thresholds. Accordingly, for each Principle, the scoring system allows the first to be awarded corresponding to the first

threshold and an additional second point to be awarded corresponding to the second threshold (see Table 1). The second point under each Principle can only be awarded if the first point for that Principle has been awarded. The thresholds specify the evidence required for a platform to receive a given point. Where no verifiable evidence is available that meets a given threshold, the platform is not awarded that point.

Table 1 Fairwork: Scoring System

Principles	First point	Second point	Total
 Principle 1: Fair Pay	 Ensures workers earn at least the local minimum wage after costs	 Ensures workers earn at least a local living wage after costs	 2
 Principle 2: Fair Conditions	 Mitigates task-specific risks	 Provides a safety net	 2
 Principle 3: Fair Contracts	 Provides clear and transparent terms and conditions	 Ensures that no unfair contract terms are imposed	 2
 Principle 4: Fair Management	 Provides due process for decisions affecting workers	 Provides equity in the management process	 2
 Principle 5: Fair Representation	 Assures freedom of association and the expression of collective worker voice	 Supports democratic governance	 2

Maximum possible Fairwork Score



Principle 1: Fair Pay

1.1 - Ensures workers earn at least the local minimum wage after costs (one point)

Platform workers often have substantial work-related costs to cover, such as transport between jobs, supplies, or fuel, insurance, and maintenance on a vehicle. Workers' costs sometimes mean their take-home earnings may fall below the local minimum wage. Workers also absorb the costs of extra time commitment, when they spend time waiting or travelling between jobs, or other unpaid activities necessary for their work, such as mandatory training, which are also considered active hours. To achieve this point platforms must ensure that work-related costs do not push workers below local minimum wage.

The platform takes appropriate steps to ensure both of the following:

- Payment must be on time and in-full.
- Workers earn at least the local minimum wage, or the wage set by collective sectoral agreement (whichever is higher) in the place where they work, in their active hours, after costs.

1.2 - Ensures workers earn at least a local living wage after costs (one additional point)

In some places, the minimum wage is not enough to allow workers to afford a basic but decent standard of living. To achieve this point platforms must ensure that work-related costs do not push workers below local living wage.

The platform takes appropriate steps to ensure the following:

- Workers earn at least a local living wage, or the wage set by collective sectoral agreement (whichever is higher) in the place where they work, in their active hours, after costs.

Principle 2: Fair Conditions

2.1 - Mitigates task-specific risks (one point)

Platform workers may encounter a number of risks in the course of their work, including accidents and injuries, harmful materials, and crime and violence. To achieve this point platforms must show that they are aware of these risks and take basic steps to mitigate them.

The platform must satisfy the following:

- Adequate equipment and training is provided to protect workers' health and safety from task-specific risks. These should be implemented at no additional cost to the worker.
- The platform mitigates the risks of lone working by providing adequate support and designing processes with occupational safety and health in mind.

2.2 - Ensures safe working conditions and a safety net (one additional point)

Platform workers are vulnerable to the possibility of abruptly losing their income as the result of unexpected or external circumstances, such as sickness or injury. Most countries provide a social safety net to ensure workers don't experience sudden poverty due to circumstances outside their control. However, platform workers usually don't qualify for protections such as sick pay, because of their independent contractor status. In recognition of the fact that most workers are dependent on income they earn from platform work, platforms should ensure that workers are compensated for loss of income due to inability to work. In addition, platforms must minimise the risk of sickness and injury even when all the basic steps have been taken.

The platform must satisfy ALL of the following:

- Platforms take meaningful steps to ensure that workers do not suffer significant costs as a result of accident, injury or disease resulting from work.
- Workers should be compensated for income loss due to inability to work commensurate with the worker's average earnings over the past three months.
- Where workers are unable to work for an extended period due to unexpected circumstances, their standing on the platform is not negatively impacted. The platform implements policies or practices that protect workers' safety from task-specific risks. In particular, the platform should ensure that pay is not structured in a way that incentivises workers to take excessive levels of risk.

Principle 3: Fair Contracts

3.1 - Provides clear and transparent terms and conditions (one point)

The terms and conditions governing platform work are not always clear and accessible to workers. To achieve this point, the platform must demonstrate that workers are able to understand, agree to, and access the conditions of their

work at all times, and that they have legal recourse if the other party breaches those conditions.

