



Women and Online Work in India: The Opportunities and Limits of Digital Entrepreneurship

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Introduction

The emergence of digital labour platforms has had a crucial impact on the work and labour markets. Digital labour platforms have been hailed as the driving force behind increasing employment opportunities. Although these platforms have made it easier to enter the labour market and marginally improved wages, but at the same time they have forced workers to be content with fluctuating wages and poor working conditions.

This report primarily focuses on Indian women who find employment through various freelancing and microwork platforms. The study uses a mixed method approach and the findings are based on a survey with 365 women working on online platforms. It aims to examine certain questions such as why women join digital labour platforms, how do these platforms aid them in entering the workforce and help them gain financial independence, what are the working conditions they face and do these platforms make them feel more economically empowered.



Source: Business Standard

Key Highlights

- **Women's experiences and capacities for digital entrepreneurship**
 - In 2019, only 21% of women participated in the workforce due to various reasons such as unavailability of suitable work, burden of care work and societal expectation of married women. The flexible timings offered by digital entrepreneurship solve these problems to some extent.
 - The features of a digital platform influence the experience of its users and determine how much they are able to earn.
 - Other factors such as unequal access to digital infrastructure, financial institutions and social hierarchies also influence women's experiences and capacities.
- **Findings of the quantitative survey**
 - Even split between women in metropolitan and smaller (tier 2) cities: 53% of freelancers from metropolitan and 47% from tier 2 cities. Among microworkers, 43% from metropolitan and 57% from tier 2 cities.
 - Women engaged in online work had high educational qualification: 46% freelancers at least had a bachelor's degree and 16% had post-graduate degree or higher. 49% of microworkers had bachelor's degree and 10% had post-graduate degree or higher. 38% freelancers and 41% microworkers had previous experience of working full-time.
 - Ability to work from home was the most cited reason for shift to online work among freelancers and for microworkers it was the ability to earn more money: Majority of workers reported an increase in earnings and stated that their families were supportive of their work.
- **Qualitative interviews revealed a gendered experience of online work**
 - Online work allowed women to better balance paid work with care work and this was the most cited reason for shifting to online work from previous formal sector jobs.
 - Income earned on online platforms not a significant contribution to household income and referred to as "pocket money".

- Online work represents deskilling of workers and not suited for long-term career progression.
 - Choice of platform observed to be determined by need. For instance, microwork attracted workers with immediate monetary need and focused goals.
 - High competition among workers on these platforms and women used various adaptive strategies to find more work. For example, to get their first assignment, freelancers used techniques such as sharing a sample of their work or lowering their rates. Microworkers used tech tools to automatically accept task or get alerted whenever a new task is posted.
 - Although joining costs were absent, women had to make significant financial investments by paying for subscriptions and accounts in order to participate.
 - Existing gender inequalities such as the gender pay gap were replicated on these online platforms as well. As compared to men, women were able to devote less hours for online work due to higher care work burden. As a result women earned less than men.
- Alternative platform ownership models, like social enterprise models might help in solving some of the problems faced by the workers.
 - The study discusses the positive difference made by online labour platforms at the household level and aims to motivate future research to examine the impact of these platforms on women's participation in labour force in India and globally.

Read more: <https://fowigs.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/FOWIGS-Women-and-Online-Work-in-India-The-Opportunities-and-Limits-of-Digital-Entrepreneurship.pdf>

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