BANGLADESH WOMEN PLATFORM WORKERS
AN ANTHOLOGY

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THE TEAM

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INTRODUCTION

The anthology on understanding the nature of the precarities of platform-based gig workers is important for multiple reasons. First, the works and places of work are in transition due to the pervasive digitalisation of businesses across the globe, and thus, traditional employment relationships are evolving. There are multiple hypotheses about the implications and impact of platformisation on works, be they formal or informal. There is a new phenomenon of informal gigs, which are performed by 'digital labourers.' Second, when traditional gig work is brought to a digital platform by a new wave of 'entrepreneurship,' it is perceived that it is going to lead towards 'formalisation' of informal work; thus, workers are supposed to be better off in terms of contractual terms and conditions, which would ensure standard protection and welfare of workers. Third, the digitalisation of platform work has implications for the skills of the workers, where they need 'digital literacy' in addition to a set of 'functional literacy.' It is important to observe whether such skills are intuitively acquired or whether they pose an additional barrier to access to decent jobs.

This anthology is prepared by applying primarily an ethnographic approach and by capturing the nuances of the relationship of the women gig workers with the digital platforms, who are 'intermediating' between the customers and them. The existing literature does not extensively cover women workers and their precarities, which are multifold compared to male gig workers. Presenting the stories narrated by the selected women gig workers from various types of platforms and gigs, it depicts three broad spectrums of implications and impact: First, does the (digital) platformisation lead to the formalisation of the precarities of 'informal works?' Second, does it eliminate or reduce some of the precarities? Third, does it exacerbate some of the precarities, undermining the 'freedom' that emanated from digitalisation? Each story captures one or more precarity or their status (status quo, deterioration, and improvement/elimination), accompanied by the impact on specific types of precarities.

Precarious work implies unstable, uncertain, and insecure jobs where workers bear the risks related to jobs in exchange for no or limited social benefits and protections (Kalleberg & Vallas., 2018). Much like in the informal economy, platform workers bear a disproportionate risk, and their work is sometimes regulated by their social identities, e.g., gender, social class, caste, and religion. While male gig workers, such as ridesharing and delivery drivers, are now a common scenario in the country, women gig workers are still a new phenomenon to deal with. They generally work as domestic workers, beauty service providers, and personal care providers. It is noticeable that these verticals, where women mainly prefer to work, have a small number of jobs available (Ghosh, Ramachandran, & Zaidi, 2022), and such jobs traditionally have inferior conditions and lower wages (Liang, Hong, Gu, & Peng, 2018).

This Bangladesh anthology is developed based on stories of women platform workers involved in a few different home-based gigs such as babysitting, beauty service, and domestic work (e.g., cooking, cleaning, etc.). Skill-wise, babysitting and beauty services require higher skills,

whereas domestic work is considered a low-skilled job. The platform workers who provide babysitting and beauty services have better formal education than domestic workers. Most of these domestic workers are single mothers. It is noticeable that these verticals, where women mainly prefer to work, have a small number of jobs available (Ghosh et al., 2022), and such jobs traditionally have inferior conditions and lower wages (Liang et al., 2018).

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 (Hunt et al., 2019; Chaudhary, 2020). These jobs are done in private households under the supervision of household members. It becomes difficult to enforce labour laws and regulate them as private households are not formal workplaces (Kagan, 2018). Consequently, in many cases, such workers are always in a disadvantageous situation, even if they work through platforms. Noticeably, for all Bangladeshi platform workers, gig-based jobs are not covered by labour law. Due to long-standing sociocultural norms, domestic workers and caregivers are expected to do some additional work as per the demands of employers. And, on frequent denials, in case it is out of the agreed scope, they may be laid off and may not get jobs easily. Traditionally, there are no rules and regulations to track overtime and determine payment based on that for domestic workers and caregivers (Ashraf, Azad, Roshid, & Yasmin, 2019; Hossain, Akter, & Barman, 2015). After the intervention of different platforms, work time is tracked, but workers still engage in additional tasks for fear of losing jobs or not getting more jobs. Even though work time and commission to platforms are calculated in a very structured manner, the structure seems to be unclear when it comes to workers' wages, bonuses, and leaves. The business models of these platforms have taken sociocultural norms as a shield to avoid their responsibilities. Platforms could easily have provided a structured way to determine festival bonuses for workers, but they chose not to do so. As a result, bonuses still depend on the level of employers' mercy. Platforms are more likely to give customers a sense of authority than traditional systems, so they will not stop using them. However, it does no good for platform workers.

In the process of preparing this anthology, it was discovered that the terms 'platformalisation' and 'formalisation' are not synonymous. Platformalisation does not necessarily lead to formalisation, which is understood as works becoming formal under the purview of a legal framework. It is rather a transfer of precarities to the platform, or, better to say, 'formalisation' of precarities, as the gig works remain informal.

If one aspires to break the nature of precarity, which is instilled in the system due to social hierarchy, power dynamics, and social psychology, in that case, the anthology shows the power of storytelling as a method for drawing the attention of stakeholders, who can pick cues for their actions. This approach uses a humanistic approach as well to investigate a particular case. Unlike formal interviews, it does not stifle the natural flow of information emanating from an interviewee. The ultimate reason for this approach is to explore in depth why and how these women gig workers face precarities and whether there is any change in informal work's 'traditional' precarities. In this study, data collection methods included conversation (a form of

in-depth interview) and participant observation in order to let interviewees illustrate their issues independently rather than forcing them to put their thoughts only into some predetermined categories. For instance, the concept of 'dignity' can differ from person to person. As a worker, what job or what behaviour seems to be against their dignity cannot be described simply in two or three words. There are many incidents where women platform workers face safety issues or do additional work even if they can deny or complain to the platform. Their ways of dealing with dangers differ, and they have some grounds for accepting additional work that may not always be good or bad for them. Every worker's story has multiple layers. These layers often get eliminated while working with formal questionnaires prepared with predetermined factors in quantitative research. Thus, the anthropological approach was considered here, and the stories of the given conditions of women platform workers can be found later in the report.