The platform must satisfy ALL of the following:

- The party contracting with the worker must be identified in the contract, and subject to the law of the place in which the worker works.
- The contract/terms & conditions are presented in full in clear and comprehensible language that all workers could be expected to understand.
- Workers have to sign a contract and/or give informed consent to terms of conditions upon signing up for the platform.
- The contracts/terms and conditions are easily accessible to workers in paper form, or via the app/platform interface at all times.
- Contracts/terms & conditions do not include clauses that revert prevailing legal frameworks in the respective countries.
- Platforms take adequate, responsible and ethical data protection and management measures, laid out in a documented policy.

3.2 – Ensures that no unfair contract terms are imposed (one additional point)

In some cases, especially under “independent contractor” classifications, workers carry a disproportionate amount of risk for engaging in a contract with the service user. They may be liable for any damage arising in the course of their work, and they may be prevented by unfair clauses from seeking legal redress for grievances. To achieve this point, platforms must demonstrate that risks and liability of engaging in the work is shared between parties.

Regardless of how the contractual status of the worker is classified, the platform must satisfy ALL of the following:

- Every worker is notified of proposed changes in clear and understandable language within a reasonable timeframe before changes come into effect; and the changes should not reverse existing accrued benefits and reasonable expectations on which workers have relied.
- The contract/terms and conditions neither include clauses which exclude liability for negligence nor

unreasonably exempt the platform from liability for working conditions. The platform takes appropriate steps to ensure that the contract does not include clauses which prevent workers from effectively seeking redress for grievances which arise from the working relationship.

- In case platform labour is mediated by subcontractors: The platform implements a reliable mechanism to monitor and ensure that the subcontractor is living up to the standards expected from the platform itself regarding working conditions.
- In cases where there is dynamic pricing used for services, the data collected and calculations used to allocate payment must be transparent and documented in a form available to workers.

Principle 4: Fair Management

4.1 – Provides due process for decisions affecting workers (one point)

Platform workers can experience arbitrary deactivation; being barred from accessing the platform without explanation, and potentially losing their income. Workers may be subject to other penalties or disciplinary decisions without the ability to contact the service user or the platform to challenge or appeal them if they believe they are unfair. To achieve this point, platforms must demonstrate an avenue for workers to meaningfully appeal disciplinary actions.

The platform must satisfy ALL of the following:

- There is an easily accessible channel for workers to communicate with a human representative of the platform and to effectively solve problems. This channel is documented in the contract and available on the platform interface. Platforms should respond to workers within a reasonable timeframe. There is a process for workers to meaningfully and effectively appeal low ratings, non-payment, payment issues, deactivations, and other penalties and disciplinary actions. This process is documented in a contract and available on the platform interface.
- In the case of deactivations, the appeals process must be available to workers who no longer have access to the platform.
- Workers are not disadvantaged for voicing concerns or appealing disciplinary actions.

4.2 – Provides equity in the management process (one additional point)

The majority of platforms do not actively discriminate against particular groups of workers. However, they may inadvertently exacerbate already existing inequalities in their design and management. For example, there is a lot of gender segregation between different types of platform work. To achieve this point, platforms must show not only that they have policies against discrimination, but also that they seek to remove barriers for disadvantaged groups, and promote inclusion.

Platforms must satisfy ALL of the following:

- The platform has an effective anti-discrimination policy laying out a clear process for reporting, correcting and penalising discrimination of workers on the platform on grounds such as race, social origin, caste, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sex, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, disability, religion or belief, age or any other status.
- The platform has measures in place to promote diversity, equality and inclusion on the platform. It takes practical measures to promote equality of opportunity for workers from disadvantaged groups, including reasonable accommodation for pregnancy, disability, and religion or belief.
- Where persons from a disadvantaged group (such as women) are significantly under-represented among a pool of workers, it seeks to identify and remove barriers to access by persons from that group.
- If algorithms are used to determine access to work or remuneration or the type of work and pay scales available to workers seeking to use the platform, these are transparent and do not result in inequitable outcomes for workers from historically or currently disadvantaged groups.
- It has mechanisms to reduce the risk of users discriminating against workers from disadvantaged groups in accessing and carrying out work.

Principle 5: Fair Representation

5.1 – Assures freedom of association and the expression of worker voice (one point)

Freedom of association is a fundamental right for all workers, and enshrined in the constitution of the

International Labour Organisation, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The right for workers to organise, collectively express their wishes – and importantly – be listened to, is an important prerequisite for fair working conditions. However, rates of organisation amongst platform workers remain low. To achieve this point, platforms must ensure that the conditions are in place to encourage the expression of collective worker voice.

