

# The Formalization of Social Precarities

Platformization from the  
Perspective of Precarious Workers  
in India, Brazil, and Bangladesh

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# Contents

**01 Introduction**

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**05 India**

**The Platform Economy's Gatekeeping of  
Class and Caste Dominance in Urban India**

---

**19 Brazil**

**Exploitation on Two Wheels:  
Platformization of Delivery Work in Brazil**

---

**33 Bangladesh**

**An Anthology of Bangladeshi Women Platform  
Workers**

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**45 Endnotes**

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**55 Acknowledgements**

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# Introduction

By Aiha Nguyen and Murali Shanmugavelan

More than two decades after the first ride-hail driver rolled through San Francisco's streets, the idea of a platform worker is now a permanent fixture in many communities and economies. Many services and jobs are now mediated through platforms, including childcare, cleaning, home repair, beauty services, delivery, digital piece work, customer service, and chauffeur services. As more sectors become platformized there is a corresponding urgency to understand how these jobs have changed, what new work conditions have been created, and what regulatory reforms might be needed to ensure platform workers receive fair working conditions. In *The Formalization of Social Precarities*, we explore platformization from the point of view of precarious gig workers in the Majority World. For occupations already held by marginalized populations, where work has always been informal, how do on-demand platforms change work experiences? Does the structure of a labor platform bring new accountability and reliability to precarious work? Or do these companies formally encode precarity into algorithms and platform policies?

## Why Platform Work is Precarious

Eurofound, a tripartite European Union (EU) agency tasked with assisting the EU in the development of policies related to employment and work, defines platform work as “the matching of demand and supply of paid work through an online platform using an algorithm.”<sup>1</sup> While this definition is accurate, it overlooks how these transactions occur within structured employment relationships, and how platforms shift away from traditional management structures, resulting in an atomized workforce. This change has many implications for workers, including shifting responsibilities of employers and expectations of platform workers.

Platforms market themselves as neutral arbiters that democratize work by lowering the barriers to the entrepreneurial economy and freedom from a subordinate relationship to a boss. Companies like Uber and Doordash promise that workers will have the flexibility to control

their schedules and easily access customers. For workers, platforms provide a queue of people seeking service, eliminating the time and cost of finding paying customers. For customers, platforms offer them instantaneous access to goods and services and confidence that the services will be reputable through crowdsourced reviews and ratings.<sup>2</sup>

However, the term “platform” obscures how companies simultaneously market themselves to users, clients, advertisers, and policymakers.<sup>3</sup> Hidden in this construction of how platforms see themselves, is the presumption that workers and clients are both users of their technology, on a similar social footing, both parties capable of terminating a work arrangement equally. However, in practice, platforms assert their own rules and structures that restrict both customers’, and, more often, workers’ actions on platforms. Such restrictions have raised questions about whether platforms truly operate as impartial intermediaries and just how much platforms control the lived experiences of platform workers. Over the past decade, research, interviews, organizing efforts, and investigative journalism have validated these concerns. Some studies track how platforms streamlined the matching process, creating greater efficiencies for both workers and customers.<sup>4</sup> Other studies look at how platform architectures limits the autonomy of laborers through information asymmetries.<sup>5</sup> Still, others document the changes in working conditions on platforms, such as work speedups, growing insecurity, depressed and unpredictable pay, discrimination, and the shifting of business risks from employers to workers.<sup>6</sup> These findings question how well workers in the gig economy are fairing and the extent to which workers are truly independent.

In the U.S., as in many other countries, formal employment relationships often confer certain benefits and protections that do not exist with a self-employment status. However, platform companies have exempted themselves from the role of employer, arguing that they are simply intermediaries. Workers are treated as self-employed by platforms, but growing dissatisfaction among workers about their ability to make decisions about their work and experiences of automated wage theft and unexplained deactivation have prompted policy reactions across the globe.<sup>7</sup> Some advocates and scholars argue that misclassification is at the crux of why workers are precarious and restoring that right will improve working conditions.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the U.S. has seen numerous battles over misclassification, and the European Union recently passed the Platform Work Directive, which grants formal employment status under certain conditions.<sup>9</sup>

However, misclassification alone will not address other forms of social precarity that platform work obscures, particularly in countries with long histories of social, political, and even religious exclusion. In countries like Bangladesh, Brazil, and India — which reinforce social hierarchies via gender, race, and caste — precarious workers are often the most marginalized members of society as well. Labor platforms made similar promises to workers in these countries: the democratization of work, the opportunity to be one’s own boss, and, in some instances, the idea of unbiased algorithmic bosses is especially appealing. However, as the contributors to this anthology argue, platforms may have severed the legal employment relationship between worker and employer, but leaned into social structures to keep workers precarious, and in the process, formalized those social precarities in the platform architecture through surveillance and data collection.

## Precarious Platforms in the Majority World

Ambika Tandon and Aayush Rathi, in their contribution “The Platform Economy’s Gatekeeping of Class and Caste Dominance in Urban India,” illustrate how the convergence of platform labor and platform urbanism has resulted in hyper-surveilled and controlled sites of employment that affect the most marginalized workforce. Gated communities use various modes of “surveillance and data collection to map and control workers’ movements throughout neighborhoods, including facial recognition, profiling and databasing of workers, and the use of QR codes.” The myriad of data that workers generate as they interact with technical systems embedded throughout neighborhoods and on their personal devices is a boon only for tech companies, because workers lack any control or ownership over the data they create. This data could constitute personal and behavioral information, which could create greater insecurity for already marginalized workers. Tandon and Rathi use this case study to demonstrate how platforms monetize idle resources, social inequality, and stratification.

In “Exploitation on Two Wheels: Platformization of Delivery Work in Brazil,” Ludmilla Costhek Abílio traces how motorcycle couriers, also called “motoboy,” have had their work completely reconfigured in less than five years. There, delivery platforms have allowed for the emergence “of a new figure: the bicycle courier, also known as ‘bike boys’ who are mostly young and Black.” Bike boys are a fixture of the urban landscape, and their presence reveals “the precariousness and new forms of exploitations that appropriate old and persistent social inequalities and injustice.” Motorcycles are regarded by law enforcement as emblematic of theft and crime in general, making these workers an immediate target. In an effort to minimize the friction in their operations, platforms partner with public security agencies and require workers to use facial recognition to legitimize their presence. Gates and elevators act as physical and social barriers designed to segregate by race and class, now interacting with the demands of platform work, creating a new form of exploitation and precarity. Dissatisfied customers can provide negative reviews through platforms if food arrives late or cold, which can result in algorithmically generated penalties such as deactivations or loss of tips and pay. However, workers face challenges getting into controlled communities, which delays delivery time. Abílio shows how “platformization aligns with the structural characteristics of Brazilian society,” which incorporates “prejudices and material and symbolic violence.”

In the last essay, “An Anthology of Bangladeshi Women Platform Workers,” Ananya Raihan, Samiha Akhter, Shamarukh Alam, and Jinat Jahan Khan follow the lives of female domestic workers. Bangladeshi domestic work takes place in the private homes of clients, often alone and subject to the whims of family members, making domestic workers susceptible to abuse and harassment. Although platforms did not always change the work site for domestic workers, as an intermediary, apps suggested that domestic workers might receive support. While companies advertised greater autonomy on platforms, this only provided an excuse to formally recognize domestic workers as “independent contractors,” increasing their precarity. The authors argue that platforms could reduce the precarities of women workers by “formalizing scope of work” and establishing basic workplace treatment standards, but choose not to do so.

This anthology illuminates the double-edged sword of the platformization of work. While platforms lower barriers to the entrepreneurial economy, they are a tool for predatory inclusion, in which marginalized workers gain access to the entrepreneurial economy on extractive terms.<sup>10</sup> The authors demonstrate how platforms reinforce social order through work. Through technologies of labor that surveil and control, clients can further differentiate and separate between classes, castes, and races such as Dalit domestic workers or Black moto-boys. The platforms' refusal to acknowledge the formal status of workers as employees aligns them with existing social hierarchies, and in some cases, entrenches them within the dominant classes. As platforms continue to reshape work, regulators and advocates need to respond by acknowledging both the role of platforms in controlling workers and its role in reinforcing social hierarchies. Recognizing those working on platforms as employees and demanding platforms accept their responsibilities to employees can provide greater economic security and also address social precarity.

# India

## The Platform Economy's Gatekeeping of Class and Caste Dominance in Urban India

By Ambika Tandon and Aayush Rathi

### Introduction

Ashrit is an experienced platform worker. He has been a delivery worker for three years, job-hopping frequently. Ashrit has worked as a package delivery worker for three platforms: two courier services and a hyperlocal grocery delivery company, which promises compressed ten-minute deliveries over short distances. While navigating the city, he often deals with omnipresent surveillance tools deployed in apartment complexes owned by upper-class and dominant-caste homeowners. Ashrit is used to being screened at every apartment complex he enters, including having his picture taken and verifying details such as his name, mobile number, and the platform he is delivering for. The everydayness of constant identity verification means that Ashrit is not bothered much by it — he said he doesn't mind the process so much as the delay it causes when customers forget to approve his entry.

MyGate is one such company offering “gated community management,” claiming to service over 25,000 gated societies in India.<sup>11</sup> A competing application, NoBrokerHood, services over 18,000 societies. Apps of this nature have sprung up across urban India in the past five years, offering “society management” services to a niche market of gated societies.<sup>12</sup> Their bouquet of services includes everything from property listings with a commission rate for the platform, security services, accounting services for maintenance and related expenses, and in-app discussion forums for residents. These apps market digital security, which allows residents to regulate entries and exits and make a database of all non-resident visitors in the society. The objective of these apps is to legitimize surveillance as a way of ensuring safety in gated societies. Through a preliminary search online, we found over 20 different companies



specializing in digital solutions for gated societies. The industry even had a business exposition in Mumbai on “Housing Society Management,” focused on technology solutions for gated societies.<sup>13</sup>

This study uses the framework of platform urbanism to understand surveillance platforms. Platform urbanism analyzes the growing power of digital platforms in cities.<sup>14</sup> Urban geographers have argued that platforms are a symptom of current models of capitalism, which exploit “idle resources” to produce new forms of urban spaces and value where they might not have existed earlier.<sup>15</sup> Airbnb and Uber are often used as examples of this new form of extraction and value creation from existing assets by monetizing empty rooms and car seats.<sup>16</sup> We argue that platforms offering surveillance services are another instance of this wider landscape of platform urbanism, manufacturing the need for surveillance systems in elite urban enclaves. We use this case study to show that platforms monetize not just idle resources but social inequality and stratification to generate value and capital.

Metropolitan cities in India have sharp levels of income inequality intersecting with hierarchies of caste, gender, and religion, among other markers of marginality.<sup>17</sup> The working class servicing upper-class and dominant-caste households continues to be treated as “servants” without dignity, with added connotations of caste impurity and gendered devaluation of labor for women domestic workers.<sup>18</sup> We place the operation of platforms in gated societies in this context.

Between March and May 2023, we conducted ethnographic visits to four apartment complexes in New Delhi. We had unstructured conversations with six security guards implementing the services offered by the surveillance platforms daily and seven platform and domestic workers servicing customers or employers at these societies. We discussed workers’ experiences dealing with the security practices of gated communities, perceptions around security and safety in enclosed urban spaces, and their experiences as workers entering the platform ecosystem at different points. We also interviewed three members of different Resident Welfare Associations (RWAs). In these interviews, we focused on the need for and utility of surveillance platforms in the gated society and the sources of risks and threats these surveillance systems were protecting against. Due to the subject’s sensitive nature, we did not directly ask any of our respondents how their caste identities shape their experiences. Rather, we undertook a meaning-making exercise on how caste shapes workers’ experiences and employers’ biases by linking their stories with existing literature on caste and work.<sup>19</sup> We also reviewed the surveillance platforms’ websites, apps, and terms and conditions and analyzed their marketing messages and other documents in this study.

We argue that gated communities are critical spaces to understand the insidious nature of physical segregation, historically manifested through caste, religion, and class, and its impact on economic relations and labor in India. This study analyzes surveillance applications in affluent gated communities in New Delhi as a case study, given the high levels of income inequality with entrenched structures of power and urban segregation along the lines of class, caste, and religion.