In Bangladesh, the rapid growth of platform work is colliding with centuries-old traditions of informal labour. Gig-work platforms advertise themselves to clients and workers alike on the merits of formalisation: organising available workers, tracking completed jobs, and structuring payments. However, the allure of a formal, digital platform for informal labour 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 report 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 (Hunt et al., 2019; Chaudhary, 2020). Notably, these verticals, where women mainly prefer to work, have a small number of jobs available (Ghosh et al., 2022), and such jobs traditionally have inferior conditions and lower wages (Liang et al., 2018).

In Bangladesh, domestic care services are primarily provided by women due to the gendered stigma attached to the division of labour 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 have been no rules or regulations to track overtime and determine payment based on that for domestic workers and caregivers (Hossain et al., 2015; Ashraf et al., 2019). Master-worker dependency and servitude play a vital role in this workspace. Therefore, it is difficult to enforce labour laws or otherwise regulate them (Kagan, 2018). In fact, no gig-based jobs are covered by Bangladeshi labour law.

When domestic labour 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.

It is expected that this anthology will trigger debate among researchers, activists, and policymakers on shaping the platform-based gig works with, at least, a humane face, if not a radical transformation.

HOW THIS REPORT IS STRUCTURED

This study takes an anthological approach to gather the personal experiences of women platform workers in Bangladesh. It attempts to unravel whether platformisation alters the working conditions of women workers and the age-old socio-cultural precarities they have been dealing with for years. The research explores whether deep-rooted social conventions overpower the intervention of platforms, keeping workers in a disadvantageous situation.

The main report has several chapters. Each of these chapters focuses on a particular issue and the associated precarities of women platform workers. These include such issues as safety, dignity, health, leave, and contracts. Within each of these chapters, the first segment presents the narratives of platform workers, and the following segment analyses whether these precarities have improved, worsened, or remained unchanged after platformisation and offers possible pathways for the betterment of the lives of this workforce. There is a chapter that looks explicitly at the end customers, who are the users of platforms and get various services offered. Also, this chapter looks at how customers impact platform workers.

The 'Common Thread' chapter picks up the precarious commonalities between these platform workers as they go through their everyday lives. The chapter that follows the 'common thread' details the existing regulatory framework in Bangladesh and the gender-based aspects of platforms. The final chapter suggests ways of improving the current working conditions of women platform workers and how platforms can be strong and effective mediums of change.

If a reader likes to have a look at technical sections, such as research methodology, data collection tools, and details of the chosen platforms, these can be found in the annexures. The purpose of the study is presented in Annex 1, and the research methodology with the necessary details is in Annex 2. More about the platforms covered in this study and the data collection instruments are presented in Annex 3 and Annex 4.

I AM THE KEEPER OF MY OWN SAFETY

"The platform gives me the address and phone number of the customer. I always call this number and make sure a woman receives the call. After talking to her, I set off for her home," Shahnaz* told us when asked whether she felt safe at work.

Most platforms, when a worker joins, give them elementary training where they alert them about their safety and advise them to check whether a *woman* is at the house before they reach their workplace.

Once, Lipi* called the customer from the entry gate of the customer's home after she had reached the destination. A man received her call, and when she asked to talk to the woman of the household, he tried to avoid her inquiry. "At that moment, I knew something was amiss. I reached out to the platform's call centre, and they told me to leave."

In one instance, Ruma* got a call on her mobile phone from a man who asked her to come for domestic work services. She was quick to respond that she would not take up any work if it was 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 recollected her training in the beginning from the platform, saying they told us 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 the workers we talked to had taken on the responsibility of being safe at work by themselves, and this is a default norm. Lack of safety, or the perception of lack of safety, is a perpetual precarity for all working women, and more so for informal workers.

Ruma said we must be careful and manage our safety. However, it is a bit of a relief to know that we can reach out to the call centre. Sheba.xyz, founded in 2015, is the largest and one of the first digital platforms to provide a myriad of household services, such as professional cleaning, pest control, repair work, and beauty services. Women platform workers provide home-based beauty services.

Safety is a pervasive concern for all women. A 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 parlour, where there have been incidents of video leakage and other harassment." Does she think that women workers should have the same kind of safety and comfort while at work? She agreed that it was the equal responsibility of the platform and the customer to make workers feel comfortable and safe.

With the advent of platforms, the workers felt that they now had a place to go to in order to inform and remedy themselves in case their safety was compromised. This is an improvement over the traditional experience of workers employed in domestic or other kinds of home-based services. In standard practices, employers sometimes keep details of the domestic worker's National Identity Card, but the worker has absolutely no information about the employer. They manage and adjust their position in the household where they work, and they remain alert and careful of their physical safety. As trust in law enforcement authorities is low, in general, domestic workers have no place to turn in any instance where they are in danger of physical abuse or violence.

Though platforms' responses to workers' queries or complaints vary, workers do not reach out to the platform as often as they need to. The platforms have not been able to create an environment where the workers feel comfortable contacting them. Workers expressed their apprehension and fear that complaining about the platform may impact their jobs, and they do not want to lose it.

Platform representatives and some of the workers said that they think the aspect of safety has improved with the presence of an intermediary (platform), whereby customers are aware and careful that their details are with the platform and can be tracked.

Women workers, compared to their male counterparts, are more vulnerable, and their risk of any kind of harassment is much higher. The platforms have not been able to formalise workers' 'basic right to safety' as they could have, being an entity connected to both the worker and the customer. The platforms do not take any responsibility 'officially' or 'legally' vis- à-vis the security of the workers.

Workers regularly get checked at the entry gate to see if they are carrying anything suspicious to their workplace. This ensures the safety of their customers. Shouldn't the workers be assured of a similar level of safety while at work? In fact, they are at greater risk of entering the homes of strangers.

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

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

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

DIGNITY SHOVED UNDER THE DOORMAT

Salma* got her childcare job through the *Amar Astha* platform. This job could be better termed a job than a gig because she works there six days a week and gets paid monthly. Almost all platforms offering domestic work or babysitting services offer customers both long-term and short-term gig services. *Amar Astha* is no exception. The name *Amar Astha*, a Bangla coinage, means 'my trust or reliance.'

Salma had a short trial period at the home where she would work for mutual familiarisation with her employer (the customer who hired her services through the platform). Workers do not get paid during trial periods.