Platforms must satisfy ALL of the following:

- There is a documented mechanism for the expression of collective worker voice that allows ALL workers, regardless of employment status, to participate without risks.
- There is a formal, written statement of willingness to recognise, and bargain with, a collective, independent body of workers or trade union, that is clearly communicated to all workers, and available on the platform interface.
- Freedom of association is not inhibited, and workers are not disadvantaged in any way for communicating their concerns, wishes and demands to the platform, or expressing willingness to form independent collective bodies of representation.

5.2 – Supports democratic governance (one additional point)

While rates of organisation remain low, platform workers' associations are emerging in many sectors and countries. We are also seeing a growing number of cooperative worker-owned platforms. To realise fair representation, workers must have a say in the conditions of their work. This could be through a democratically governed cooperative model, a formally recognised union, or the ability to undertake collective bargaining with the platform.

The platform must satisfy at least ONE of the following:

1. Workers play a meaningful role in governing it.
2. In a written document available at all times on the platform interface, the platform publicly and formally recognises an independent collective body of workers, an elected works council, or trade union. This recognition is not exclusive and, when the legal framework allows, the platform should recognise any significant collective body seeking representation.

APPENDIX II

Interviewees: Fairwork network member profiles

Eduardo Carillo.

Eduardo Carrillo is the Principal Investigator for Fairwork Paraguay. He is a public policy and human rights analyst at TEDIC.

Eduardo has a Bachelor of Arts in International Relations and MPA in Digital Technologies and Policy from University College London. He has more than six years of work in civil society and international organizations. He is a researcher in science, technology, innovation and digitization public policies. He is also interested in the social and economical development of Paraguay.

Olayinka David-West

Olayinka is an Associate Dean and Professor at Lagos Business School. She holds degrees in Computer Science (BSc.), Business Systems Analysis and Design (MSc.) and a Doctorate in Business Administration.

As a member of the global emerging platform economy project focussing on African Platforms, Olayinka has been conducting platform research since 2015; starting with the first regional survey paper (The Rise of the African Platforms). She also co-developed and led a micro-course (DIGITAL AFRICA: Platform Management, Strategy & Innovation). She participated in a 2019 collaboration with CENFRI to size Nigeria's digital platform economy and worked with Caribou Digital and MasterCard Foundation in 2021 to understand how platform work empowers young women as well as with the International Labor Organization (ILO) to understand platform dynamics towards engendering digital labour platforms.

Rafael Grohmann

Rafael Grohmann is the Principal Investigator for Fairwork Brazil. He is an Assistant Professor of Media Studies with focus on Critical Platform and Data Studies at the University of Toronto, Canada.

Rafael is the Leader of DigiLabour Initiative. Editorial Board Member of Big Data & Society and Work, Employment and Society journals. Member of Scholars Council, Center for Critical Internet Inquiry (C2i2), UCLA. Founding Board Member of Labor Tech Research Network. His research interests include platform cooperativism and worker-owned platforms, work & AI, workers' organisation, platform labour, communication/media and work. He holds a Ph.D. in Communication from the University of São Paulo.

A full list of Rafael's publications can be found [here](#).

For the Fairwork project, Rafael develops and leads the research strategy in Brazil. This includes adapting the Fairwork principles, interviewing workers and platform executives, analysing the evidence and developing platforms' scores, and disseminating the results.

Mishal Khan

Mishal Khan is a sociologist working on global histories of labour governance, the intersections of race and capitalism, and the political economy of slavery and abolition in South Asia and the broader British empire. Mishal's work leverages an in-depth understanding of the legal, social, and economic transformations of the nineteenth century to critically analyse contemporary

labour governance, precarity and dispossession across the global North and South, and debates around modern slavery, trafficking, and the future of work.

Mishal holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Chicago and has a BA in international studies and political science from Macalester College. Her publications include *Abolition as a Racial Project: Erasures and Racializations on the Borders of British India*, *The Indebted Among the "Free": Producing Indian Labor through the Layers of Racial Capitalism*, and *Imperial Anti-Trafficking: Producing Racialized Knowledge Regimes over the Longue Durée*. For a full list of publications, see [here](#).

As a postdoctoral fellow for Fairwork's U.S. team, Mishal is involved in coordinating research, building partnerships, and publishing and disseminating the Fairwork US reports based on fieldwork conducted with support from the Ford Foundation.

