"Before cementing them as pathways to success, more longitudinal research should be focused on digital labour platforms and women's participation in the labour force globally."

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Women, work and what empowerment can be:
Opportunities and limits of digital entrepreneurship

The nature of work and the ways in which we access it have evolved dramatically since the rise of the internet. Digital labour platforms have created both a global outsourced workforce and a contingent of hyper-local on-demand workers to perform a variety of tasks and services, accessible anywhere and at any time.

However, the impact of these digital labour platforms is complicated. While they've offered workers marginally better wages than traditional offline markets, lower barriers to entering the workforce and better institutionalised work processes, they've also left workers in precarious situations, battling fluctuating wages and abysmal working conditions. These platforms offer the promise of greater opportunities, agency and ownership of their time and money under the thin veneer of 'digital entrepreneurship'. This is especially evident in the lived realities of women who do platform-based or "online work" in India. It's yet to be seen how a medium of accessing work - purported to be empowering - is, in fact, that.

'Women and Online Work in India: The Opportunities and Limits of Digital Entrepreneurship' is one of the first few quantitative and qualitative studies on women and online work platforms. Out of the 365 women surveyed and 22 women interviewed from Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities in India, the majority seemed to have made the shift from previous jobs in the formal sector to better balance paid work with responsibilities associated with married life and child-rearing. Being able to work from home and earn a bit more were the most cited reasons to move to online work, but other sentiments ranging from "setting a good example for children" to "feeling some sense of fulfilment" also prevail. It offers insight not only unto the individual reasons Indian women shift to online work but also into a frame of agency and ownership still tied to traditional understandings of a woman's role in the home. But while online work provides some recourse from financial dependency on their families or spouses, because the amount and type of work they're able to do are

limited, their earned income still isn't a significant contribution to household income and, at best, classifies as "pocket money". So the question of how far platform work goes into empowering these women is one that still requires asking.

Digital labour platforms are built and also function within the material reality that prevents women from taking full advantage of the opportunity in the first place. Its architecture might seem neutral, but it's often the case that these platforms further perpetuate or even exacerbate the inequities that exist offline. For example, the architecture for these platforms only allows a very narrow set of entrepreneurial opportunities, i.e. it connects workers to available jobs based on algorithmic matching. Indian women don't have as much choice as they'd like, and probably need.

There are also time and financial costs involved in finding and accepting work on these platforms. Initial assignments are hard to come by, making it hard to establish an attractive enough profile for clients. Women freelancers are often compelled to lower their initial rates to attract clients, while some reported availing of various plug-ins and tools to automatically accept any new jobs, regardless of pay, right away. The financial cost of using these platforms is further amplified when workers are required to pay for subscriptions to bid for more work or devices to work on, or even buy accounts from existing workers. Because a lot of the work on these platforms comes from the Global North, the women also have to adjust their hours to do the work and bid for it

as it comes in. While the end result for Indian women online workers is greater participation in and access to earning opportunities, the actual pay-off might be overestimated.

The existing twin forces of gender inequality and gendered socio-cultural norms have a definitive effect on women's motivations and ability to join digital labour platforms. Existing inequities experienced offline are replicated online. Women can't commit to as many hours as men can because of care work responsibilities, resulting in less pay. The need for financial investments to participate in the first place, requiring assistance from family members or existing savings, also impacts that foray into online work - and how much they can truly make from it later.

There's little contesting that digital labour platforms have made a positive difference for people looking to access work more aligned with their day-to-day life. But for Indian women, the actual impact of these platforms on employment trajectories and socio-economic empowerment is still up for debate. Before uncritically cementing them as foolproof pathways to success, more longitudinal research should be focused on the impact of digital labour platforms and women's participation in the labour force in India and globally.