The rest of the essay lays out our key arguments. First, this study discusses gated societies as an example of physical segregation in New Delhi. The study also traces the lineage of labor relations in urban enclaves, and how they shape the experience of platform workers. Second, it explores how platform business models thrive on mediating highly unequal social and economic relations, and financial and data accumulation. In our discussion of workers' rights and protection against surveillance, we discuss data privacy and how legal frameworks respond to specific platforms' data extraction.

Before moving on, we want to acknowledge our own caste positionalities, as this essay engages with questions of caste-based discrimination faced by workers: we belong to dominant caste groups that have perpetuated the patterns of discrimination this essay highlights.

## Discrimination in India's Cities and Gated Societies

Gated societies have long been sites of identity-based discrimination. In 2008, a gated society in Mumbai, with a majority of houses occupied by followers of Jainism, cut off electricity and water access to a household occupied by a Muslim family. In 2016, Ansar Shaikh, an aspiring civil servant, used a Hindu pseudonym — Sanjay — to look for paying guest accommodation to prepare for the ultra-competitive examinations.<sup>20</sup> In early 2023, a notice issued by a housing society was shared online that forbade tenancy of bachelors of different caste identities and identified specific apartments.<sup>21</sup> As anyone of a marginalized identity, or for that matter, anyone even “looking” like someone from a marginalized identity, who has hunted for a house to rent can attest, identity is the primary criteria determining landlords' tenancy choices. In an audit study of one of India's largest online real estate platforms, the authors' findings corroborated marginalized residents' experience of renting in India: they found striking variations in how likely and quickly people of marginalized caste and religious identities heard back from landlords.<sup>22</sup>

Labor markets in gated societies are just as bad, if not worse than home rental and ownership markets. Their governance encodes the dominant class and caste groups' power. For example, a gated society in Bengaluru issued a notice forbidding the use of common spaces by domestic workers:

### **Maids waiting areas to be used instead of parks**

Maids can use the waiting areas in all buildings to wait between jobs or eat their food. We do understand there may be breaks. It's difficult to see them hang out everywhere in the park, amphitheater, gazebos. Residents can feel uncomfortable when being surrounded by maids everywhere we walk. Security is not able to monitor common areas. Cooks, carpenters, and plumbers sit on the sofa at the building reception. Most of us have probably stopped sitting on the sofas by now.<sup>23</sup>

Gated societies are inherently discriminatory. They mimic the identity-based segregation that shapes India's cities. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar had envisioned the Indian city as offering a path

for oppressed castes in India to break free from the shackles of the caste-based oppression in rural India. In a meeting of the Constituent Assembly that was drafting independent India's Constitution, Ambedkar said:

Every Hindu village has a ghetto. The Hindus live in the village and the untouchables live in the ghetto. [...] What is the village but a sink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow mindedness, and communalism? I am glad that the Draft Constitution has discarded the village and adopted the individual as its unit).<sup>24</sup>

These characteristics have seeped into contemporary Indian cities, which are immensely segregated along the axes of class, caste, and religion. Twenty-six percent of urban Muslims live in neighborhoods in which 80 percent of the residents are Muslim; 17 percent of people belonging to oppressed caste identities live in neighborhoods with over 80 percent of the residents belonging to oppressed caste identities.<sup>25</sup> This becomes a problem because these neighborhoods are not materially alike. Public services in cities are less likely to be found in neighborhoods with many oppressed-caste and Muslim residents. A neighborhood with all of its residents being followers of Islam is only half as likely to have a secondary school as a neighborhood with no Muslims. Urbanization in India has not effaced religion and caste identities, as Ambedkar had hoped. Instead, the right to the city is increasingly more checkered, and it is mediated through technological platforms that encode dominant class and caste desires and anxieties.

## Segregation and Labor Indignity

Gated societies are now a commonplace fixture of urban geographies. As with neoliberal economies, gated communities also make clear the residents' high levels of income inequality. Studies in the US have showcased how, for rich urban residents, intersecting with other axes of domination, such as race-gating or fortification, is a means to maintain social order and distance from othered communities through physical segregation.<sup>26</sup>

In India, Anne Waldrop traces the arrival of gated societies (locally referred to as colonies) to disturbances in the social order after liberalization in the 1990s, which led elite classes — more often from dominant caste groups — to maintain social distancing and establish boundaries.<sup>27</sup> In 2004, during Waldrop's studies in New Delhi, gated societies were primarily a collection of independent houses with a common gated entrance, rather than a tightly knit apartment complex. She characterizes gated colonies in New Delhi in the early 2000s as “glocal,” carrying similar tendencies as fortification in other global cities with the local flavor of caste-based segregation. These also overlap with labor relations. High-caste, upper-middle-class Hindus employed several domestic workers with specialized tasks (cooking, cleaning, gardening, etc.), some of whom lived within the colonies in “servant quarters,” occupying insider positions. Therefore, domestic workers were “insider-outsiders” who

belonged to oppressed-caste low-income communities and worked in households of dominant-caste employers, holding insider positions within the household.

Waldrop further notes, “The fortification in New Delhi differs from São Paulo and Los Angeles in that surveillance and control are less severe.” For example, “the new gates are open during the day, the guards do not use intercoms, and checking of visiting cars goes by appearances. Whereas gating in the Americas is described as fairly effective in terms of providing physical barriers between the upper and lower classes... this is not the case in New Delhi... gating does not provide a clear separation between the rich and the poor, because servants continue to live in servant-quarters within the gates.”

Labor relations and surveillance regimes have evolved to match global patterns within two decades. The patterns Waldrop describes as defining features of other cities that do not exist in New Delhi are exactly what we found in the gated societies we visited. Domestic work relations became more contractual, such that most workers are in live-out rather than live-in relationships. Even though urban density and labor migration to cities has increased, domestic and informal workers remain poorly paid, with long hours of work and little to no regulation or social security.<sup>28</sup> These patterns of inequality have resulted in the kind of physical segregation described above, with gated societies that have state-of-the-art surveillance systems to monitor the comings and goings of workers.

Now let us turn to the question: What does any of this have to do with platform urbanism?

Viraj, a member of the RWA at one of the societies we visited, told us, “We didn’t have any regulated entries for visitors and vendors. This was a serious security concern. Now it’s just a click away... We chose MyGate because it already has a database of all workers in the neighborhood, and we just need to input the number of the worker and their profile pops up. These apps are an essential part of societies nowadays.”

Surveillance apps for gated societies such as MyGate — or “society management” apps, as they call themselves — make money from the threat and fear dominant-caste employers hold of Dalit and oppressed-caste workers entering their household and private spaces. It is striking that the surveillance functions Waldrop describes as thriving in São Paulo and Los Angeles but missing from New Delhi two decades ago are now being provided by society management apps. Surveillance technologies aimed at mapping and controlling workers’ movements include: facial recognition, profiling and databasing of workers’ whereabouts, and QR codes to map their movement inside gated societies. The latter works by placing QR codes in different zones within society premises, which workers need to scan when entering or exiting those zones.

The most appealing feature of MyGate for the RWAs we spoke to was searchable, centralized databases with the information of delivery workers such as Ashrit, so that any worker ever entering a society using MyGate is permanently logged into a database for all users across India to access. No publicly available information exists about how MyGate uses this data and who they share it with. Workers do not have access to this dataset on their interface; only security personnel and residents of gated societies have access to workers’ data.

What changes occurred in the past two decades to propel this shift toward surveillance and fortification in urban India? The residents and welfare associations we spoke to describe the rise of privatized development businesses that specialize in elite urban housing with services within a large compound or “society.” These “hi-fi” societies — as described by one of our respondents — are highly valued real estate with promises of state-of-the-art living, which includes amenities and cutting-edge security practices. Platforms have grown to cater to this demand, monetizing a discourse of historical social insecurity and distrust of certain caste and labor groups, with an added element of technological surveillance.

Labor relations have evolved from feudal relations between live-in workers employed for decades with one family to part-time domestic workers frequenting several households simultaneously.<sup>29</sup> Domestic work relationships resemble contractualized employment relations with better-defined (although still fluid) tasks and pay. Therefore, workers have mobilized and unionized to ask for paid leave, bonuses, and other entitlements. As the demand for rights grows, the pattern of controlling and disciplining workers increases. Much like employers in other industries, domestic employers began using surveillance technologies to control and discipline workers by tracking their attendance and movements. We argue that employers selectively use these technologies to surveil, and that this breeds mistrust against and attaches a stigma to workers from select occupations and types of workers, in a digital extension of what Ambedkar called the “division of workers” by the caste system.<sup>30</sup>

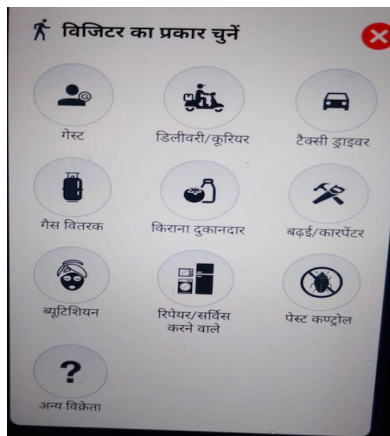


Image 1: MyGate requires guards to classify workers without an existing record associated with MyGate into an occupational category. Most of the options are service lines mediated by digital labor platforms (delivery/courier, taxi driver, beautician, carpenter, etc.).

Domestic work carries a history of suspicion, mistrust, and othering, which is now encoded by platforms.<sup>31</sup> Security guards at a colony in South Delhi using MyGate said that domestic workers working at residents' homes are assigned passcodes to enter and exit the colony, allowing the app to create an attendance register for workers. A permanent log of workers' schedules is publicly available to all residents in the society so that each household can view the profile and timings of domestic workers employed by every other household. Employers routinely assess workers' behavior through their ratings, and the app allows them to share reviews about their workers with other residents. Workers are searched upon entry and exit, and the application allows employers to specify any items or cash workers carry with them. If these are not specified, workers are held by security on suspicions of theft.

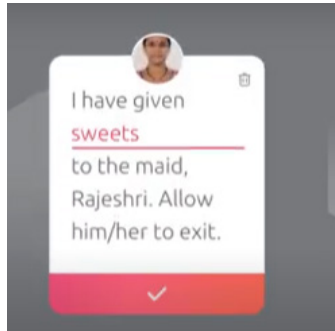


Image 2: MyGate allows employers to input specific items they have given to domestic workers to allow them to exit the housing society without being investigated for theft.

In an interview with domestic workers in a gated society in 2019, our team found that “workers are physically checked by the security every time they enter or exit the apartment, and have to carry a note from employers confirming that they have received their salaries in cash or the security suspects them of having stolen the money and does not let them exit. Workers feel criminalized and are made to undergo police verification, which also keeps them in control and fearful of employers.”<sup>32</sup>

## Implications for Platform Workers

A second shift in labor relations over the past decade has been the growth of digital labor platforms, which are mediating or providing service delivery across sectors such as taxi, food and grocery delivery, and personal services (beauty, cleaning, carpentry, plumbing), among others. This growing platform workforce is primarily intranational migrant workers from smaller cities, towns, and villages looking for work in urban cities, with fewer options than other informalized sectors.<sup>33</sup> Platforms offer them an opportunity to earn a living wage while controlling all aspects of work, from task allocation to wage-setting. Workers are constantly surveilled through location-tracking, mandatory facial recognition, sharing pictures and selfies as evidence of task completion, and data harvesting from their phones.

For urban residents, platform-based delivery workers are another source of insecurity and threat. These workers, often men from low-income communities and migrant workers, from

north Indian states such as Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, require access to gated societies to deliver goods and services. Platform workers are often assigned separate lifts and are prohibited from using common spaces such as parks or staircases within gated societies to rest, furthering historical practices of physical and spatial segregation to enforce caste hierarchies.



Image 3: A notice posted next to lifts in a condominium building stating “Building में रहने वालों के अलावा कोई भी Lift का प्रयोग न करे।... जैसे की SWIGGY, ZOMATO, सामान Delivery waale” [“No one except the residents of this building, such as delivery workers from Zomato, Swiggy, and Couriers, should use this lift.”]

