



Gender Inequality in the Delivery Gig Economy of Pune: A Study of Opportunities and Barriers for Women

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Abstract:

The delivery gig economy has emerged as a transformative employment sector in Pune, providing income opportunities for thousands of workers. However, gender inequality remains a persistent issue, with women significantly underrepresented in this domain. This study investigates the systemic barriers and potential opportunities for women within the delivery gig economy in Pune, using a combination of quantitative data and qualitative insights from workers, organisations, and policy analysis. The findings indicate that while flexible work arrangements offer a pathway to financial independence, challenges such as safety concerns, wage disparities, and cultural constraints limit women's participation and growth. The paper highlights actionable strategies, including improved safety protocols, gender-sensitive incentives, and enhanced access to resources, to address these disparities and foster inclusivity.

Introduction:

The gig economy, defined by its reliance on flexible, task-based employment facilitated by digital platforms, has become an integral part of urban labour markets in India. Pune, a rapidly growing city with a vibrant tech and service sector, exemplifies the shift towards app-based work models. Companies such as Zomato, Swiggy, and Dunzo have created substantial demand for delivery services, making last-mile delivery jobs one of the most prominent aspects of the gig economy. However, women's participation in this field remains strikingly low, reflecting broader patterns of gender inequality in India's labour market.

According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2022, the urban labour force participation rate for women

is 22.3%, compared to 73.5% for men. In the delivery gig economy, women constitute less than 2% of workers in Pune, as revealed by primary data collected for this study. This disparity is shaped by intersecting factors, including safety concerns, societal norms, infrastructural challenges, and wage gaps. Despite these barriers, the gig economy holds potential to empower women through its flexibility, which allows them to balance caregiving responsibilities and work.

This paper seeks to understand the gendered dimensions of the delivery gig economy in Pune by addressing the following research questions:

1. What opportunities does the delivery gig economy offer to women?

2. What systemic barriers hinder women's participation and growth in this sector?
3. How can stakeholders create a more inclusive environment for women workers?

By examining these questions, the study aims to contribute to policy-making and academic discourse on gender equity in India's evolving labour market.

Literature Review:

The gig economy is defined by its reliance on digital platforms to connect workers with short-term, flexible jobs. Kumar (2024) discusses the expansive role of food delivery platforms like Swiggy and Zomato in providing income opportunities in Indian cities. Despite the flexibility offered, gig work often comes with precarious employment conditions, including a lack of social protections. Kelkar (2022) analyses the intersection of capitalist and patriarchal structures in the gig economy, arguing that digital platforms often reinforce existing gender inequalities. This is especially relevant in India, where systemic barriers such as unequal pay and limited access to resources marginalise women in the labour force.

Ghosh, Ramachandran, and Zaidi (2021) identify several barriers specific to women's engagement in the gig economy in India, including limited access to smartphones, societal perceptions about women's roles, and safety concerns. Their study, conducted across major cities, highlights that women often prefer home-based or less physically demanding gig roles, avoiding delivery work due to cultural constraints.

Arya and Nemuri (2024) provide a legal perspective, exploring how existing

labour laws fail to account for the gender-specific challenges faced by women in gig work. Their analysis underscores the need for policy reforms to address gaps in maternity benefits, workplace harassment protections, and social security coverage.

Pathare (2015) investigates the role of cultural expectations in shaping employment choices for women in Pune. The study reveals that traditional notions of respectability and safety discourage many women from pursuing public-facing roles such as food delivery. Similarly, Gupta and Gupta (2023) found that while gig platforms offer flexible work opportunities, inadequate safety measures and harassment remain major deterrents.

Rani, Castel-Branco, and Satija (2022) explore the impact of digital technology on women's participation in the economy, noting that while platforms provide new opportunities, they often neglect to address gendered concerns such as access to safe transportation and fair wage structures.

Comparative studies highlight commonalities and differences in women's participation in the gig economy across regions. Behl et al. (2022) identify barriers to entry for women in India, contrasting these with developed economies where childcare support and workplace policies better facilitate women's employment. Similarly, Raval (2020) notes that while technology enables participation, socio-cultural norms and limited policy interventions in India inhibit inclusivity. Kelkar (2022) contextualises these findings within the broader framework of patriarchal discrimination, arguing that the gig economy mirrors existing societal inequalities rather than addressing them.

By comparing labour market trends across sectors, this study emphasises the need for systemic change to enable equitable participation.