She got an understanding of what her job would entail: through a verbal account on the platform, taking care of a child. No written contract was drawn. She was meant to take care of a 2-year-old child from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. The parents of the child are away at their jobs throughout the day. After a week of her work, she found that her stay-at-home grandparents kept a strict eye on her. She was asked to wash doormats. She did what she was asked to, hoping it was a one-off occurrence. But amongst other activities that were unrelated to childcare, she was regularly washing 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?" She was offered tea in modest cups as she recalled that this 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 problem was resolved.

Rabeya* was not brave enough to formally handle her issue as Salma did. Rabeya had taken up a gig job to provide a beauty service to a customer. She reached there on time and did a good job, well within the estimated time. There was a bowl of water that was used for the job, and in at the end, she got up and went to the nearest toilet to throw it away. Immediately, the customer became angry and rudely admonished her for entering the toilet without taking her

permission. Rabeya was subsequently asked to use the driver's common toilet downstairs on the apartment premises.

While talking to a customer, Naureen*, who takes regular beauty services from the Sheba.xyz platform, she said she was happy with that 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 the women workers, she praised the platform workers who often come to give her a pedicure. Once she reached home later than the time of her appointment, she found the platform lady already waiting for her. She apologised for being late and told her that she would wash her feet, and then they could start off. The beauty worker said, "Do not bother washing your feet, Mam. All the other customers just put forward their dirty feet for pedicures. I wash their feet before I begin."

The age-old socio-cultural practice of treating informal workers with sheer disrespect is embedded in society. Women informal workers carry an additional layer of gender-based burden of compromised dignity at work.

In Bangladesh, there are 10.5 million people employed as domestic workers, of whom around 90% are female (Dhar, 2018). Almost every upper-middle- and upper-class family has one or more domestic workers; some work at a designated time, and others are live-in bits of help. Apart from the fundamental rights of a living wage, decent work conditions, health, safety, and social security, every worker has the fundamental right to be treated with respect at their workplace.

If platform customers continue the social practice of dehumanising home-based women gig workers, these precarities, where workers are reduced to a level of diminishing dignity, will continue.

This aspect of informal women workers has not changed in the platform economy. Changing behaviours and practices rooted in the deep societal hierarchy cannot be achieved easily. However, platforms must formalise the terms and conditions they draw with their customers, where considerable improvement can be achieved by ensuring that workers are treated politely, and their dignity is not compromised. Classifying different types of activities and gigs clearly, along with the job description of each activity, should be put in place by the platforms.

In the current state of platform governance, agreements with workers are unilaterally determined by the platform, with exclusivity clauses, and they must necessarily accept these terms and conditions. This is advantageous to the platforms because they can free themselves of any responsibilities where workers may face discrimination or maltreatment.

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 leaves 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*, such a luminescent girl, was sharing her pathetic life story with us. Jui works with a domestic worker's platform named HelloTask, who came to Dhaka 5 years ago in search of work. Initially, she started traditional domestic tasks in houses, using the references of slum people. She used to keep her money with the employer; planned to get a good amount together later. But the employer never gave her the due amounts. After having this kind of issue several times, she got to know about the platform that works as an intermediary in domestic work. Jui started working through the platform afterwards, but now she is not able to work at all because of her pregnancy; her delivery is due in the next two weeks.

The fact that Jui is managing a lot by herself, and how naturally she is 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 from the platform, they told her that she could not work now. However, there is no guarantee she will get her work back or not, as it is not like she is taking maternity leave; she was not even aware of this kind of leave. 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 emergency support from her platform, she was shocked and asked if it was even possible to get these benefits.

Jui feels that, as she is an illiterate person, people try to trick or mislead her in the city.

Rabeya*, another Hellotask worker, managed to give us time to talk even though she was suffering from gastrointestinal problems. She never received any institutional education and was married off when she was a teenager. Her husband is a vagabond, does not work to earn money, and wastes her money on gambling. Rabeya is having a difficult time adjusting to the man. Most days, she is beaten by her husband for money. Before falling sick, she could earn an amount of BDT 10,000-12,000 (US$ 100-120) monthly working at the platform by taking on 2 or 3 part-time tasks. But now, she earns only BDT 5,000 (USD 50) monthly from one part-time domestic work.

As she informed the platform regarding her sickness, she was deprioritized after that to get work. It is getting tough for her to go to work regularly, but there is nothing called sick leave. She also mentioned that they demand sick leave, some medical support, or at least loans for medical treatments from the platform.

"My five-year-old daughter burned herself accidentally while lighting the stove, and we had to go through a traumatizing period for a long time. We initially needed BDT 600,000 (US$ 6,000) for her treatment, which is a lot for us, whose monthly income is not even 5% of it," said Rabeya, another domestic platform worker. She requires more surgery in the future for skin implants.

If there is any support from the platform, like urgent medical support or loans for that, it would be extremely helpful for them. "After reaching out to them, they said they would look into this matter but still don't know," Rabeya told us when asked whether the platform knows the issue or not.

Many kinds of platforms are emerging in today's platform economy in Bangladesh. They work as a bridge between service providers and consumers as intermediaries. However, through this platformisation, there is no change in the general precarities, like the lack of hospitalisation benefits or leave policies. It is a sad truth that these platforms are setting an example to continue these precarities by not providing any policies from their end. In a competitive market of domestic platforms, like HelloTask and Amar Astha, many other platforms will come to the market and follow the same poor example of apathy by not addressing these basic rights.

There are significant challenges in delivering adequate benefits to platform workers. For instance, when platforms pitch to motivate to work to a company, they will receive certain benefits for their well-being, from starting to decent payment to safety, leaves, and other benefits. It is not in their policies, and if the policies mention those benefits, they are not enforced.

Maternity health support is a critical need for women platform workers. Many of these workers live a risky lifestyle where they have little to no access to benefits such as paid maternity leave, flexible work arrangements, and healthcare coverage. This lack of support leaves many women in a vulnerable position, as they are forced to choose between their livelihoods, their health, and

that of their newborns. What is the point of this kind of platformisation if there are not even the bare minimum of facilities?

There is no leave policy on any of the platforms. As most workers choose it as their primary source of income, the platforms are obligated to provide leave policies such as sick leave, casual leave, annual leave, maternity leave, etc. The platforms should ensure customers abide by the public holidays for workers. However, none of those were found to be there for the platform workers.

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

Platform workers are deprived of the basic health and leave facilities they expect from their work in Bangladesh because these workers are not recognised as employees. Even platforms like Amar Astha and HelloTask to provide full-time domestic and childcare services (8/9 hours per day).