This flier barring delivery workers from using lifts went viral on Twitter late last year, sparking a debate on casteism experienced by platform workers in elite societies.<sup>34</sup> Workers are forced to spend considerably more time and effort to deliver food while operating on a clock set by platforms. We find that digitally mediated platforms and society management platforms codify such discriminatory practices and market them to users. For example, one of MyGate’s features alerts security guards if delivery workers spend more than a designated amount of time inside the society premises or are seen in places they are not supposed to be. Workers are restricted to their delivery destination, with the assumption that their continued presence after the delivery is a risk to residents.

Casteist discourse around physical segregation and associating oppressed-caste workers with impurity and disease also became rife during the COVID-19 pandemic. Delivery apps started marketing “no-contact” deliveries wherein workers would leave food or groceries outside customers’ doors, eliminating any interaction between workers and customers. No-contact deliveries remain a feature of digital platforms offering delivery and logistics services, long after the threat of COVID-19 infections has waned. Workers had no such options in their work and continued working through the pandemic while bearing the risk of contracting the disease even as their wages were being reduced. Sushant, who has been delivering food in Delhi since 2018 and who hails from western Uttar Pradesh, told us that workers are used to experiencing physical segregation across the city, with shopping malls and markets demarcating separate service lifts and waiting areas for delivery workers, restaurants using separate entries for workers, and apartment complexes monitoring their entries and exits.

The normalization of spatial and physical segregation is similar to having separate entries for “lowly jobs” like sanitary workers, barbers, and washing people in “modern” India.<sup>35</sup>

Waldrop details home layouts wherein areas used by “servants” are demarcated separately, with separate entrances into the house and a segregated space within the housing complex that live-in domestic workers can use.<sup>36</sup> We showcase that this physical segregation has also translated into modern apartment complexes, which continue to use surveillance technologies to mark spaces that workers can and cannot use. In turn, workers experience reduced dignity and rights to the city.

Security agencies have been thriving in urban spaces for decades, with digital platforms entering to provide an additional layer of surveillance datafication of workers as they enter urban enclaves. We seek to understand the impact of this additional layer on social relations in gated communities through the perspectives of workers and consumers as part of a larger ecosystem of platforms shaping urban life. This ecosystem thrives on data extraction from its users while offering them a gamut of platformized services.

The universal impact on workers across platform types and business models is a reduced ability to exercise their right to the city. We argue that digital platforms mediating labor provision and providing surveillance services thrive on social inequality, further contributing to the loss of workers’ dignity and autonomy. These practices build on centuries of caste discrimination through physical segregation and the treatment of caste-oppressed workers as outsiders in spaces controlled by dominant-caste Hindus. The suspicious gaze of employers takes a technological turn with platform urbanism.

Platforms interact with the governance and planning of city space, shape economic and labor relations, and mediate social relations. Urban spaces are also necessary for the growth of digital platforms, given the accumulation of capital, growing digital infrastructure, and access within cities with burgeoning populations. Focusing on urban enclaves as a hotbed of social inequality and caste, class-based indignity, and suspicion for domestic and platform workers alike, we show how platform urbanism adds a layer of technological surveillance and data monetization to historical social hierarchies.

## Collective Action and Demands

The hours of labor required for platform workers to make a living wage have become a flashpoint for unions in India and elsewhere. In ride-hailing, a report by the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) revealed an average work time range of 16–20 hours per day in a survey of over 2000 respondents.<sup>37</sup> The report finds a host of health issues among taxi drivers as a result of long hours of work outdoors, including exhaustion, sleep deprivation, and chronic pain. The workers we spoke to corroborated this, with most delivery workers spending at least 12 hours on the road. Rajesh, a delivery courier working in grocery delivery, said that he has made an income of R\$ 500 per day, half of his income a month ago. Recent policy changes



in the platform he works for, Blinkit, reduced workers' incomes by half, which led to widespread protests throughout Delhi and other cities.<sup>38</sup> Reducing wages amid inflation implies that workers must spend more time searching for and performing tasks on the platform.

The long hours of work on the road traveling between customers' homes significantly impacts workers' health and wellbeing. Preeti is a beauty worker with Urban Company, Asia's largest personal services platform. She works in the South Delhi area but lives slightly away from localities in which she usually finds work. When we spoke to her about the implications of long hours of work without rest, she had several complaints — top of the list being unable to access washrooms or drinking water while on the job. Preeti said:

Hum poora din 7 kilo se upar tak ka bag leke ghoomte hain customers' ke gharon ke beech cabs mein. Hum sadak pe leke ghoomte hain aur customers' ke ghar tak kisi tarah pahuchte hain garmi mein. Seediyan chadke upar jaate hain. Aur customer humein ek glass paani tak nahi offer karta. Agar humne kabhi galti se customer ko apni paani ki bottle bharne ko bol diya toh woh humari rating kam kar denge. Review mein likh denge iss ne paani manga tha.

[We have to carry bags that are over seven kilograms with us while traveling in cabs between customers' homes. Then we spend time looking for customers' homes in the heat, and we climb up staircases to reach the customer. After this, we are not even offered a glass of water by the customer. If we even ask customers to fill our water bottle, they will give us a poor rating and leave a negative review stating that she asked for water while on the job.]

Workers have also raised the issue of access to toilets while on the job. When asked if they are able to use toilets in customers' homes, workers completely dismissed the idea. Two workers we spoke to shared the difficulty in finding usable public toilets, which are often dirty or out of service. They pointed out that this is an issue that is particularly plaguing women workers, as men find it easy to find secluded spots to urinate while women are left without access to washrooms.

These patterns speak to a history of indignity for working class and caste-oppressed communities. A representative of the National Platform for Domestic Workers has described this as “the mindset in the society... that the toilet is the owner's ‘private’ space, which is neater and cleaner than [the workers working there]. The workers are allowed to clean toilets in homes, but not to use them.”<sup>39</sup> Workers have started reducing their water intake to regulate their needs due to a lack of access to toilets, which leads to dehydration.<sup>40</sup>

The demand for access to washrooms and drinking water made its way into the list of 12 demands issued by the All India Gig Workers Union (AIGWU) during a spate of protests in 2022 against Urban Company by beauty workers.<sup>41</sup> The company responded by acknowledging this infrastructure gap and promised to nudge customers through their in-app

messaging to offer workers these basic amenities. However, platforms have shirked providing such amenities to workers in a systematic way. Similar demands around “the right to pee” have been raised in other contexts. DoorDash workers in the US successfully negotiated rest stops and toilets to be provided by the platform given the nature of platform work.<sup>42</sup>

MyGate and most of its competitors are “free-mium” service providers, offering most of their basic services, including installation, training, and a dedicated smartphone to use the app all for free. All four societies we visited during our ethnography were using this free-to-use version, which allowed databasing and monitoring of workers and visitors for free. In addition, the premium version offers services such as managing community spaces and amenities, accounting and legal services, etc. MyGate has not been a profitable company since its inception, raising venture capital for growth without profitability in a trajectory similar to other technology platforms. The customers and their data are the products MyGate is selling.

In early 2022, desperate for new revenue streams, MyGate launched an advertising vertical. Its target client-base? Leading digital labor and e-commerce companies. MyGate even projected advertising to become its primary source of revenue. In its bid for new revenue streams, MyGate also started offering home-based services that have historically been considered “unorganized,” and, by extension, requiring organization. A former executive of MyGate stated that MyGate was “basically running a mini Urban Company.”<sup>43</sup> Soon enough, in November 2022, Urban Company — one of India’s most popular platforms providing a range of services at home, from plumbing to beauty work — announced that their services would be integrated within MyGate. This was followed by Urban Company investing R\$ 500 million (approximately US \$6.1 million) in MyGate. MyGate needed money, and Urban Company needed data on gated societies. Abhiraj Bhal, CEO of Urban Company, announced the partnership:

This partnership helps us draw on MyGate’s deep understanding of gated communities. This will unlock not only new consumer demand channels for us but also will give us an opportunity to innovate on our product offering to service gated communities.

This synergy is not only financial but deeply political. Both platforms, and in turn, the ever-expanding urban platform economy, are marked by a range of control mechanisms deployed to manage and govern urban environments. This is control in its well understood forms: preventing what platform workers can do, restricting their movement, and seeking to ensure that they work the way platforms want them to. Control is so embedded in the lived experience of platform workers (and all other precarious workers working in gated colonies) that it also mediates what workers cannot opt out of — platform work itself. This perhaps explains Ashrit’s resignation with the constant gaze of suspicion. Opting out is a luxury, and not really an option. A “guest” of a resident might be able to resist being added to the database of a society management platform, but a platform worker? No chance.

In our interviews with security guards, they would often allude to these management platforms having CCTV-like properties. While these surveillance technologies have mushroomed across urban India, purportedly filling security deficits, they serve other

purposes too. They are surveillance technologies that are marked by a self-fulfilling and self-propagating ubiquity. The residents we spoke to are happy to adopt these services because they are offered free of cost and give them a sense of security. Meanwhile, businesses create a database of premium customers living in the most elite residential areas in urban cities, which are offered to food delivery and e-commerce platforms to sell their services. MyGate's website boasts of integration with several of the top platforms across sectors in the country, ranging from food delivery (Swiggy) and e-commerce (Amazon) to health care (Tata 1mg) and education (BYJU's). The company's offer is simple: with gated societies, they have captured and databased the most premium customers in the country with large amounts of disposable income.

## Data Rights for Workers

Gig workers, including ride-hailing drivers, delivery personnel, and freelance workers, regularly generate vast amounts of data while interacting with digital platforms and surveillance platforms such as MyGate. As we discuss, this data encompasses a range of personal and behavioral information, such as location, transaction history, ratings, and customer preferences. However, despite being the creators of this data, gig workers often lack control and ownership over it, raising concerns about their data rights and privacy.

Data has become a valuable asset for digital platforms, enabling them to improve their algorithms, enhance customer experiences, and tailor their services. However, India's current data protection frameworks prioritize platform ownership and monetization of this data, often neglecting the interests and rights of the gig workers who generate it. This power imbalance can lead to the exploitation of gig workers, as their generated data is often used without their consent or knowledge.

In the case of platforms such as MyGate, the company's data practices are self-proclaimed to be compliant with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) as well as a proposal for a personal data protection bill in India back in 2019.<sup>44</sup> They also claim that they are in alignment with key principles of the right to privacy, including data minimization and purpose limitation. However, the implications of these applications for workers, whose movements are surveilled by their employers, and customers, who are profiled for advertisers, points to the failures of these principles to protect data rights. We did not find any evidence of the platform facilitating any mechanisms through which workers profiled by MyGate could access their data — a key feature of the rights that the GDPR accords to data subjects.

Similar gaps arise with the data protection bill, of which iterations have been proposed since 2019, with no clarity on when a data protection law will be passed. The bill aims to address data privacy concerns and establish a comprehensive framework for data protection. While the bill provides a much-needed legal framework, its impact on gig workers' data rights remains negligible.

The latest iteration of the bill — the Digital Personal Data Protection Bill, 2022 — reduces the autonomy of workers in standard employment arrangements over their data; an employer

does not need to obtain written consent from an employee where employee information is being collected about employment. Granting employees control over their data, let alone those in heterogeneous work arrangements such as gig workers, seems to be a distant dream. This greatly undermines gig workers' ability to protect their privacy, negotiate fair terms, and contest instances of unfair dismissal by digital platforms.

To ensure the fair treatment of gig workers and protect their data rights, it is crucial to include specific provisions around workers' ownership and rights over data generated by and about them. These provisions should grant gig workers ownership and control over their generated data, enable them to consent to its usage, and establish mechanisms for challenging decisions by digital platforms and their algorithmic managers. Strengthening data rights for gig workers would empower them to make informed choices, negotiate fair terms, and advocate for their own interests.

Demands for improving the working conditions in the gig economy are intrinsically tied to platform workers being able to assert their data rights. In GDPR contexts, gig workers have shown how they can use GDPR to make platforms' algorithmic systems more transparent. For example, a group of UK Uber drivers filed a lawsuit against Uber for failing to provide them with access to their data, which they needed to calculate their hourly wage and make a case for what Uber owed them to meet living wage and holiday pay requirements.<sup>45</sup>

In non-GDPR contexts like the U.S., gig workers have sought to assert their data rights through innovative structures such as data trusts and data cooperatives.<sup>46</sup> The Driver's Seat Cooperative is one example of a structure that the transportation sector gig workers govern. The cooperative, through a parallel application, enables drivers to pool their driving data. This pooled data gives them more leverage and insights that are otherwise opaque. For example, drivers can use the collected data of all cooperative members to see how much they are being paid per ride, compare their earnings to other drivers, and identify areas where they can improve their earnings.