Policy interventions and technological innovations are critical to improving women's experiences in gig work. Kurian and Madhavi (2024) highlight the role of platform-specific safety features, such as real-time tracking and SOS buttons, in addressing women's safety concerns. However, they argue that these solutions must be complemented by structural changes, such as the provision of affordable childcare and legal protections against workplace harassment.

Arya and Nemuri (2024) call for gender-sensitive labour legislation, proposing reforms that consider the unique challenges faced by women in the gig economy. These include mandatory reporting mechanisms for harassment, incentives for platforms to hire more women, and subsidies for skill development programmes.

Despite the challenges, some studies highlight the empowering potential of gig work for women. Nikore et al. (2022) discuss how flexible work arrangements allow women to contribute financially while managing household responsibilities. Similarly, Paliwal et al. (2023) found that women in Pune who engaged in gig work reported increased financial independence and decision-making power within their families.

Rani, Castel-Branco, and Satija (2022) stress the importance of recognising women's agency in navigating digital platforms, advocating for a shift from a deficit model to one that acknowledges women's resilience and

adaptability in overcoming structural barriers.

The gig economy presents a double-edged sword for women, offering opportunities for income generation while perpetuating systemic inequalities. In Pune and other urban settings, cultural norms, safety concerns, and inadequate policy frameworks continue to limit women's participation in the delivery sector. Future research should focus on designing interventions that address these challenges, ensuring that gig work becomes a viable and equitable employment option for women.

Methodology:

Research Design:

This study adopts a mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews to provide a comprehensive understanding of gender inequality in Pune's delivery gig economy. The research focuses on capturing the lived experiences of female delivery workers, analysing their challenges and opportunities within this sector.

Data Collection:

1. **Quantitative Surveys:** Surveys were conducted with 80 gig workers (50 women and 30 men) in Pune to quantify disparities in earnings, working hours, and job satisfaction. Participants were selected from diverse age groups and socio-economic backgrounds.
2. **Qualitative Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with 25 female delivery workers, focusing on their motivations, challenges, and coping strategies. Additional interviews with 10 male workers

and 5 organisational representatives provided comparative insights.

3. **Secondary Data:** Policy reports, industry studies, and academic articles were reviewed to contextualise primary findings within broader labour market trends.

Analytical Framework:

Quantitative data was analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and narratives. The analysis was informed by gender-sensitive frameworks, focusing on the intersectionality of societal norms, economic structures, and individual agency. findings and Discussion

Opportunities for Women in the Delivery Gig Economy:

Flexible Work Hours:

Flexibility is one of the most cited advantages of gig work, particularly for women balancing caregiving responsibilities. In this study, 78% of female respondents identified flexible schedules as a key motivator for joining the gig economy. Many women reported working midday shifts, allowing them to manage household duties while earning supplementary income. For instance, one single mother detailed how her flexible hours enabled her to attend her children's school events without jeopardising her income. This flexibility is especially crucial for women in dual-earner households who must juggle multiple responsibilities.

Income Generation and Financial Independence:

The gig economy offers a tangible pathway to financial autonomy for women who previously relied on familial income. Female delivery workers in Pune earned an average monthly income of ₹18,000, which, while lower than the male average of ₹22,000, represented a marked improvement over informal sector wages. Nearly 62% of respondents stated that their earnings were primarily allocated to children's education or healthcare expenses. Additionally, 18% reported using their income to build savings or invest in small-scale entrepreneurial ventures. Such trends demonstrate the gig economy's potential to enable women to take charge of their financial futures.

Challenging Gender Norms:

Although women's participation in the delivery gig economy remains low, their presence is gradually reshaping societal perceptions. Interviews highlighted instances of customers and peers expressing admiration for women in traditionally male-dominated roles. One respondent, Priya Sharma, shared how her choice to work as a delivery partner inspired several women in her neighbourhood to consider similar opportunities. Furthermore, platforms like Zomato and Swiggy reported a slight increase in female applicants over the past year, indicating a slow but encouraging shift in public attitudes.

Barriers Faced by Women in the Delivery Gig Economy:

Safety Concerns:

Safety emerged as the most significant barrier, with 94% of female respondents expressing concerns about

harassment, particularly during late-night shifts. While platforms like Zomato and Swiggy provide GPS tracking and emergency support, these measures were deemed inadequate by 72% of respondents. Specific incidents reported included verbal abuse from customers and intimidation in poorly lit areas. Women cited these safety issues as a primary reason for declining night shifts, which directly impacted their earnings and job efficiency. Enhanced safety measures, including female-specific helplines and more rigorous monitoring systems, were among the top requests from participants.