Bangladesh, an active member state of the ILO since 1972, should implement the findings of the Social Finance and Impact Insurance 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 (ILO, 2018). It shows how platforms are stripping workers of basic labour rights like health and leave protections.

It is recommended that a comprehensive policy framework be put in place that addresses fundamental vulnerabilities such as occupational and reproductive health, gender rights, and fair leave protection. By implementing such policies, the government can ensure a healthy and sustainable working lifestyle for platform workers and contribute to the growth of the gig economy in Bangladesh.

BEYOND THE REMIT OF MY CONTRACT – CAN I SAY 'NO'?

Lily* has been at her job six days a week and 8-9 hours a day for the last 18 months, where she takes care of two children. The children are siblings between 2 and 4 and a half years of age, respectively. She is a responsible woman who understands the constraints of all working mothers. Thus, every morning, she makes sure to reach her work home on time before the children's mother leaves for work.

She got this work through *Amar Astha*, a digital platform that provides babysitting services to working mothers in Dhaka, where 93.8% of the women workforce is employed in the informal sector. However, such services can only be afforded by women who belong to the upper-middle and upper classes and have a formal workplace to go to.

Lily juggles a lot during the day. She hardly takes any breaks throughout the day. She does not mind the non-stop chores, but she carries a certain amount of underlying anxiety. Childcare calls for an immense amount of intimacy, something that can be joyful for mothers but not so much for Lily.

She talks with confidence and polite fluency. 'Let me tell you about various shades of my work.' It is a joint family, a common cultural practice in Bangladesh, where multiple relatives stay under the same roof. Cousins eat and play together as they grow up. While Lily is meant to cook and feed two children, she often ends up doing this for three children, including the additional child, who is a cousin and is of the same age as her two wards. The additional child comes and sits at the dining table while his cousins are eating lunch. Lily makes sure there is enough to eat on the table. The trio comes with their three different kinds of tantrums while eating, as all children do; she manages it all. Though aware of the added load

this brings, she could not possibly think of complaining about the extra work, as it feels mean to talk against a child after all.

The other day, the two children wanted to have chocolates from the fridge. The mother (of the children) had shown Lily where chocolates were kept and gave clear instructions on the amount of chocolate the children ate. And, as Lily suspected, the third child appeared just then and wanted his share! Lily found herself in a difficult situation. She could not bring herself to say no but, at the same time, knew that she would be accused of missing chocolates. As a common social practice, domestic help often live with perpetual anxiety about anything going missing in the household because they are the first to lay suspicion.

Lily took a call, gave chocolates to all three children, and kept count. She neatly wrote a note and left it on the table for her 'employer' to see. On it was written:

3 for Parisa,

3 for Araf

2 for Ryan (being the cousin).

Shefali*, another *Amar Astha* nanny, recounted a similar tale, where she ends up washing clothes for the child, she takes care of, and some more are thrown in the laundry basket that belongs to other children in the household.

While Lily was keenly aware that she was doing extra work beyond her remit, which is essentially unpaid, Shefali accepted her additional load as the norm.

Traditionally, in Bangladeshi households, house helps are taken aboard, completely based on an oral description of responsibilities. Nothing is documented anywhere, and they often end up doing all sorts of housework that they may not have anticipated as part of their job description.

With the advent of platforms that promise to offer convenience to customers and opportunity creation for women workers, has this informal practice changed in any way? With no tri- or bi-party formal contracts, as is the case with all digital platforms today, the terms and conditions of work that the workers sign up for 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 labour in the country. This loophole works to great advantage for the platforms and ends up laying the burden of it on workers.

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

BOUND TO THE CUSTOMER,
FOR BETTER OR FOR WORSE

"These days, I am not keeping well. I can't work full time; I am still hanging on to one family for whom I have been working for a while. They treat me well and often help my children with extra food," said Polly*, a *HelloTask* worker. There is no provision for sick leave or any other relevant benefits from the platform at such times.

Another *HelloTask* worker mentioned struggling to admit her children to school. One of her customers helped her with school fees, which was an informal gesture.

Abida, who is a regular Sheba.xyz customer, prefers platform beauty services as she can get them done from the comfort of her home at a time convenient to her. However, she's particular about getting her beauty treatment from a specific worker, Rima*. She calls *Sheba* customer care and asks specifically for Rima's* treatment. Though Rima may have certainty about getting a piece of work from Abida*, other workers may get overlooked or not receive similar opportunities.

Eid is the largest festival in Bangladesh, a predominantly Muslim-populated country. On this happy occasion, all formal sector workers receive festival bonuses. Traditionally, domestic workers also expect bonuses from the household they work at. However, this is entirely a social practice, and the bonus amount is never fixed. Thus, a worker may get anywhere between BDT 500 (US$ 5) and BDT 5,000 (US$ 50). Alo*, an *Astha* worker, conversed with us sitting in her modest one-room house; she said, "I sincerely hope I get a good bonus this Eid from my ma'am, where I work as a babysitter. I want to buy new clothes for my children. I couldn't afford to buy anything for them on Eid last year." Though formal workers invariably receive Eid bonuses from their employers, just like any other informal worker, the platform does not provide Eid bonuses to their workers. Alo*, though employed by the platform, depends solely on her customer to pay her a decent amount this year.

A customer seeks efficient services as well as a feeling of comfort from a beauty worker at home. "As I work a very hectic schedule, I can

 hardly manage time to go to a beauty parlour. Besides, the parlour often has a waiting queue before I can get in." Abida* continued. We talked over a video call as she shared her experience with platforms.

"I have been taking beauty services from a *Sheba.xyz* beautician for the past one and a half years. And we have developed a very close bond." She was referring to Rima: "I give her a bit of an additional fee whenever she comes. I don't have any requirement from the platform as such to pay her any bonus. But as I have developed a liking for her, I feel that I should." For the sake of "humanity and personal bond," a *HelloTask* customer named Saiful* also affirmed that he pays a bonus on Eid to platform workers, even though there is no such obligation or contractual requirement from the platform. These benefits depend solely on the customer's discretion, and the worker has little to do other than try her best at work.