Unions in India, including the IFAT and the AIGWU, have demanded the government protect workers' data rights. They have highlighted rights to access, portability, and right to explanation.<sup>47</sup> They also demand transparency and public audits of algorithms. Most critically, they raise the demand to delink incentive structures with pay and guarantee minimum wage regardless of metrics such as rankings. AIGWU has further raised demands to stop the permanent blocking of workers' accounts, which has become a flashpoint in recent protests.<sup>48</sup>

## Anti-discrimination in Indian Cities

Despite the brazen and frequent discrimination practiced in Indian cities broadly, and housing cities specifically, courts have typically given housing societies carte blanche in setting their governance mechanisms. In *Zoroastrian Co-operative Housing Society Limited v. District Registrar Co-operative Societies*, the Supreme Court had to judge the validity of a society bylaw that limited the membership of the housing society only to Parsis, a Zoroastrian community.<sup>49</sup> Since housing shares could be transferred only to members, only Parsis could

buy plots on the land owned by the housing society. The Supreme Court upheld the bylaw, holding that housing society members are free to associate with only those they voluntarily admit to the association. The reason for this, the Court found, was that as far as a housing society is concerned, “there should be a bond of common habits and common usage among the members... in India, this bond was most frequently found in a community or caste or groups like cultivators of a village.” In doing so, the Court not only legitimized caste-based discrimination but also kept private contracts outside of the purview. The Supreme Court narrowly interpreted anti-discrimination obligations only from state and state-like entities.

Rectifying the ill-conceived logic in *Zoroastrian Co-operative Housing Society Limited*, the Supreme Court, in a landmark 2011 case — *Indian Medical Association v. Union of India* — adopted a more accurate and transformative understanding of anti-discrimination provisions and ideals of the Indian Constitution.<sup>50</sup> Referring to Article 15(2) of the Constitution, the provision that forbids discrimination on the grounds of religion, sex, and caste in “shops” (among other things), the Court held that the word “shop” does not refer to a literal shop. Instead, it is a placeholder for the abstract market, where one can transact goods and services, much like in the housing society, where several commercial transactions take place: buying houses, renting houses, delivery packages, and domestic work.

We argue that the Indian Supreme Court’s decision in *Indian Medical Association* has laid a long overdue foundation for enforcing anti-discrimination requirements in economic markets, broadly and abstractly understood. These would include the various commercial relationships and sites of work that characterize the gig economy, irrespective of any conclusions on the employment classification of gig workers. The reasoning of the Supreme Court in *Indian Medical Association* needs to be built on and its logic encoded as a comprehensive law against private discrimination. This law should tackle both direct and indirect discrimination in access to economic transactions and services of a public character, and it should apply not just to private individuals, housing societies, and RWAs but also to applications such as those run by digital platforms and surveillance tools, such as those that we discuss above. This, perhaps, is one of the legal imperatives that can uphold Dr. Ambedkar’s vision of egalitarian Indian cities.

# Brazil

## Exploitation on Two Wheels: Platformization of Delivery Work in Brazil

By Ludmila Costhek Abílio

### Introduction

This chapter provides the reader with an overview of platform work in Brazil, then takes a closer look at the work of app-based delivery drivers. The analysis is guided by the changes and continuities surrounding deep inequalities, such as those that surround race, gender, class, and other identities that structure the Brazilian labor market. Investigating these inequalities involves researching the everyday practices, experiences, and life trajectories that shape the lives of individuals and the larger social fabric.<sup>51</sup> Our analysis helps us understand this new and powerful global phenomenon through integrating quantitative data and interviews conducted before the platformization of delivery work, with qualitative research guided by the life-story approach.

Our central area of concern is the production, reproduction, and possible overcoming of social inequalities, as well as the cultural practices associated with platform work. What kind of informality/formalization is being generated by platform work? How are inequalities produced/reproduced in these activities? Can the category of platform economy as an umbrella term encompass the breadth of different social realities with which it interacts? Which methods help us understand the social transformations at play?

In the first part, we describe the Brazilian labor market and the current context of platform work. We also present the main elements that contribute to the complexity of defining platform work. In the second part, we provide an overview of the changes in delivery work since the 1980s. In the third part, we analyze how this platformized work interacts with and

transforms labor relations. Our analysis is based on over ten years of empirical research with motorcycle couriers. From 2012 to 2024 we conducted in-depth interviews and surveys that allowed us to closely monitor the transformations of this work.

## Platform-controlled Work in Light of Brazilian Social Dilemmas

The legacy of slavery continues to exert its influence in Brazil, not as a residual aspect, but as a fundamental element that shapes everyday practices, institutions, family dynamics, and cultural power structures.<sup>52</sup> The country faces high levels of violence, with 47,000 individuals falling victim to violent deaths in 2021; 78 percent of the victims were Black. When it comes to police killings in 2021, 84 percent of the victims are Black.<sup>53</sup> Although affirmative action policies have increased the presence of Black individuals in higher education and public and private sector jobs, inequalities persist. Income disparity in Brazil is deeply entrenched, with the wealthiest 10 percent of the population holding 60 percent of the national income.<sup>54</sup> Income inequality is closely intertwined with race and gender dynamics. Black women occupy the lower tiers of the social pyramid, primarily working in low-paying, low-skilled, and less socially protected occupations. They are followed by Black men. Non-Black men experience an unemployment rate of 6.1 percent, while non-Black women face 8.9 percent unemployment. In contrast, Black men face an 8.7 percent unemployment rate, and Black women face a significantly higher rate of 13.9 percent.<sup>55</sup>

Approximately 17 percent of employed Black women are engaged in domestic work, making up 80 percent of that workforce.<sup>56</sup> Domestic work remains a manifestation of inequalities and perpetuates both material and symbolic violence rooted in the legacies of slavery. Humiliation, harassment, long working hours, unpaid labor, and undervaluation of their work are common experiences for Black domestic workers.

The wage gap between Black and non-Black individuals is striking and intertwined with gender inequalities. On average, the income of Black women corresponds to only 46.3 percent of the average income earned by non-Black men. Black men, on the other hand, have an average income equivalent to 58.8 percent of that earned by non-Black men.<sup>57</sup>

In the Brazilian labor market, *informality* is a structural issue, currently affecting approximately 39.1 percent of the employed labor force. Informal work is characterized by the absence of a formal employment contract, as well as the lack of social protections and labor rights typically associated with it. The processes of industrialization and urbanization throughout the 20th century were deeply intertwined with informal work, which expanded both in urban and rural areas.<sup>58</sup>

In the 21st century, informality has proven not to be a residual phenomenon that would be overcome by industrialization and the expansion of formal work. On the contrary, it has expanded and integrated in new ways in the face of technological development and globalization. Brazil experienced growth in formal employment, a decrease in unemployment rates, and real increases in the minimum wage. Informal work witnessed a significant decline

during this period, but in the past ten years it has been on the rise, especially intensifying during the pandemic.

Informal work is often associated with precariousness. However, precariousness is not limited to informal employment relationships in Brazil. In 2021, over one-third of employed workers in Brazil earned the minimum wage or less per month, primarily occupying low-skilled occupations; 41.6 percent of employed women and 31.6 percent of men fell into this income bracket. The figures were 51.5 percent for Black women and 39.4 percent for Black men. Brazil's minimum wage serves as a safeguard for minimal survival standards.<sup>59</sup> The current value is R\$1,302.00 a month, equivalent to US\$256. However, the Inter-Union Department of Statistics and Socioeconomic Studies (DIEESE), rooted in labor unions, estimates that the minimum wage required to ensure decent living standards should be R\$6,571 a month, equivalent to US\$1,338.

Although formal contracts provide more stability, turnover rates in formal employment are consistently high. Furthermore, in recent decades, labor laws and regulations have been made more flexible and increasingly favor extended working hours, dismissals, and turnover, weakening mechanisms for health and safety inspections and allowing for the devaluation of labor. A significant alteration in labor laws was implemented in 2018, resulting in a series of changes in the legal definition of formal employment, which weakened social protections and guarantees. Among more than 100 alterations in labor legislation, new regulations introduced the “Intermittent Work Regime,” which allows formal workers to be hired as on-demand workers. Intermittent work removes guarantees regarding remuneration and working hours, making it legal for formal employees to earn less than the minimum wage per month.<sup>60</sup>

Within this context, the Brazilian labor market has become fertile ground for the expansion of work controlled by digital platform companies. It is estimated that around 1.5 million people work as app-based drivers and delivery workers.<sup>61</sup> However, the measurement of platform work is still in its early stages, with no precise data available in Brazil — or perhaps globally — regarding the actual number of workers.

The definition of platform work, as well as that of platformized workers, is valid but can be problematic. The definition obscures what is at stake — the action of companies and new modes of labor subordination. In recent years, we have used the definition of *Uberization* as a “new form of control, organization, and management of work.”<sup>62</sup> Uberization — or platformization — promotes the expansion of informality and new modes of informal work subordination. Its main elements are:

1. Platform companies manage to monopolize economic sectors.
2. With this monopolization, some companies centralize the control of the work of vast crowds of workers.
3. Workers are transformed into *just-in-time workers*. The on-demand labor force is available but recruited and used according to the companies' determinations.



Workers lose any guarantee about how many hours they will work and how much they will receive per day.

4. Labor control is now based on the possibility of datafying a vast amount of elements of social life and managing them in a highly efficient and rationalized way, through algorithmic management of work.
5. This control also involves a loss of stability and regulation of various elements that make up work relations. We call this *informalization processes*: the rules governing work become blurred, such as definitions of working time, work distribution, remuneration, costs, and risks.<sup>63</sup>

Defining platform work is complex; statistical challenges are numerous, highlighting the complexity of this new form of labor organization and control. Workers often work for multiple platform companies and may also engage in work both within and outside of platforms. Remuneration among workers in the same occupation varies significantly due to a range of factors that are difficult to map, and different socioeconomic profiles may be involved in the same activity. Some occupations typically involve extremely long working hours. For instance, studies on app-based couriers consistently show that they often work six to seven days a week, exceeding 12 hours per day.<sup>64</sup>

Platform-controlled work is not uniform and encompasses a wide range of socioeconomic profiles and occupational trajectories. For instance, preliminary studies indicate a modest growth of platform work for domestic labor. However, courier work has been almost completely transformed by platform work in just a few years, creating an effective oligopoly. Micro-task work is rapidly expanding and involves predominantly highly educated workers.<sup>65</sup> Research indicates that location-based workers are more likely to be Black and have lower levels of education compared to those involved in web-based occupations.<sup>66</sup> However, even among location-based workers, there are still differences in terms of race, life trajectories, family situations, and age, depending on whether they are bicycle couriers, motorcycle couriers, or Uber drivers, for example.

The work of motorcycle delivery riders, commonly referred to as “motoboy” for decades, has undergone a complete reconfiguration in less than five years. With the emergence of platform companies, a new figure has emerged: bicycle couriers, also known as “bike boys,” who are predominantly young and Black.<sup>67</sup> These workers’ experiences shed light on the precarity and new forms of exploitation that take advantage of long-standing social inequalities.

## The Urban Space and Delivery Workers: Conflict, Technological Development, and Social Transformations

Afrânio is a 60-year-old Black man who has been working as a motoboy for 30 years. The interview with Afrânio took place in 2014, in an office he had rented. At the time, Afrânio had established a small delivery company and informally hired two other workers. However, a

year later, platform-based delivery companies would dominate the market, and within a few years, small businesses like Afrânio's would be engulfed by the oligopolization of this sector.

Currently, three companies — iFood, Loggi, and Rappi — hold significant influence in this market, exerting control over hundreds of thousands of workers and forming partnerships with a wide range of businesses. These companies facilitate deliveries from restaurants, grocery stores, pharmacies, and other establishments, with Loggi in particular involved in e-commerce distribution. These companies operate in an ongoing legal gray area — they exist in an indeterminate space between illegality and the absence of regulation, yet continue to expand their operations, engaging an increasing number of workers and consumers. And despite rampant datafication, which enables precise information about the work process,<sup>68</sup> these companies also obscure fundamental data such as the actual number of delivery workers per app, working hours, and remuneration. This ambiguity helps companies argue that their workers are self-employed and should be regulated accordingly. Within the legal realm, there have been various court rulings that both recognize and deny the existence of an employment relationship.