Cultural and Familial Constraints:

Societal norms remain a significant impediment to women's participation in public-facing jobs. Approximately 65% of respondents reported facing resistance from family members who viewed delivery work as unsafe or inappropriate for women. In rural-urban migrant families, these attitudes were particularly pronounced, with women often having to negotiate extensively for permission to work. Such cultural constraints not only limit opportunities but also perpetuate a cycle of economic dependency.

Wage Disparities:

Despite gig platforms' commitments to equal pay, earnings gaps persist. Restricted working hours, limited access to peak-hour incentives, and higher operational costs (e.g., vehicle rentals) resulted in women earning 18% less on average than their male counterparts. For instance, women working fewer than 30 hours per week earned an average of ₹13,500, compared to ₹19,500 for men working similar hours but with greater access to incentives. These findings underscore the urgent need for gender-

sensitive policies that address structural inequities in pay and access to resources.

Resource Constraint:

Limited access to essential resources such as smartphones and vehicles continues to hamper women's participation in the gig economy. The study found that 38% of female respondents relied on rented or borrowed vehicles, increasing their operational expenses and reducing net income. Additionally, technical difficulties with app navigation were reported by 22% of respondents, many of whom suggested that more user-friendly interfaces and training sessions would improve their efficiency.

Comparative Analysis: Male vs Female Delivery Workers:

Male delivery workers consistently demonstrated higher earnings, greater mobility, and fewer safety concerns compared to their female counterparts. For instance, 84% of male respondents reported working late-night shifts, compared to only 12% of women. This unrestricted mobility allowed men to access peak-hour incentives more frequently, significantly boosting their earnings.

Additionally, male workers were more likely to own personal vehicles (76% compared to 42% among women), reducing operational costs and increasing their delivery efficiency. In contrast, women often incurred higher expenses due to reliance on rented vehicles and more limited geographic coverage. The cumulative effect of these disparities underscores the systemic inequities that constrain women's full participation and success in the delivery gig economy.

Policy Implications:

Enhanced Safety Measures: Gig platforms must prioritise safety by implementing robust measures such as real-time tracking, gender-sensitive support teams, and comprehensive grievance redressal systems. Additionally, introducing location-based safety ratings for delivery zones and leveraging predictive analytics to identify high-risk areas can further ensure worker safety. Collaborative efforts with local authorities to improve street lighting, expand CCTV surveillance in vulnerable zones, and enhance public transport infrastructure are also essential.

Gender-Sensitive Incentives: Introducing incentives tailored to women's working patterns, such as daytime bonuses, childcare support, and dedicated safe delivery routes, can address structural barriers and promote greater participation. Platforms could also offer financial rewards for consistent performance or milestone completions, encouraging women to sustain their engagement over longer periods.

Access to Resources: Companies should provide subsidised access to vehicles and smartphones, along with training programmes on app navigation, financial literacy, and customer interaction, to empower women workers. Initiatives like vehicle-sharing partnerships and discounted maintenance plans can reduce operational costs for women. Furthermore, periodic skill-enhancement workshops can improve women's competitiveness in the sector.

Awareness Campaigns: Public initiatives aimed at challenging societal norms and promoting women's inclusion in the gig economy are crucial. Collaboration with NGOs, educational institutions, and

community leaders can amplify the impact of such campaigns. Highlighting success stories of women thriving in delivery roles through social media, advertisements, and community engagement programmes can gradually shift perceptions and inspire wider participation.

Policy Frameworks: Policymakers must establish regulations that ensure fair wages, workplace safety, and access to resources for all gig workers, with specific provisions addressing gender disparities. Enforcing accountability measures for companies to maintain gender-sensitive workplace environments, providing tax incentives for hiring women, and mandating regular safety audits are essential components of a robust regulatory framework.

Conclusion:

The delivery gig economy in Pune reflects both the opportunities and challenges of achieving gender equity in an evolving labour market. While the sector offers flexible income-generating opportunities, systemic barriers such as safety concerns, wage disparities, and cultural constraints continue to hinder women's participation. Additionally, limited access to resources, such as affordable transportation and digital tools, further exacerbates the inequities faced by women. Addressing these challenges requires a multi-stakeholder approach involving gig platforms, policymakers, and civil society. Targeted interventions, including enhanced safety measures, tailored financial incentives, and widespread awareness campaigns, are necessary to bridge these gaps. By fostering a more inclusive environment and addressing these barriers

comprehensively, the gig economy can serve as a transformative force for women's empowerment and economic independence in India, potentially reshaping societal norms and enhancing gender equity across the broader labour market.

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