A *HelloTask* customer recounted, ''There was this one time I didn't quite like the behaviour of a *HelloTask* worker; I called customer care and complained about her. They immediately replaced her with someone else. When asked how the platform handled the rejected worker, she had no clue whether the worker got another job or how the platform dealt with it. It remains unclear in such cases whether the customer or the worker is at fault. But in most cases, the worker gets penalized. Complaints or poor ratings from customers can change the fate of any platform worker. The algorithm set by platforms prioritizes workers with good ratings. When we got into the discussion on customer ratings, a *Sheba* beautician named Taslima* said, "I often get prioritised over others while having gigs as I have better ratings from my customers. Platforms are more likely to give more orders to those who have better ratings. This is why I always request my customers to give me a good rating, as it is a way to get more jobs." It shows how much control customers continue to hold over platform workers.

As we wrapped up our conversation with Alo, we asked her one last question: "Is there an event you'd like to share with us when you had an unpleasant experience?" She paused a bit. "Once, my *madam* lost her ring. It was an expensive one. I held my breath those two whole days. Though I was not questioned, I could feel the overcast. I had a sigh of relief when the lost ring was found." Her customers were decent folks, but there are instances where the customer simply assumes that things misplaced have been stolen by the platform workers and lodges complaints with the platform.

Similarly, Rima sounded grateful as she saw us off: "My current employer lets me take leave for my exams. I would not be able to continue my studies alongside my babysitting work if my customers were not supportive.'' Platforms have no such formal provisions.

In Bangladesh, where upper-middle and upper-class households are run by a range of house helps, there hangs a clear power imbalance. Social hierarchy is manifested in multiple ways, where a pattern of submission is expected from the workers. Often, a lot depends on the discretion of the employers, be it pay, benefits, or working conditions. As platforms emerge as service providers of similar kinds, rather than formalising these informal practices through fair contracts, social protection, and other benefits, they are shouldering 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 like leaves, pay raises, and other benefits around

health, education, etc. Platforms take advantage of conventional sociocultural rules, and they shirk responsibility to sign a fair and transparent contract with workers.

Though customers benefit from the introduction of platforms and enjoy a significant amount of convenience, women workers do not see any improvement in their working conditions. For years, women household workers have accepted the power their employers hold on them, being deprived of their basic rights to decent work conditions, including sick leave, maternal leave, social benefits, health insurance, and so on. Instead of securing fundamental rights, platforms often leave the terms and conditions of contracts 'loose' and 'vague;' thus, several basic aspects remain heavily hinged on customers.

The platform could have been a catalyst for eliminating informal social practices and promoting a formal way of working, but unfortunately, that does not seem to be the case.

THE COMMON THREAD

Bina*, a *HelloTask* domestic worker, got married when she was in class 5, sharing her life struggles: "I was married for 17 years; a few months ago, my husband died. Now, I am on my own with two children here in Dhaka. I do not have education or any other source to earn, without only domestic work now."

Rabeya*, another *HelloTask* worker, was married off when she was only 13. The man was a drug addict; most of the day, she was beaten by her husband, and all her money was snatched by her husband. She gave birth to four children before she turned 18. Rabeya recounted, "I used to pass horrifying days, working all day outside and then coming back home exhausted; my husband used to misbehave and wanted to take money for drugs. I passed days when I had nothing to feed my children. It is traumatizing for me when I recall those days."

Sangeeta*, who is a single mother and a babysitter at *Amar Astha*, resides in Dhaka with her only son. Her son studies in class nine; her husband is kind of a vagabond and does not have any income of his own. He never helped her financially or with household chores. Sangeeta added, "I got separated when my son was in class 4, and since then, I have been carrying all family expenses myself. I studied till class 10, but I wish my son would be an engineer one day. I understand the importance of education. No matter how, I will not stop my son's education."

Rima* is another babysitter at *Amar Astha*. She is a student with a job. She takes care of her old mother all by herself. Such a strong young girl, Rima said confidently, "My mother was so worried about our future when my father died a few years ago, but I took all the responsibility for earning by working through this platform."

These stories highlight a common pattern: how these women are natural strugglers. Many of the workers either have little formal education or none. Coming from a low-income family without education, it is tough for them to bear basic expenses for their families when they migrate to the city. Working as domestic workers in well-to-do families is the only choice that they have. They face social discrimination, exploitation, and abuse. They work in multiple

households; managing basic expenses in the city is an everyday struggle. Often, they work 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 are introduced to service provider platforms and when they get a chance to work on platforms. They hope for basic rights like fair pay, safety, healthcare, leaves, and other social protection from platform work.

A number of workers expressed their expectations and aspirations from platform work as they narrated their stories. They carried a subtle perception of dignity and the betterment of their lives through platformisation.

On the *Sheba.xyz* platform, the beauty service workers 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 must choose where I want to work in the future, I will always choose Sheba 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 parlour, 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 labour 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 a passion for beauty services from childhood, I chose this path as my main source of income; if I give one service a day, I get to earn a minimum of BDT 30,000 (US$ 300) monthly after commission." This is, in fact, a flawed calculation of income because it does not 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 mehendi (a form of coloured decoration on palms) artist. After completing her Class 12, she took a course on makeup and later came to know *Sheba*. She was saying, "I work here out of my passion. I could start 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 the slums of Dhaka, we noted the potential of the platform economy and how it could improve the social *precarities* of a large women workforce.

CONCLUSION

As It Stands Today

Re-classifying Platform Workers as 'Employees'

Platform operators unilaterally determine the terms and conditions of their engagement with workers. The three platforms covered in this study, namely *Sheba.xyz, HelloTask, and Amar Astha*, are no exception. These 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 labourers. This is the crux of the debate in the platform economy, commonly referred to as the 'misclassification issue.'

The *HelloTask* platform that offers domestic work service to customers vehemently denies that any of the workers are employees and terms 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. In the FAQ section of their website, it reads:

Are maids employed at HelloTask?

No, we do not employ any maids. They are registered as a verified freelance worker at HelloTask.

Sheba.xyz uses a 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 avail of this service and is not necessarily translated into basic labour rights for the platform workers.