The recently elected president of the Republic, Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, campaigned on paying attention to delivery workers and imposing new regulation on the Uberization of this workforce. Since then, the government has created a working group for the regulation of platform delivery workers that includes unions, leaders, and representatives of companies. There is no consensus on what type of formalization should be promoted; the companies' lobby is powerful and has involved the production of research, news, and infiltrated actions within the workers' movement in recent years,<sup>69</sup> among others. Among the institutions and movements that defend the recognition of the employment relationship and the accountability of companies, there are those who believe that the current work relationship can and should be framed in the existing regulation of formal work, while others advocate the need to create a new work regime for platform workers.

Recording the narratives of workers like Afrânio is essential to understanding how platform companies establish, replicate, and transform labor relations. Afrânio recalled that when he started working as a motorcycle courier in the 1980s, the term "motorcycle courier" didn't even exist; he was referred to as a "delivery messenger." The term "motoboy" emerged as a derivative of the term "office boy" in later years. In Brazil today, we mainly associate most motorcycle delivery riders with meal delivery, but in reality, they have existed for decades, and their historical function was related to the transportation of documents within the city, as well as valuable goods, medical tests, medication delivery, and personal belongings. In addition to making deliveries, the work of motoboys also involves various bureaucratic tasks such as document authentication and retrieval from notaries, obtaining signatures, and more.

Afrânio's trajectory reveals the interplay between political and socio-technical transformations that reshape work relations, territory, and the everyday lives of workers. When he worked as a "delivery messenger" in the 1980s, he had significantly different working conditions compared to today's motorcycle couriers. The motorcycle belonged to the company, not the worker, and the company covered the costs of fuel and maintenance. With the rise of outsourcing, companies have normalized transferring costs and risks to the workers. Now we reach the figure of the

Uberized worker: the motorcycle and its costs become the worker's responsibility; the smartphone becomes an essential tool, and its expenses also fall on the worker; if the courier experiences accidents, the platform companies bear no responsibility; in addition to these costs, the motoboy is also required to purchase delivery bags from the company.

The profession of motorcycle couriers expanded in the 1990s. In São Paulo, the financial and real estate circuits gained strength in the '90s as it transformed into a global city<sup>70</sup> and expanded within a collapsed urban road network. The outsourcing of this occupation increased, and delivery businesses of various sizes were established, providing services to other companies, the public sector, and end customers.

With the expansion of outsourcing, formal employment opportunities also expanded for these workers. The 2000s were marked by the legal recognition of the profession of motorcycle couriers in 2009 and the growth of job openings for these professionals. Afrânio and other interviewees in 2014 stated that there was no shortage of motorcycle courier jobs — if one had a motorcycle and some experience.

This occupation also served as a gateway to the labor market for individuals with a criminal record. The motorcycle couriers we interviewed were predominantly Black and had diverse professional trajectories, such as metalworkers, waiters, security guards, salespeople, market vendors, and stock clerks. For these workers, being a motorcycle courier was one of the riskiest professions they had ever had, but also the best-paid. The city streets became their workspace and social environment. With the consolidation of the profession, a class identity was also established. Despite being associated with young people, many motorcycle couriers were, and still are, over 30 years old.

In the 1990s, deliveries had a different rhythm and logic. Back then, when a delivery was completed, the worker had to find a public telephone to contact the company and find out their next destination. Consumers also requested services from the companies over the phone.

The popularization of cell phones in the 2000s profoundly reconfigured the rationality and organization of distribution. The worker became much more easily available and accessible. The logistics underwent modifications, intensifying the pace of work, an acceleration that took place on city streets. With smartphones, couriers' work became mediated by algorithms. The worker's required skills changed too. In the 1990s, it was necessary to have a deep knowledge of the city. Now, workers can rely on devices with GPS that define routes, while platforms simultaneously surveil workers' movements and efficiency.

## **There is No Straight Direction: Paths are Curved, Full of Intersections**

In just a few years, motorcycle couriers' working conditions, professional identity, and daily strategies have undergone profound changes. Platform companies have monopolized the delivery sector, leading to an articulation of previous logics and modes of employment and subordination to new elements. Prior to the emergence of platform companies, motorcycle

couriers had different types of employment contracts. What we observed in our research over ten years ago, and continue to see today, is that the dream and goal of many of these workers is to be truly independent, meaning they don't have a boss who hires them or an app-based company that controls them. Sustaining oneself solely as an independent worker is rare and challenging because it requires having a broad and consistent client base. However, economic crises, the platformization of this work, and fierce competition with companies are some of the elements that make the life of an independent delivery worker uncertain and unstable. Typically, workers would combine — and continue to combine — independently performed deliveries with other work relations.

Besides being self-employed, ten years ago, motorcycle couriers were also hired as subcontractors through delivery companies. Such contracts could be formal, or if the company risked being in illegal conditions, it could also be informal.

When formally employed, the motorcycle courier could have two different work situations. In the first, they would receive a fixed amount defined as the minimum wage of the category — which included a payment for the use of their motorcycle, an additional amount for hazardous conditions, and an additional amount for each delivery.

In the second form, instead of earning for each delivery, the worker would be available exclusively to one company — such as a pharmacy, restaurant, or office — which would pay a fixed amount for a day of work. In this second option, the worker earned less but had better working conditions and security, as their earnings did not depend on how much they intensified their own work. Additionally, there were also informal contracts with pizzerias and other establishments that paid the worker per day of work and an additional amount for each delivery. Motorcycle couriers' informal and formal contracts illuminate how this profession encompassed various types of work relationships. Far from having a linear or exclusive trajectory for one type of employment contract, workers combined these different possibilities according to their conditions, motivations, and family situations.

With the platformization of this work, these types of contracts have not disappeared. Today, some restaurants hire a specific amount of workers per day through third-party delivery companies while others maintain their own fleet of formally employed motoboys. However, the platform companies have profoundly altered this sector. Many delivery companies have gone bankrupt, and many establishments have relinquished having their own couriers, opting instead to distribute their services or goods through platforms. We have witnessed the expansion of e-commerce; the digitization and datafication of various services and commerce have also facilitated the integration of establishments such as supermarkets, pharmacies, and pet shops, among others, into app-based deliveries.

Many businesses have delegated the recruitment, management, and control of delivery drivers to platforms. However, over time, some establishments, especially restaurants, have also realized that this can be a complicated relationship that affects the quality of service they offer. It's one thing to have a driver who works regularly for that establishment, has personal relationships with the staff, and is familiar with the customers and the geographic area of the deliveries. This worker also specializes in transporting meals, which requires a lot of skill, as

they need to simultaneously navigate urban traffic while preserving the integrity of the transported meal.

On the other hand, having unknown workers all the time, who have no established relationships, is a different matter. These workers' unfamiliarity has driven some establishments to return to having their own dedicated delivery workers. In turn, platform companies have offered restaurants their services through delivery platforms without having to use app-based motoboys. So, consumers place orders via the platform, but the driver is an employee of the platform company hired by the restaurant.

This is the case of Tadeu, a delivery driver for a restaurant in Campinas, São Paulo. Tadeu is a 24-year-old Black man with a high school education. He has been working as a motorbike courier for over three years. Currently, Tadeu is formally employed by a pizzeria, receiving a fixed salary plus an amount for each delivery. We can see how datafication and algorithmic management enable a variety of possible combinations between different work relationships: consumers can place orders through the iFood platform, but if the delivery is within an eight kilometer radius, it is the restaurant's own delivery drivers who take care of it. Tadeu explains that the drivers take charge of organizing the logistics, distributing the orders among themselves, and leveraging their knowledge of the city to maximize productivity and reduce costs.

Tadeu initially started working with the apps not as a motorbike rider, but as a bicycle delivery rider. Bicycle delivery riders working through apps are called "bike boys," a term we will use to distinguish them from motorbike riders. As discussed above, the term motoboy has been in use for decades, predating the existence of platform companies. However, the term "bike boys" specifically refers to app delivery workers, highlighting the increasing importance of bicycle delivery with the advent of platforms. Previously, this occupation was relatively invisible and dispersed, but platform companies have played a significant role in the rapid and centralized expansion of the bicycle delivery sector.

Metropolitan cities like Campinas or São Paulo lack the infrastructure necessary for cyclist commuting, yet we witness the exponential growth of the bike boy army in these cities. Additionally, there has been a significant increase in cyclist fatalities in traffic. Researchers find that bike boys are predominantly young and Black, work an average of nine to 12 hours per day, seven days per week, earning less than minimum wage.<sup>71</sup> The work entails high physical exertion and low remuneration. These young individuals come from the city's outskirts and employ various daily strategies to survive while making deliveries in the city center, including sleeping on the streets to avoid expenses and commuting time to return home.

What we observe is that the more precarious this occupation becomes, the more it is dominated by young and Black individuals. Becoming a bicycle delivery rider requires low investment — including the option to rent a bicycle instead of purchasing one — and no professional experience, despite the numerous skills and knowledge necessary for the worker to literally *survive*. Consequently, young individuals who face profound difficulties entering the labor market and who come from economically disadvantaged backgrounds in the outskirts of the city see this profession as a "first job," which, however, is informalized and not recognized as such by other employers.

Tadeu embarked on what we can now consider a “career” as a bike boy. For a bike boy, transitioning to a motoboy is an opportunity to increase earnings and reduce the high energy expenditure required for the job. It can also be seen as a professional achievement and an indication of some degree of social mobility. Tadeu previously worked as a mechanic’s assistant in a motorcycle workshop.

However, during the pandemic, he became unemployed, and working as a bike boy became his solution. He recalls cycling over 100 kilometers a day, seven days a week. He worked for food delivery platforms like iFood and Rappi, handling deliveries from restaurants, pharmacies, grocery stores, and pet shops. The day-to-day work of this young Black bike boy was highly exploitative, an arrangement that has been normalized and incorporated into algorithmic management practices. He shares that the most challenging deliveries were those from pet shops, where he had to transport dog houses and heavy bags of cat litter. In grocery deliveries, he had to carry large packages of toilet paper. His strategy to avoid such situations was to wait for the next delivery request in the vicinity of pharmacies, where the packages tended to be smaller.

After working as a bike boy for two years, Tadeu managed to buy a used motorcycle. At that time, he didn’t have a driver’s license, so a friend let him use their account on the platform to continue working with deliveries. Renting accounts is a common practice worldwide, establishing a market among workers based on their vulnerabilities and specific local contexts. Workers tend to rent accounts when they are an undocumented immigrant, lack identification documents, or don’t have enough money to obtain a driver’s license. One day, while enroute to a delivery, a driver reversed and hit him. He suffered a fractured femur and hand and was immobilized for seven months. Since he didn’t have a driver’s license, the motorcycle was seized by the authorities, and he couldn’t recover it. Tadeu’s accident reveals the precarity of a bike boy: without any company-sponsored rights, social protection, and no job, he faced food insecurity, health issues, and not being able to support his family. Despite his leg not being fully recovered, he soon borrowed a bicycle from his uncle and returned to work as a bike boy.

Eventually, he managed to buy a new motorcycle, which he financed. He continued working with app deliveries until he secured his current job at the restaurant. Currently, he combines his restaurant job with freelance deliveries. Some beauty salons hire him to transport human hair and beauty products between the cities of Campinas and São Paulo, which are 100 kilometers apart. He typically works seven days per week, between 12 and 13 hours per day, usually taking only one Sunday off per month. His net income amounts to around R\$ 3255.00, equivalent to US \$640.00. Although he no longer works with app deliveries, the platform companies are still present in his work, acting as intermediaries between customers who order through the app and the restaurant.

The trajectory of the majority of delivery workers in the Brazilian labor market is characterized by strategies, daily arrangements, instabilities, and combinations of different work situations, professions, temporary jobs, and self-employment. App-based companies’ strategies are

becoming datafied and managed under a new type of work organization that is at the same time highly flexible and highly controlled.