Batoul Al Mehdar

Batoul Al Mehdar joined Access to Knowledge for Development in February 2022 as a senior researcher. Her research interests include digital era governance, empirical methods for policy analysis, behavioral economics and innovation in public services delivery.

Prior to joining, Batoul was Global Partnerships Manager at Riseup and managed the Hajj Hackathon in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. She also worked on several research projects at the Department of Political Science in the American University in Cairo.

Batoul graduated with a Master of Public Administration from the London School of Economics in 2020 and holds a BA in Economics and Politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies.

Eisha Afifi

Eisha Afifi recently graduated with a BA in Economics from the American University in Cairo. She has since joined the Access to Knowledge for Development Center as a Research Assistant, where she is part of Fairwork's Egypt team.

Her work at the center has allowed her to develop an interest in the gig economy, labour law, and unionisation. At the center, she works on several projects related to AI

for development, the digital economy, and new forms of work.

Mounika Neerukonda

Mounika Neerukonda is a Research Assistant at Fairwork in India. She is also a student of the Integrated Masters of Technology (iMTech) programme at the International Institute of Information Technology Bangalore (IIIT-B).

Her research interests include collective action in the gig economy, disability studies and gender studies. She recently co-authored the papers *Creating an Accessible Technology Ecosystem for Learning Science and Math: A Case of Visually Impaired Children in Indian Schools* (MCHV-INAIS workshop, 2019), with Supriya Dey, Vidhya Y, Suprgya Bhushan and Amit Prakash, and *Are Technologies (Gender)-Neutral?: Politics and Policies of Digital Technologies* (ASCI Journal of Management, 2018), with Bidisha Chaudhari.

For the Fairwork project, Mounika is gathering evidence about platform work conditions in India and analysing primary data.

Janaki Srinivasan

Janaki Srinivasan is a Co-Investigator for the Fairwork project in India. She is also an Assistant Professor at the International Institute of Information Technology Bangalore (IIIT-Bangalore).

Her research examines the politics of information technology-based development.

Her work has shown how gender, class and caste shape Indian digital inclusion initiatives, focussed on community computer centres, mobile phones, identity systems and open information systems. Currently, she is exploring privacy, algorithmic control and the role of intermediaries in digital exchanges. You can find a full list of her publications on her [website](#).

For the Fairwork project, Janaki is involved with developing and implementing the research and fieldwork strategies in India.

Cheryll Ruth R. Soriano

Cheryll Ruth R. Soriano is the Principal Investigator for Fairwork Philippines. Cheryll is a Professor of the Department of Communication at De La Salle University in Manila.

Cheryll's research focuses on the implications of digital media on social and organizational practices and formations. In particular, she examines emerging forms of labor organization and communicative relationships in the platform economy, worker conditions, class relations, solidaristic formations, and the underlying institutional structures shaping them. She co-led a project, "Between global aspirations and local realities: Digital labor in Philippine regional cities," a project funded by De La Salle University (2019 to mid 2020) and led an ethnography on "Digital labor in the Global South: Deep stories and deep structures from online Filipino freelance workers' lenses", a research stream under the Newton/British-Council Institutional Links project between De La Salle University and the University of Leicester, which ran from 2017 until 2019.

Cheryll has published/co-published studies examining the institutional and historical conditions underlying digital platform labor in the Philippines and worker imaginaries, as well as the key experiences central to the lives of platform workers. These include experienced tensions between opportunity and precarity, as well as emerging forms of solidarity among workers on social media; the differential conditions and asymmetries among local platform workers and the rise of influencers or 'skill-makers' who perform a crucial role in driving the popularity of platform labor and in stimulating spaces for solidarity among workers, as well as the materiality of platform work and the function of co-working spaces for Filipino platform workers. You can find more details of her publications [here](#).

For the Fairwork project, she is set to expand her research to examine, using the Fairwork principles, the design and labor arrangements facilitated by emerging local labor platforms in the Philippines. More broadly, she will examine how digital labor is becoming embedded within the larger technological, cultural, and social experience of Filipino workers and their communities, interrogating the interrelationships across the multiple layers of social and economic exchanges at the global and local levels and

between formal and informal networks and markets

Valeria Pulignano

Valeria Pulignano is the Principal Investigator for Fairwork Belgium. She is also the PI of the ERC AdG ResPecTMe "Resolving Precariousness: Advancing the Theory and Measurement of Precariousness Across the Paid/Unpaid Continuum" and Full Partner in the EU WorkYP "Working and Yet Poor".