> *A directive regulating the working conditions of digital platform workers and clarifying the status of these workers started in December 2021 and is now being negotiated by the European Parliament. The directive gives a list of criteria, of which, if two are met, the platform will be deemed an employer. In Pakistan, Foodpanda treats food delivery person as part-time or full-time employees. Thus, Foodpanda workers fall under local labour legislation.*

Regulatory Framework

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

The Bangladesh Labour Act 2006 was amended in 2013 and 2018 to include better access to freedom of association (forming trade unions, etc.), occupational health and safety conditions, and a new section to address women workers' harassment at work. This is backed by the National Labour Policy 2012 and the Labour Act Implementation 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, face violence and discrimination, and thus require protection. However, this policy has not been implemented on the ground (Islam & Amin, 2017).

Given that the platform workers are not recognised as workers or employees, they are left in the lurch by the legal system. Thus, terms set by the platform favour them to shun any basic provisions such as fair wages, decent work conditions, social protection, health benefits, and annual, sick, or maternity 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 my work, the platform answers with no less ambiguity.

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।

(You do not get any salary for working on HelloTask. You get a commission. This means that you will get anywhere between 60% and 120% of the commission based on how much you work. If your work is worth BDT100, you may get BDT120 at times or BDT60 at other instances.)

This clearly undermines the right to fair wages for platform workers. The workers fall between the cracks due to the absence of a regulatory framework that lets the platform go scot-free with violations of basic labour rights.

Women workers, especially those who are in home-based work, come into 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 responsibilities 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। এথানে হ্যালোটাস্ক বা সুনীতি প্রকল্প কোনো দায় নেবেনা

(If you face any problem at the home of the service taker, i.e., the customer, and the customer creates the problem, the responsibility is his/hers. If you create the problem, it is your sole responsibility. HelloTask will not bear any responsibility in this regard.)

Platform work is heavily gendered

Platform work in Bangladesh is heavily gendered, with a majority of domestic workers being female and a substantial majority of ride-hailing drivers and delivery workers being male.

A considerable majority of women platform workers are engaged in domestic and other household work. Unfortunately, there is no data available on women platform workers yet, as this is a relatively new area of research in this geography. There are some beauty workers who are usually employed only if they have formal training and previous experience working in salons. The relatively new area of childcare work has, in effect, become another form of domestic work.

Following historical socio-cultural practice, domestic workers tend to be women, as it is a type of work regarded as an extension of the unpaid household work that women usually do. They often work with low pay and under poor and exploitative conditions, without contracts or access to social benefits. Domestic workers basically help to reduce the unpaid work that would mostly be undertaken by women members of their employers' households. Given that it is only those who can afford to engage domestic workers for pay, this further creates another layer of stratification in women's employment. Those women and men who work in the formal sector on wage employment hire women domestic helps, who typically have lower education and skills.

This structural discrimination and the precarities of women in the informal workforce have been replicated in platform work. This continues to limit access to opportunities for women workers, further curtailing their right to choose a varied line of work.

WHEN ALL IS NOT WELL, CAN IT END WELL?

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 the potential to significantly reduce the social precarities of women informal workers in Bangladesh. By formalising the scope of work, accepting forms of decent treatment from both platforms and customers, mandating a formal and polite communication mechanism with workers, and other standardisation of services, platforms can eliminate the social and financial precarities of women workers to a great extent.

A regulatory framework is essential that would ensure workers' basic rights and gender rights, including fair pay, decent work conditions, social protection, and other benefits.

The reclassification of platform workers from self-employed or independent contractors to employees is essential to formalising platform work. The Labour Act must recognise platform workers as 'employees, which would mandate platforms to draw bilateral clear contracts and provide all standard employee benefits. The inclusion of platform workers in the Labour Act, Rules, and Policies will allow workers to form unions and ensure fair representation with negotiation power.

Today, Bangladesh has a worker's organisation for a single category of platform work, namely ride-hailing. This is formed by male workers and is primarily meant to uphold the demands of platform drivers. Moreover, this is not a legally recognised union because of the undecided status of platform workers. Women platform workers have absolutely no representation today. The inclusion of gender rights for platform workers in labour policies and legislation is a must. Recently, a new platform for 'App-based workers' was formed, initiated by ride-hailing platform workers. It is yet to be seen how this new platform can play a role in safeguarding platform-based gig workers' interests.

The informal women workforce is employed predominantly in domestic work due to the acute lack of diversity and types of employment. Platforms hold considerable potential for 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 advocates to define new employment standards, new regulations, and amendments to existing labour laws for platform workers.

As each one of us is a customer and takes services from digital platforms at some point or another, public awareness campaigns are important to highlight what the platforms lack today and what they could potentially achieve in terms of reducing precarities for women's platform workers and the need for customers to play a role in the whole process.

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ANNEXURE 1: BACKGROUND AND OBJECTIVES

Background

The digitalisation of the labour market offers more market opportunities, productivity growth, industrial upgrading, and different jobs, including more flexible and greener ones. Digital labour platforms, or gig companies, are creating new sources of jobs and income for people. The phenomenon of the gig economy is rapidly expanding, redefining the nature and scope of work. In 2018, there were 43 million gig workers globally, which is expected to rise to 78 million in 2023 (Financial Times, 2020). Though women's participation can be observed in this field of work, jobs are also limited to those that are considered feminine, such as household chores and caregiving (Hunt et al., 2019) and beauty services (Chaudhary, 2020). In these jobs, it may or may not require some basic skills (Kasliwal, 2020). Despite the success of employing a huge number of people, there are negative consequences of such digitalisation that are related to workers' protection, job security, work intensification, fair treatment, fair representation, and deterioration of mental well-being.