João is 41-years-old and has been a motorcycle courier for 20 years. His professional trajectory is characterized by a series of different activities and employment contracts. However, two main pillars have structured his life as a worker over the past two decades: being a metallurgist and being a motoboy. Prior to the platformization of delivery work, he worked as a metallurgist during the day and motorcycle courier for restaurants at night. In the factory, he was a formal worker; in the restaurants he was hired on an informal basis, and he would receive a fixed daily wage along with additional compensation for each delivery. However, for the past four years, he has exclusively been doing deliveries through the apps.

For him, both professions helped him sustain one another. In 2020, for example, when he had a serious motorcycle accident, it was his job as a welder that provided him access to medical insurance and paid leave. In the factory, he faced a controlled and enclosed environment. There, he enjoyed benefits such as paid vacations, sick leave, and contributions toward retirement. With deliveries, he experiences a sense of freedom, being out on the streets, navigating through various environments in the city, meeting people, and observing the social dynamics in the territory. As he puts it, “I like seeing people, seeing university students, seeing people from the favela, witnessing how the environment changes, seeing that rich guy from the gated community who takes the delivery without even looking at your face, and another person who treats you well. The delivery rider sees everything all the time.”

Working as a delivery rider also serves as a safety net for João during times of unemployment. Welding jobs have high turnover, and the longest he has stayed with a single company was three years. Since 2022, he hasn't had any employment in the industry, as the wages being offered are lower than what he can earn through deliveries. He continues to search for a job that provides better compensation, but currently he relies solely on app-based deliveries to sustain himself. When he has both occupations, he usually works 18 hours a day. Currently, he averages around 12 hours a day solely on deliveries, seven days a week. He estimates earning a net income of approximately of R\$ 3255.00–3906.00 or US \$640.00–768.00 per month. He starts at 10 a.m. and works until 4 p.m. He then returns in the evening, usually from 7 p.m. to midnight, but if business is good, he can work until 3 a.m.

For João, being an app-based delivery rider has advantages and disadvantages. He states that when a worker also has a stable job, platform work allows them to combine a fixed work schedule with a job with more flexible hours. However, if one doesn't have a stable job, they must face platform companies' instability and uncertainty.

Motoboys formally contracted as third-party workers have a defined workplace, manager, and clear rules regarding the organization of their work. They have access to infrastructure, which includes clean water, restrooms, and a resting area. The distribution of deliveries is managed through a queue system. Their remuneration is established by collective agreements, which define a base wage plus the value of remuneration per delivery. The value of each delivery is calculated based on the relationship between the distance traveled and the

time required for delivery. Additionally, motorcycle delivery workers under formal contracts also receive hazard pay.

However, with the advent of delivery apps, the rules of distribution and remuneration become obscure and automated. The definition of the value per delivery becomes unclear and changes frequently. The criteria for the distribution of rides are also undecipherable, obscurely linked to the productivity of the workers. The physical presence of a manager disappears, replaced by algorithmic management. Routes and delivery times are determined by data-driven algorithms and controlled through digital means. The traditional workplace disappears, along with formal determinations regarding work schedules. Basic infrastructure is not provided, and there is no regulation regarding working hours and minimum hourly pay.

When a motorcycle courier works through platforms, all the guarantees and rights achieved by the category disappear. First, the motorcycle courier is no longer hired — both the formal employment contract and the informal agreements that establish and fix the rules of informal work vanish. There are no job vacancies advertised, no formal interviews or selections. The requirements to register as a delivery driver through an app are simply having a valid driver's license and being over 18-years-old. There is no hiring or firing, but rather joining, blocking, and deactivating.

For João, one of the issues that bothers him most is the difficulty in communicating with the company, especially when they impose what he refers to as “punishments.” If a customer files a complaint about a delivery, the company suspends the worker's access to the platform for 48 hours. They claim that it is the necessary period for investigation. Regardless of the incident, the worker is left without access to income for two full days. There are also what workers commonly refer to as “white blocks,” when they have access to the platform but, for obscure reasons, do not receive any delivery requests. Trying to decipher the rules has become part of the job.<sup>72</sup> Workers usually interpret the “white blocks” as punishment for refusing some rides or not making faster deliveries.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, they begin to accept tasks that might not be beneficial for them to guarantee future deliveries. In other words, the lack of clarity of the companies' rules encourages workers to accept as many deliveries as they can.

Some of the injustices delivery workers face are deeply rooted in Brazilian society and materialize through the platformization of work. Inclement weather, the police, and building security represent some of the most challenging aspects of this work. These factors have remained unchanged over the decades. When it rains, the work becomes more dangerous, and the accident rates increase. In the pre-platform era, delivery workers' compensation included a hazard pay addition to their salary. Nowadays, companies offer bonuses during rainy periods, incentivizing work during these times through gamification of work.

Regarding the police, motorcycles are often associated with robberies and general criminal activity. Often, police target Black motorcyclists and inspect their belongings and documents. In the past year, the company iFood, currently the largest platform company in this sector, established an unprecedented partnership with law enforcement in several states of the country. Workers are now required to use facial recognition technology to carry out deliveries through the app. The company shares their data with police verification systems. Both



the company and law enforcement claim that sharing this data is beneficial for the workers and society, as it allows the police to confirm if an individual is indeed a delivery worker. However, in reality, the boundaries between public power, police oppression, and private and public surveillance become blurred, creating an unregulated convergence that can result in adverse consequences for the workers.

In Brazil, workers often experience discrimination when working in gated communities. As discussed by Aayush Rathi and Ambika Tandon in this report, in India, new technologies enable new forms of surveillance, which combine with old racist and segregationist practices. João tells us about similar, daily discrimination he faces in Brazil. Currently, gated communities use facial recognition for the entry and circulation of workers. Beyond this extraction of data and nonconsensual surveillance — as workers have few options but to accept — gated communities establish their own rules for motoboys. In one of the places João frequents, the security gate requires the worker to undergo facial recognition, present an identification document, and have a valid driver's license, otherwise they cannot enter the premises. Additionally, the community has installed radars along its streets, and if a motoboy exceeds the permitted speed limit, they are photographed, registered, and denied entry on future occasions.

Building architecture and building security reinforce social barriers and symbolic violence that reproduce racial and class discrimination. Today, buildings include security measures such as gates with openings only large enough for goods to pass through so that workers avoid physical contact with customers and entry into the building.

Elevators are also another daily problem. In deliveries made to commercial buildings, the delivery worker generally has to use elevators to reach the customers. Going back to Afrânio's experience in 2014, he told us about daily humiliations. He has had to use the elevator designated for freight and trash and descend 20 flights of stairs because the elevator operator would not let him enter. Further, older residential buildings often lack elevators. Recently, delivery workers created discussion forums on social media: "Does the delivery worker have to climb stairs?" The question was addressed by iFood, and on their website, the company instructs customers that the delivery worker is not obligated to climb stairs, and going downstairs is a sign of "respect for the delivery worker."<sup>74</sup> For workers in the era of platformization, the issue takes on new dimensions beyond the violence they are subjected to. Dissatisfied customers (because the delivery worker refused to climb stairs or took longer with the delivery when unable to access the elevator) can leave negative ratings. Negative ratings can result in a range of unclear penalties/damages that are now part of algorithmic work management. In other words, everyday racial violence can, in uncertain and incomprehensible ways, result in reduced remuneration, extended working hours, and blocks.

Elite shopping centers today employ strategies to keep delivery drivers separate from the general public. For example, they have separate entrances that ensure the drivers do not pass through the shoppers to pick up a delivery, but in practice, this increases their travel time and costs. Restaurants create designated areas on the street for the delivery drivers to stay away from the customers, informally appropriating public space. In some places, these areas are uncovered, leaving the motorcycle drivers, for instance, waiting in the rain for an order that is not yet ready. In Campinas, motoboys refer to the "electric fence" created by McDonald's,

one of the main waiting points for drivers to pick up deliveries. It involves some sort of internet signal blockage in the external area of the establishment, ensuring that the workers are close enough to get the orders on time, but far enough not to be seen on its premises.

## Conclusion: The Challenges of the Present

In platform-based delivery work, there is no minimum wage, no protection against accidents, and no regulation of working hours. The worker decides when to turn the app on and off, how many days to work per week, and where to work. Despite the autonomy — a word difficult to use in a strong sense in this situation — research shows that most delivery workers work six or seven days a week, over 12 hours a day, and earn an average income of R\$ 3906.00 or US \$768.00 per month.<sup>75</sup>

Datafication qualitatively changes the experiences of the labor force. Companies transform various elements of social life into data. Thus, on the supply side, small companies become subordinate to and controlled by a series of mechanisms that are not clearly defined in any service contract but are nonetheless powerful and operational, defined by platform companies. As for the delivery workers, the time they dedicate to work, their daily strategies, and their spatial movements are also datafied, creating a feedback loop where decisions and everyday practices become elements of algorithmic management and are internalized within the mechanisms of control over the workers. On the demand side, consumer habits, in addition to their evaluations, are datafied and incorporated into the algorithmic management of work.

These dynamics create a transformation: the worker becomes a just-in-time worker.<sup>76</sup> Living on-demand means losing all guarantees and stable agreements regarding how much one works per day and how much one earns. It also means being specifically remunerated for productive work time, while the waiting and searching times for new deliveries become costs for the workers. The stable and predictable equation of “x hours of work = y earnings” unravels. Workers now establish daily goals of what the minimum earnings necessary for their survival are, and the amount of work time needed to achieve them will depend on the company’s determinations. However, these determinations are neither clear nor stable.<sup>77</sup> Opacity permeates the rules that govern the work process.

As we have seen, workers face discrimination and injustices as part of their everyday work life. They are targets of police oppression. They face the risk of traffic accidents involving motorcycles, which have become a normal part of the job — and nowadays without any form of accountability for platform companies. The platformization of work and the new forms of management and control in this work are bringing about new precarities, intensifying risks, and deteriorating working conditions. Platformization aligns with structural characteristics of Brazilian society, incorporating prejudices as well as symbolic and material violence.

However, with the COVID-19 pandemic, these workers gained social visibility and were recognized as political subjects organizing themselves in the face of new forms of work organization.<sup>78</sup> While urban flows were interrupted, these workers continued to circulate. They became essential for those who could isolate themselves.

In 2020, we witnessed a nationwide protest of significant proportions organized by app-based delivery workers. Organizing through the slogan #braketheapps, workers demanded better working conditions and limits on algorithmic management. Four years later, it doesn't seem that improvements have been made, but collective organizations persist. With motorbike couriers and bike couriers, we see social processes in motion, a movement that seems so fast-paced with motorcycles racing between cars, or so bumpy and unstable with the roads that bicycles traverse. But indeed, everything is in motion. Therefore, it is necessary to follow the developments of labor regulation, political organization, and changes in couriers' working conditions.

# Bangladesh

## An Anthology of Bangladeshi Women Platform Workers

By Ananya Raihan, Shamarukh Alam, Samiha Akhter, and  
Jinat Jahan Khan

### Introduction

In Bangladesh, the rapid growth of platform work is colliding with centuries-old traditions of informal labor. Gig-work platforms advertise themselves to clients and workers alike on the merits of formalization: organizing available workers, tracking completed jobs, and structuring payments. However, the allure of a formal, digital platform for informal labor hides the very real precarity that continues to plague this work. And in many cases, the intrusion of platform intermediaries encodes this precarity, leading to further exploitation of workers.

To demonstrate the realities of gig work in Bangladesh, this chapter presents the stories of women platform workers involved in home-based gigs. Women in the platform economy prefer those domains of work or jobs that are traditionally known as women's work, including cleaning, cooking, providing beauty services, and caregiving.<sup>79</sup> It is notable that these verticals where women mainly prefer to work have a small number of jobs available<sup>80</sup>, and such jobs traditionally have inferior conditions and lower wages.<sup>81</sup>

In Bangladesh, domestic care services are primarily provided by women due to the gendered stigma attached to the division of labor in society. Traditionally, the home is also treated as an informal workspace; because of traditional and hierarchical sociocultural norms, domestic workers and caregivers are expected to do additional work when employers demand it. Historically, there are no rules and regulations to track overtime and determine payment based on that for domestic workers and caregivers.<sup>82</sup> Master-worker dependency and

servitude play a vital role in this workspace. Therefore, it is difficult to enforce labor laws or otherwise regulate them.<sup>83</sup> In fact, no gig-based jobs are covered by Bangladeshi labor law.