Valeria's research lies in employment (industrial) relations and labour markets, their changing nature and implications for voice at work, precarity and inequality as differences in wages, working conditions, job quality and wellbeing. Here you can find a full list of publications.

For Fairwork, she is collecting qualitative data on a selected number of platforms in Belgium.

Ainan Tajrian

With interests in social science research and project management, Ainan Tajrian is a Research Associate at DataSense at iSocial, where she has been involved in a diverse set of projects relating to digital economy, platform economy, entrepreneurship, startups, women empowerment, gender lens investing, international trade, etc.

Her work ethos is to design optimum plans by employing her technical knowledge, organizing instinct, and investigative enthusiasm. Her forte is in producing organized and actionable insights through her research projects. At DataSense, her responsibility revolves around developing strategic plans for different projects, assisting a project with relevant insights through research and in-depth analysis, and maintaining communication with the stakeholders of the projects.

As a researcher and research manager at Fairwork Bangladesh, her role involves undertaking extensive research and analysis to gain insights into the working conditions and treatment of individuals engaged in digital platform-based work. This includes examining factors such as pay, benefits, job security, and overall working conditions, among the digital workers. Her role in Fairwork also entails overseeing the management of the overall execution of the research and other relevant activities in

Bangladesh, including engaging with stakeholders and partners, as well as disseminating findings through various channels.

Ainan has achieved her MBA degree, majoring in Finance & Banking, from Bangladesh University of Professionals and aims to implement her knowledge to bring positive changes to society and the economy.

Samiha Akhter

With a focus on the digital economy, women empowerment, international trade and business, Samiha currently holds a position as a Research Officer at DataSense. Her enthusiasm for research and development is apparent through her active involvement in diverse projects, showcasing her unwavering commitment to making a constructive impact on her community.

Throughout her professional journey at DataSense, Samiha has taken on the role of coordinating research projects spanning various verticals. Her invaluable skill set encompasses project coordination, research analysis, and data management, enabling her to make substantial contributions to her team. Within her role, she is responsible for developing research designs, methodologies, overseeing project implementation, and conducting comprehensive data analysis to derive meaningful insights.

Samiha completed her under-graduation in economics and finance from Brac University, Dhaka. In her student life she was dynamic in different co-curricular exercises and social work.

María Pía Garavaglia

María Pía Garavaglia is the Principal Investigator for Fairwork Argentina and a researcher at the Centre of Research in Public Administration (CIAP) from the University of Buenos Aires, emphasizing on managing the research on platform economy. Pía is a PhD candidate for a cotutorship programme between Universidad de Buenos Aires and Université Sorbonne Nouvelle and has a BSc in Economics from the University of Buenos Aires (UBA). Her research work is focused on the analysis of public policy on digital platforms.

For Fairwork Argentina, Pía is responsible for planning

the main stages and activities, design and redaction of the report and academic articles, supervising the implementation of the fieldwork, performing interviews with the platform managers, and the dissemination of the report and main results.

Tanja Jakobi

Tanja Jakobi is Principal Investigator for the Fairwork project in Serbia. She is also the Executive Director of the Public Policy Research Center.

Her research interests are focused on labour markets, discrimination at work and precarisation. She is also interested in the impact on new technologies on labour contacts and unionization. Tanja writes on digital economy and online platform work and co-edits CENTER's main research products.

For the Fairwork project in Serbia, she oversees local research activities and contributes towards the publications emanating from the research.

Her recent works include:

- Andjelkovic, B., Jakobi, T., Radovanovic, Lj. (2020). The Rise of Food Delivery and Ride-Hailing Mobile Apps: The Case of Serbia. Belgrade: Public Policy Research Center.
- Kovač, M., Anđelković, B. & Jakobi, T. (2020). Nestandardni oblici zapošljavanja u Srbiji: "Novi rad" u ekonomiji zasnovanoj na znanju [Non-standard Forms of Work in Serbia: 'New work' in the Knowledge Based Economy]. In T. Jakobi & B. Anđelković, Predvodnici promena na tržištu rada: Prototipovi dostojanstvenog rada za Srbiju u digitalnom dobu (pp. 4-10). Beograd: Centar za istraživanje javnih politika.
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None of the researchers have any connection with any of the platforms and the work undertaken received no funding or support in kind from any platform or any other company, and we declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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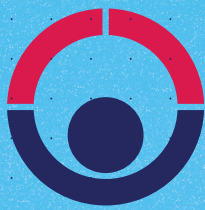
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