In Bangladesh, 85.1% of the employed population belongs to the informal economy (BBS, 2017). Since the arrival of Uber in Bangladesh in 2016, the gig economy has been contributing to the country's employment and GDP. The contribution of the informal economy, along with the gig economy, is around 43% of the GDP of Bangladesh (Khondkar, 2019). While the informal economy suffered a downfall amid the COVID-19 pandemic, the platform economy saw an unexpected expansion all around the world. In Bangladesh, in 2021, the gig economy saw a 27% increase, and the gig workforce increased to 3 lakh location-based gig workers and 5 lakh cloud workers (The Business Standard, 2022). According to the Bangladesh Employers Federation (BEF), digital platform companies recruited around 30,000 new workers during the COVID-19 pandemic because of the increasing demand for platform services. Most of these hired workers were in Dhaka, as the demand was higher there (Moazzem & Taznur, 2021). Although the contribution of gig workers to the economy and our daily lives is significant, there are not enough laws and policies to ensure the minimum wage and basic health and safety measures. The Fairwork Bangladesh Report 2022 found that none of the interviewed platforms were offered a wage guarantee. Interviewed workers were not provided with proper facilities for working full-time or more than that, like they would have gotten for being full-time formal workers. They face different insecurities, a lack of unions for collective bargaining, and the existence of intermediaries and third parties, making their conditions more vulnerable (Fairwork, 2021; 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the growth of gig platforms all around the world has raised the argument again that these platforms are generating more precarious work and greater insecurity for workers (Dunn, 2020). Precarious jobs imply unstable, uncertain, and insecure jobs where workers bear the risks of jobs in exchange for no or limited social benefits and protection (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018). Much like the informal economy, gig workers bear a

disproportionate risk, and their work is sometimes regulated by their social identities, e.g., caste, gender, class, and religion.

In Bangladesh, gig workers, including ride-sharing workers, delivery drivers, and domestic helpers, often face high levels of precarity and insecurity, which are perpetuated by platform companies' business models and policies. While male gig workers as ridesharing and delivery drivers are now a common scenario in the country, female gig workers are still a new phenomenon to deal with. They generally work as domestic workers, beauty service providers, and personal care providers. It is noticeable that these verticals, where women mainly prefer to work, have a small number of jobs available (Ghosh et al., 2022), and such jobs traditionally have inferior conditions and lower wages (Liang et al., 2018). Despite the growing interest in the platformisation of work and its impact on female workers, there is still much to be understood about the specific precarities that female gig workers face. This research report aims to contribute to this knowledge by examining the experiences of female gig workers in the platform economy, determining whether platformisation has changed their precarious condition, and identifying strategies for improving their working conditions and well-being.

Objectives of the Research

The Data & Society has aimed to focus on a few unexplored aspects of the platform economy in different countries. These are:
   a. Analysing the situation of marginalised platform workers (protected categories include but are not limited to gender, race, immigrants, and oppressed caste members)
   b. Unveiling the nature of the precarity of informal workers transpired to the platform economy and attempting to influence the perspectives of actors.
   c. Finding out whether the precarity of gig workers is often the result of embedded exploitative socio-cultural practices that have long dehumanised informal workers.

Bangladesh Country Focus

In the context of Bangladesh, based on the scope and focus provided by The Data & Society, are:
   a. Finding out precarities around earnings, working conditions, job security, physical safety, and social-cultural practices related to class and gender discrimination.
   b. Investigating whether platformisation is formalising these precarities and observing if the financial and social priorities are changed due to the platformisation.
   c. Analysing whether platforms, as a new intermediary, are shaping the relationship between employers and workers.

d. Determining how platformisation has changed the informal workers' working conditions and dignity rooted in the social hierarchy and power asymmetry (e.g., behaviour, working condition, overall experience as a service provider, safety, etc.)
e. Figuring out how customers financially affect the gig workers (e.g., pay, number of gigs, ratings, etc.)

Literature Review

The establishment and growth of platforms are quite new to the global economy, and women's participation in such platforms is even newer. Consequently, there is a paucity of prior studies or literature regarding female workers in the platform economy, not only in Bangladesh but also all around the world. It has been observed that 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 salon services, and caregiving (Hunt et al., 2019; Chaudhary, 2020). And jobs on location-based platforms such as Uber are traditionally considered to be men's jobs (Ghosh et al., 2022). On the other hand, there are some differences in the payments for male and female platform workers. In the United States, women only share 16% of the total income earned in the economy, whereas it is 23% for men (Farrell & Greig, 2016). There is also an income gap of 7% between male and female Uber drivers (Cook et al., 2018). Another study showed that about 75% of women in the gig economy received an income lower than £11,500 per year (Balaram, Warden, & Stephens, 2017). On the contrary, women in delivery services are paid 10% less than men in India (Kasliwal, 2020).

Traditionally, women in Bangladesh remained in their households doing household chores for years. It wa not long age that women began to participate in jobs outside of their homes. Since the 1980s, the boom in the readymade garment (RMG) sector opened a new horizon for women in Bangladesh for paid employment, especially for poorer and less skilled women. There are over 4.2 million workersin the readymade garment sector of Bangladesh, and 90% of them are women (Mamun & Hoque, 2022). Moreover, with the higher demand for assistance in household chores in urban cities, there has been a significant increase in domestic workers in the informal sector, where most of them are female. According to the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies (BILS), there are around 3 million domestic workers, and around 1.7 million workers live in Dhaka (Hossain et al., 2015). There are two broad categories, such as 'live-in' workers who reside in employers' houses and work full-time on different tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of children and elderly people. Another group lives in their own residences in low-income neighbourhoods and works for a few hours in different houses as per the needs of more than one house owner or employer (Ashraf et al., 2019; Hossain et al., 2015). Those who work as live-in domestic workers have no fixed amount of work. Their long hours of work are not even considered overtime. Such workers do not even receive their payments on time. In rural areas, wages are basically the discretion of employers, whereas there are different neighbourhood rates for various domestic tasks in urban areas. Previously,

it has also been observed that around 85% of domestic workers live below the poverty line, implying that they earn less than the poverty line measure, which is BDT 5,000 (Hossain et al., 2015).

Previously, the Domestic Workers Protection and Welfare Policy (DWPWP) of 2015 was facilitated to protect domestic workers and ensure their welfare. It was more focused on the role of stakeholders to ensure effective implementation and sound employment practices. However, there are some problems and limitations to the policy in order to maintain the workforce, too. After independence, the country took around 44 years to approve a policy for domestic workers' protection and welfare. During this long period, the mindset of relevant stakeholders was already impeding certain stands for the informal workforce that are quite difficult to change. Even with this policy, it failed to ensure a minimum wage for domestic workers. So, there is a variation in payments, depending on their experience and bargaining power. No government or private training institutions were delegated to arrange training facilities for workers in the informal sector. Moreover, the policy is not very active due to the absence of a proper workers' database, associations of domestic workers, documentation of employment of domestic workers, and formal appointments (Islam & Amin, 2017).