When domestic labor is platform-mediated, the platform will track work time. But workers still engage in additional tasks for fear of losing future jobs. Even though work time and the commissions to platforms are calculated in a very structured manner, this structure is unclear on workers' wages, bonuses, and leaves.

The terms “platformization” and “formalization” are not synonymous. Platformization does not necessarily lead toward formalization, or becoming formal under the purview of a legal framework. Rather, it is a transfer of precarities to the platform, or a “formalization” of precarities, as the gig work remains informal. What platforms choose to structure or ignore has great consequences for workers — if an aspect of work is not included in the platform, it is forced into informality and precarity.

The precarious nature of domestic care workers is produced by a combination of the prevalent social hierarchy, gendered power dynamics, and, as this anthology shows, the recent practices of platforms. To demonstrate, this chapter has several sections — each focusing on a particular issue and the associated precarities for women platform workers: safety, dignity, contracts, health, and leave. Within each section, we present the narratives of platform workers alongside analyses of whether these precarities have improved, worsened, or remained unchanged after platformization. We consider whether there are possible pathways to improving the lives of this workforce. Finally, we specifically look at the customers who are the users of platforms and their impact on platform workers.

In this study, data collection methods included conversation (a form of in-depth interview) and participant observation to let interviewees illustrate their issues independently, rather than forcing them to put their thoughts only into predetermined categories. Storytelling or collecting long testimonials from domestic care workers is a powerful and empathetic approach that puts the researcher in a listening mode. A dialogical process is critical to engaging with domestic workers, who already face subjugation and pressure from gendered, sociocultural, and the working condition norms of platforms. Such a humanistic approach has been robust and a tool of solidarity to bring out complex nuances of domestic workers' status rather than a technical and legalistic labor-employer analysis.

## **I Am the Keeper of My Own Safety**

In one instance, Ruma<sup>\*84</sup> got a call on her mobile phone from a man who asked her to come for domestic work service. She was quick to respond that she will not take any work if it is not booked through the platform. She even cautioned the caller, saying that the platform is tracking every call. The man did not call again.

Shahnaz<sup>\*</sup> recollected her platform training in the beginning, saying they told them to adopt various tactics to remain safe at our workplace. “If you suspect anything, just leave your bag, and get out of the house by giving some excuse.”

All of the workers we talked to had taken on themselves the responsibility of being safe at work, and this is the norm. Lack of safety or the perception of lack of safety is a perpetual precarity for all working women, even more so for informal workers.

Safety is a pervasive concern for all women. One customer, Shaila\* said something that turned the question of safety completely on its head. She said, “I prefer the platform for taking beauty services at home. I feel safer at my own home, rather than in a beauty parlor, where there have been incidents of video leakage and other harassment.” Does she think that the women workers should have the same kind of safety and comfort while at work? She agrees that the platform as well as the customer are equally responsible for making workers feel comfortable and safe.

One advantage of the platformization of domestic worker services in Bangladesh is that the workers now feel that they have a place to go to for information about and resolution of safety concerns. This is a paradigmatic change to the traditional experience of workers employed in domestic services or other home-based services. Before the advent of platforms, employers alone had the power to ask for and keep details of the National Identity Card of the domestic workers, while workers could not do the same due to social hierarchies. For example, it is not uncommon for employers to check whether workers are carrying anything suspicious at the entry gate to their workplace.

Once Lipi\* called a customer from the entry gate after she had reached her destination, a man received her call. When she asked to talk to the woman of the household, he avoided answering Lipi’s question. “At that moment, I knew something was amiss. I reached out to the platform’s call center, and they told me to leave.” In this case, the design of the platform made this choice possible.

When a worker joins, most platforms give them elementary training in which they alert the worker about their safety and advise them to check whether a woman is at the house before they reach their workplace. This is in recognition of the caste and gender dynamics in Bangladesh.

As trust in law enforcement authorities is low in general, domestic workers have no place to turn to when they are in danger of physical abuse or violence. “The platform gives me the address and phone number of the customer. I always call on that number and make sure a woman has received the call. After talking to her, I set off for her home,” Shahnaz\* told us, when asked whether she feels safe at work. Ruma\*, another platform worker, said, “We have to be careful and manage our own safety. However, it is a bit of a relief to know that we can reach out to the call center.”

With that said, platforms’ responses to workers’ queries or complaints vary, and workers do not reach out to platforms as often as they need to. The platforms have not been able to create an environment in which the workers always feel comfortable contacting them. Workers interviewed for this study expressed their apprehension and fear that complaining to a platform may affect their jobs. Though the platform design includes safety measures, both platform policies and customers’ behavior continue to be informed by traditional and stigmatized cultures of domestic care workers in Bangladesh.

Platform representatives and some of the workers said they think the aspect of safety has improved with the presence of an intermediary because customers are now aware and make sure that their details are with the platform and that they can be tracked.

Based on our interviews, women domestic care gig workers felt they were more vulnerable than their male counterparts and that their risk of harassment is much higher. The platforms have not formalized the workers' basic right to safety as they could have. The platforms do not take any responsibility officially or legally for the security of the workers.

The Supreme Court of India formulated the Vishaka guidelines that made it mandatory for all institutions to put in place measures to prevent and redress sexual harassment in the workplace. The Vishaka guidelines laid the foundation for the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act & Rules, 2013.<sup>85</sup>

In Bangladesh, the Labor Rules 2015 was amended in 2022 to add a section (361 KA) that addressed sexual harassment, and impolite, obscene, and rude behavior in the workplace and made it mandatory for all institutions to formulate a sexual harassment policy. The new provision outlined the process of redressal by women workers who fall victim to harassment.

Advocacy effort should be driven toward formulating a policy framework that makes it mandatory for all digital platforms to take responsibility for women workers' safety at work, including sexual harassment, abuse, and violence, along with a redressal mechanism.

## Dignity Is Shoved Under the Doormat

While talking to a customer, Naureen\*, who takes regular beauty services from the Sheba.xyz platform, she said she was happy with the platform. She is a working woman, and thus finds it convenient to book a home-based beauty treatment at her preferred time, from the comfort of her home. Talking about her experience with women workers, she praised the platform workers who often come to give her a pedicure. One time, she reached home later than the time of her appointment and found the platform lady already waiting for her. She apologized for being late and told the woman that she would wash her feet and then they could start. The beauty worker said, “Do not bother washing your feet, Ma'am. All other customers just put forward their dirty feet for pedicures. I wash their feet before I begin.”

Salma\* got her childcare job through the Amar Astha (meaning “my trust” or “reliance” in Bangla) platform. To Salma, this feels more like a job than a gig — she works there six days a week and gets paid monthly. Almost all platforms offering domestic work or babysitting services offer both long-term and short gig services to the customers. Amar Astha is no exception.

Salma had a short unpaid trial period at the home she would ultimately work at to establish a mutual familiarization with the client. She eventually understood what her childcare job would entail, through a verbal account — without any formal contract from the platform.

Salma was meant to take care of a 2-year-old child for ten hours from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. During the day, the parents of the child were away at their work. A week into her work, she found that stay-at-home grandparents keep a strict eye on her and asked her to do non-child-care work. She was asked to wash doormats. Salma did what she was asked to do, hoping it was a one-off request but soon was asked to regularly wash doormats. “I really felt insulted and demeaned by this. This is not what I signed up for. Why must I wash doormats when I am supposed to look after a child?”

Salma was offered tea in small modest cups; as she recalled, this sort of petty behavior was a blow to her self-respect. After several weeks, Salma was firm enough to gather her wits and complain to the platform. The platform talked to the customer and this particular problem was resolved.

Treating informal workers with disrespect and indignity are expressions of power over the working class in most South Asian societies. Women informal workers carry an additional layer of a gender-based burden at work. In Bangladesh, there are 10.5 million people employed as domestic workers, around 90 percent of which are female.<sup>86</sup> These workers are paid so little it is common for every middle- and upper-class family to have one or more domestic workers; some work at a designated time, and others are live-in helpers. These live-in helpers commonly come from remote villages, increasing their work-home vulnerability.

Customers on platforms (previously masters of the home) continue the social practice of dehumanizing home-based women gig workers. Therefore, implementing platforms’ terms and conditions with their customers is the only way to ensure that workers are treated with dignity and respect and can perform their jobs without fearing for their safety.

After all, not everyone can be as brave as Salma. Rabeya\*, a beauty care worker, finished her job for a customer and went to her client’s bathroom to flush out the water used for the job. The customer became angry and yelled at her for entering the bathroom without asking her permission. Rabeya was told to use the driver’s common bathroom downstairs. These instances reveal the caste-equivalent taboo in which a person who works in a “low occupation” is not allowed to enter the “upper-class” master’s space.

In the current state of platform governance, agreements with workers are unilaterally determined by the platform through exclusivity clauses. Workers are forced to accept these terms and conditions in order to work. This is advantageous to the platforms, freeing them from any responsibility if workers face discrimination or maltreatment. This is all the more significant because these platforms don’t enforce contracts between workers and the actual customers. Traditionally, in Bangladeshi households, domestic care workers (also called maids) are verbally informed of their job description and work responsibilities that include their behavior at home. Despite these discussions, they often end up doing all sorts of housework that may not have been part of their job description.



What has changed with the advent of platforms that promise to offer convenience to customers and create opportunities for women workers? With no tri- or bi-party formal contracts, as is the case with all digital platforms today, the work terms and conditions are unilateral and have no clear outline of their job description. Digital platforms are still not in the purview of the existing legal framework of labor in the country. This loophole works to the platforms' great advantage and ends up laying the burden of it on the workers.

Ambiguous terms of a job, which invariably result in additional workload for women workers, can be and should be improved within digital platforms. Regulations should be in place to ensure platforms draw up clear bilateral contracts with workers that include their work hours, overtime, scope of job, pay, and decent work conditions.

## Forgotten Health, Forsaken Leave

“It has been four months; I am living alone with my 8-month pregnancy. My husband cheated on me and now he left me in this situation. He filed a divorce letter at this time. I am dealing with all these medical check-ups and fees just by myself” — Jui\*, a luminescent girl, was sharing her life story with us. Jui works with a domestic worker's platform, HelloTask, and came to Dhaka five years ago in search of work. Initially, she started traditional domestic tasks in houses through local references. She used to keep her money with her employer, planning to get a large sum all at once later, but the owner never gave her the due amounts. After having this kind of issue several times, she found out how HelloTask works as an intermediary in domestic work. Jui started working through the platform afterward, but now she is not able to work at all because of her pregnancy, her baby is due in the next two weeks.

The fact that Jui is managing a lot by herself and how naturally she was sharing, amazed us. Even though she works through the platform, she is not getting any support from it in her critical situation. Until last month, she was working for two part-time domestic services. But, on the platform, they told her she cannot work now. However, there is no guarantee she will get her work back because this pause isn't formally considered maternity leave. She was not even aware such leave existed. Jui was desperate to work even in this situation as she was saving money for a potential C-section. When we asked if she got any help regarding medical insurance or any emergency support from her platform, she was shocked and asked is it even possible to get these benefits?

Rabeya\*, another worker, managed to talk with us even though she was suffering from gastro-intestinal problems. She never received any institutional education and was married off when she was a teenager. She describes her husband as a vagabond, who does not work and wastes her money gambling. Rabeya is having a difficult time adjusting to the man. Most days, her husband beats her for money. Before falling sick, she could earn 10,000–12,000 Bangladeshi taka (BDT) (US \$100–\$120) monthly working at the platform by taking two or

three part-time tasks. But now, she earns only BDT 5,000 (US \$50) monthly from one part-time domestic job.

The platform deprioritized Rabeya after she informed them about her sickness. It is getting tough for her to go to work regularly, but the platform has no sick leave policy. Some time ago, her “5-year-old daughter burned herself accidentally while lighting the stove and we had to go through a traumatizing period for a long time. We needed BDT 600,000 (US \$6,000) initially for her treatment, which is a lot for us, whose monthly income is not even 5 percent of it.” Rabeya contacted the platform and they said they would “look into this matter but still don’t know.”

Despite the boom of the so-called disruptive platforms that have offered the veneer of a safety structure to gig workers in Bangladesh, the precarious nature of their work is still the same, due to the lack of health care and work safety support. In a competitive market of domestic platforms, most platforms will avoid their responsibilities regarding the protection of (domestic) workers’ basic rights.

There are significant challenges in delivering adequate benefits to platform workers. For instance, when enrolling them, platforms pitch to motivate these workers, claiming that working through their company will give them certain benefits — decent payment, safety, leaves, and others. In reality, these benefits are not in their policies or, if they are, are not enforced.

Maternity health support is a critical need for women platform workers. Many of these women live in precarious conditions, with little to no access to benefits such as paid maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, or health care coverage. This lack of support leaves many women in a vulnerable position, as they are forced to choose between their livelihoods and their own or their children’s health.

On the other hand, Bangladesh labor laws do not mandate these platforms to protect their workers by provisioning health services, as informal workers are not part of industrial or garment “workers.” Domestic care gig workers (primarily women) suffer the most from these precarious practices as they are the least unionized and have suffered from gendered stigmas, lack of state regulation, and platform neglect.

Our study shows that no platform in Bangladesh offers any form of leave policy. But the reality is that most of the workers are choosing it as their primary source of income. Platforms, therefore, should be obligated (we argue) to provide leave policies such as sick leave, casual leave, annual leave, or maternity leave; the platforms should ensure that customers abide by the public holidays for workers.

Bangladesh, an active member state of the International Labor Organization (ILO) since 1972, should implement the findings of the *Social Finance and Impact Insurance* annual report which says, social protection, or social security, is a human right and includes benefits for employment injury, sickness, old age, disability, survivors, and health protection, as well as for maternity, children, and families.<sup>87</sup> It shows how platforms are stripping workers of basic labor rights like health and leave protections.

According to the ILO, platform workers are not protected under other complementary legislation or regulations that would support the overall well-being of workers in employment (such as, the Employment Act, the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Minimum Wage Act, etc.).

It is common for domestic care gig workers to work for eight to nine hours a day. Despite this, platform workers are deprived of the basic health and leave facilities they expect from their work in Bangladesh because these workers are not recognized as employees.

## The Common Thread

In Bangladesh, where upper-middle-class and upper-class households are run by a range of house helps, there exists a clear power imbalance. Social hierarchy is manifested in multiple ways in which a pattern of submission is expected from the workers. Often a lot — including pay, benefits, or working conditions — depends on the discretion of the employers. As platforms emerge as service providers of similar kinds, rather than formalizing these informal practices through fair contracts, social protection, and other benefits, they are shifting this responsibility to the end customer.

Thus, the arbitrary and irregular relationship goes on, whereby workers continue to rely on the mercy of the customer to have basic rights such as leave, pay raises, and other benefits around health or education. Platforms take advantage of conventional sociocultural rules and shirk their responsibility of signing a fair and transparent contract with workers.

Though customers benefit from the introduction of platforms and enjoy a significant amount of convenience as a result, women workers don't see any improvement in their working conditions. For years, women household workers have accepted the power their employers hold over them, being deprived of their basic rights of decent working conditions, including sick leave, maternal leave, social benefits, health insurance, etc. Platforms, instead of securing these fundamental rights for workers, often leave the terms and conditions of contracts "loose" and "vague"; thus, a number of basic aspects remain heavily hinged on customers.

These platforms could have been a catalyst for eliminating informal social practices and promoting a formal way of work but, unfortunately, that doesn't seem to be the case.

These stories of the workers we spoke to highlight a common pattern of how these women are positioned to struggle. Many of the workers either have low formal education or none

at all. They come from low-income families without education, and when they migrate to the city, it is difficult for them to bear basic expenses for their families. Working as domestic workers for well-to-do families is the only choice they have. They face social discrimination, exploitation, and abuse. They work in multiple households — often for long hours — receive low pay, and lack any legal protection.

Given their limited opportunities and hand-to-mouth struggle with social precarities, they often seek relief when they get a chance to work on platforms. They hope for basic rights such as fair pay, safety, health care, leaves, and other social protections from platform work.

A number of workers expressed their expectations of, and aspirations for, platform work as they narrated their stories. They carried a subtle hint of dignity and betterment of their lives from platformization.

The Sheba.xyz beauty service workers we spoke to felt confident about the quality of their work because of the flexibility in working hours, decent pay, and perceived safety. One of the Sheba workers, Rubina\*, mentioned, “If I have to choose, where do I want to work in future, I will choose Sheba always, because it is a safe place for me, as they give me the comfort of taking care of my safety, if any emergency arises.”

Another Sheba worker, Tumpa\*, has a similar notion. “When I used to work in a parlor, there was no work-life balance as I had to go there early in the morning and get back home late at night. But now, I have enough time to take care of my family and can take leave whenever I want.” She enjoys the flexibility, but does not yet demand that a decent leave policy be part of her basic labor rights.

Shilpi\*, a beauty service worker, speaks with a sense of achievement. “Even after completing my graduation, every job had a pay rate of BDT 15,000–20,000 (US \$150–\$200). But as I had the passion for beauty services from childhood, I chose this path as my main source of income where if I give one service a day, I get to earn a minimum BDT 30,000 (US \$300) monthly after commission.” This is in fact a misleading calculation of income, because it doesn’t take into account transportation, loss of pay on sick days, and investment in beauty products for her work.

Sahema\* works at Sheba as a Makeup and Mehedi (a form of colored decoration on palms) artist. After completing her Class 12, she did a course on makeup and later came across Sheba. She was saying, “I work here from my passion, I could make an individual business by opening a page, but Sheba does all the promotional work for us that is why I am a renowned makeup artist today. Furthermore, they are ensuring my safety at the workplace, which is why I can aspire to be an excellent beautician one day.”

On the journey of visiting platform workers at their homes, most of which were situated in slums of Dhaka, we noted the potential of the platform economy, and how it could improve the social precarities of a large women workforce. But to do so would require real change.

## Regulatory Framework

Platform operators unilaterally determine the terms and conditions of their engagement with workers. The three platforms covered in this study, Sheba.xyz, HelloTask, and Amar Astha, are no exception. Their terms and conditions most commonly classify platform workers as “self-employed” or “independent contractors.” The service agreements generally deny that platform workers are employees, preventing their access to the justice system of the country’s legal framework for laborers. This is the crux of the debate on the platform economy, commonly referred to as the “misclassification issue.”

The HelloTask platform vehemently denies that any of the workers are employees, and refers to them as “freelance workers.” In addition, they are careless enough to use the derogatory term “maid” translated from the Bangla word “bua” to refer to their domestic workers. On their website, in the FAQ section, it reads:

*Are Maids employed in HelloTask?*

*No, we do not employ any maid. They are registered as a freelance verified worker in HelloTask.*

The Sheba.xyz uses the more respectable term “professionals” to refer to their beautician workers. This is intended more as a way to attract the urban well-to-do customers who usually request this service, and not necessarily translated into basic labor rights to the platform workers.

In March 2024, the European Council passed the EU Platform Worker Directive, which regulates the working conditions of digital platform workers and clarifies their status. The Directive gives a list of criteria and, if two criteria are met, the platform will be deemed as an employer. In Pakistan, Foodpanda treats food delivery persons as part-time or full-time employees. Thus, Foodpanda workers fall under the local labor legislation.

To date, Bangladesh has ratified 33 ILO Conventions, including seven fundamental Conventions to comply with international labor standards.

The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 was amended in 2013 and in 2018 to include better access to freedom of association (forming trade unions, etc.), occupational health and safety conditions, and a new section to address the harassment of women workers at work. This is backed by the National Labour Policy 2012 and implementation of the Labour Act Rules 2015. The Minimum Wages Board has set minimum wages for 44 different types of work, including garment workers.

A Domestic Worker Protection and Welfare Policy was put in place in 2015, which acknowledged that domestic workers are primarily women, who face violence and discrimination and thus require protection. However, this policy has not been implemented on the ground.<sup>88</sup>

Given that the platform workers are not recognized as workers or employees, they are left in the lurch by the legal system. Thus, terms set by the platform favor them to shun any basic provisions such as fair wages, decent work conditions, social protection, health benefits, and annual, sick, and maternal leave.

HelloTask, in their onboarding training manual for women domestic workers, outlines the following: When asked by a new woman entrant how much money she will get from her work, the platform answers in ambiguous terms

হ্যালোটাস্কে কাজ করলে কোনো বেতন পাওয়া যায় না। এখানে কাজ করলে কমিশন পাওয়া যায়। অর্থাৎ আপনি যত টাকার কাজ করবেন, তার ৬০ ভাগ থেকে শুরু করে কখনো কখনো ১২০ভাগ পর্যন্ত টাকা পাবেন। মানে, আপনি যদি কখনো ১০০ টাকার কাজ করেন, হতে পারে আপনি ১২০ টাকা পাবেন আবার কখনো কখনো হয়তো ৬০টাকাও পেতে পারেন।

Image 1: You do not get any salary by working on HelloTask. You get a commission. This means that you will get anywhere between 60 percent to 120 percent of commission based on how much you work. If your work is worth 100 takas, you may get 120 takas at times, or 60 takas at other instances.

This clearly undermines the right to a fair wage for platform workers. The workers fall between the cracks due to the absence of a regulatory framework that lets the platform remain unaccountable for violations of basic labor rights.

Women workers, especially those who are in home-based work, come in close physical and mental contact with their employers, making them all the more vulnerable to abuse and harassment. The same manual, in a later section, absolves the platform of all responsibility for ensuring the safety of women workers.

Addressing the women platform aspirants:

গ্রাহকের বাসায় যদি কোনো সমস্যা হয়, তাহলে সেই দায়ভার কার?

- গ্রাহকের বাসায় কোনো সমস্যা হলে, এই সমস্যাটি যদি গ্রাহক ঘটান, তাহলে দায়ভার গ্রাহকের আর যদি আপনি ঘটান, তাহলে দায়ভার আপনার। এখানে হ্যালোটাস্ক বা সুনীতি প্রকল্প কোনো দায় নেবেনা

Image 2: If you face any problem at the home of the service taker, i.e., customer, then if the problem is created by the customer, the responsibility is his/hers. If you create the problem, it is your sole responsibility. HelloTask will not bear any responsibility in this regard.

## Conclusion

As the platform economy grows globally, dialogues are going on between platforms, governments, platform workers, and their representatives to ensure that platforms become a powerful driver for fair competition and decent work for all.

As an expanding market with a new business model, platforms have a potential to significantly reduce social precarities of women informal workers in Bangladesh. By formalizing the scope of work and accepted forms of decent treatment from platforms and customers, mandating a formal and polite communication mechanism with workers, and other standardization of services, platforms can eliminate social and financial precarities of women workers to a great extent.

It is essential to have a regulatory framework that ensures worker's basic rights and gender rights, including fair pay, decent work conditions, social protection, and other benefits.

Reclassification of platform workers from self-employed or independent contractors to employees is essential in formalizing platform work. The Labour Act must recognize platform workers as "employees," which would mandate platforms to draw bilateral clear contracts and provide all standard employee benefits. Inclusion of platform workers in the Labour Act's rules and policies will allow workers to form unions and ensure fair representation with negotiation power.

Today, Bangladesh has a workers' organization for a single category of platform work, namely ride-hailing. This is formed by male workers, and primarily meant to uphold demands of platform drivers. Moreover, this is not a legally recognized union because of the undecided status of platform workers. Women platform workers have absolutely no representation today. Inclusion of platform workers' gender rights in labor policies and legislation is a must. Recently, a new platform of "app-based workers" has been formed, initiated by ride-hailing platform workers. We have yet to see how this new platform can play a role in protecting the interests of platform-based gig workers.

The informal women workforce is employed predominantly in domestic work, due to the acute lack of diversity and types of employment for them. Platforms hold considerable potential in expanding opportunities for women by giving them more categories of work to choose from. This can be achieved by collaboration between government bodies, skill development institutions, and platforms.

Researchers, activists, development partners, and civil society actors can play the role of advocate to define new employment standards, new regulations, and amendments to existing labor laws for platform workers.

Each one of us is a customer who requests services from digital platforms at some point. Public awareness campaigns are important for highlighting what the platforms lack today, what they could potentially achieve in terms of reducing precarities for women platform workers, and the need for customers to play a role in the whole process.

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