When the COVID-19 pandemic happened, female workers were at a greater loss again. During the pandemic, about 98% of informal sectors have faced a drastic fall in income , which was around US$ 80, or BDT 6,829. For males, the average fall was US$ 88 (BDT 7,506), and it was US$ 72 (BDT 6,093) for females. Even though the decrease in income was greater for male informal workers than female informal workers, female workers (69%) faced greater hardship. Workers engaged in services and sales faced the highest income fall in terms of both amounts (US$ 119 or BDT 10,112) and percentages (68%) (Swarna et al., 2022).

Workers involved in beauty businesses also suffered due to COVID-19. Basically, there are two major sectors in the informal economy: personal care workers and non-clinical healthcare workers. Personal care workers, in the context of our country, are those involved in beauty parlour services that include providing makeup, haircuts, spas, and so on (Hossain et al., 2021). These businesses, mainly owned by women, contribute BDT 5 billion per year to the national economy, and around 0.15 million women are involved in this sector. However, this sector and its contributions are not much discussed. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, approximately 15,000 beauty parlours were on the brink of closure, leaving many female workers jobless (Bangladesh Post, 2020). On the contrary, non-clinical healthcare workers are nannies, babysitters, ward boys, ward masters, and other occupations, including cleaners, gatekeepers, and so on (Hossain et al., 2021).

For personal care workers, non-clinical healthcare workers, and all other types of informal care workers, there are some common instabilities and insecurities. In this sector, most workers get paid on a monthly basis, whether they are hired on a permanent or seasonal basis. The number of personal care workers increases during festivals such as Eid, Puja, etc. However, signing any kind of contract is very rare in the informal care economy. According to a study, about 86%

of workers did not sign any contracts during their enrolment. Most of them do not even possess identity cards. Like other informal industries, workers have no job security in this sector. Termination can happen without any prior notice, as it is not covered by any existing law. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many workers in Bangladesh lost their jobs, mostly due to employers' inability to pay wages, a lack of consumers, and lockdown (Hossain et al., 2021).

It is also found that such informal workers work more than normal working hours. According to a study conducted by Hossain et al. (2021), 72% of informal care workers, including both personal care and non-clinical workers, worked over 10 hours per day, and only 10% of interviewed workers worked for normal working hours (8 hours daily). Fifty-six per cent of workers who worked additional hours were not even paid. Their overtime is not even recognised by the Bangladesh Labour Act of 2006. Almost no worker reported that their employers took their consent for late-night duties (Hossain et al., 2021). A similar situation can be observed for platform workers as well. In the 2018 amendment to the Bangladesh Labour Act, informal workers are not explicitly recognised. Some non-typical workers, including seasonal workers, casual workers, and temporary workers, are included in a specific category of workers. However, it is not clearly mentioned if gig workers are included in this section (Section 4, Bangladesh Labour Act 2006). The ridesharing guidelines provided by the government provide some guidelines to regulate such companies, but legal guidelines were found to protect platform workers. Platform work remains ambiguous in the legal context of Bangladesh (Fairwork, 2022).

ANNEXURE 2: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study used an anthropological approach, combining different qualitative methods to collect and analyse data. The aim is to better the condition of female platform workers . The research process of the study is presented in Figure 1.
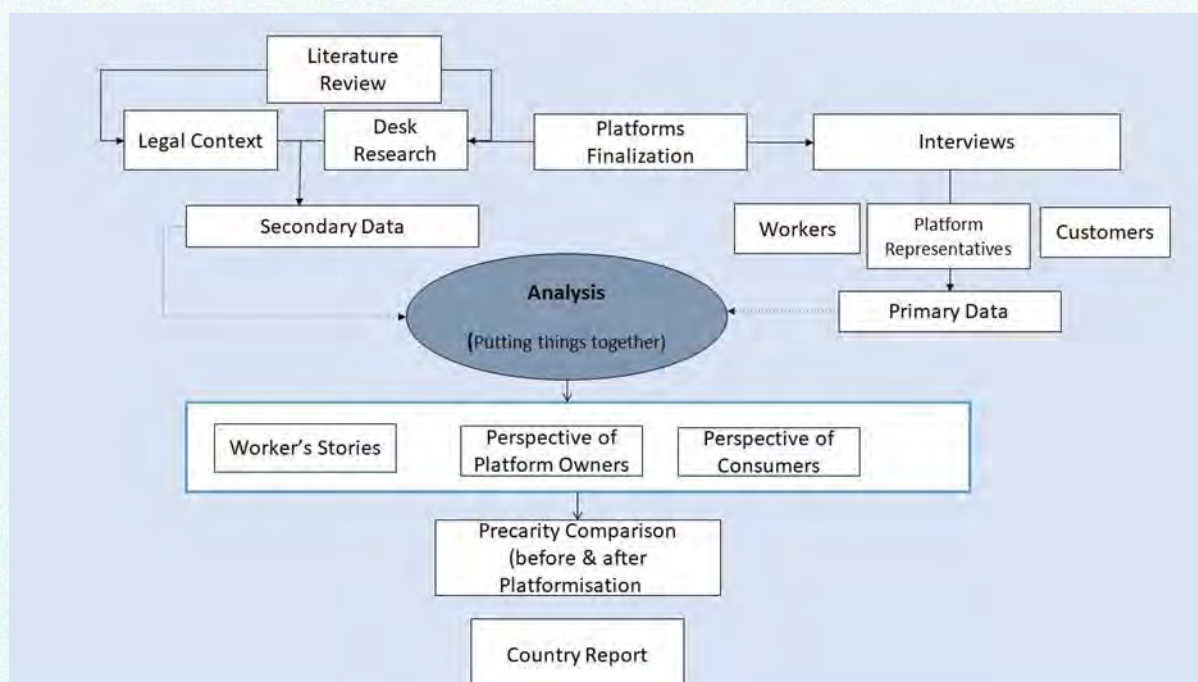

Figure 1: Methodology

Literature Review

It has two parts , including desk research and legal context.

Desk Research

The desk research was carried out to understand the precarities of female workers. Including prior studies and documents on informal and platform female workers is part of the desk research. Since the situation of female platform workers has not been explored much in Bangladesh and around the world, relevant publications and data are very limited.

We identified, through desk research, digital platform companies where female gig workers are actively engaged. In the case of platform companies, women mainly provide home-based

services, such as domestic work, beauty parlour services, and caregiving services. In home-grown platform companies, they are more likely to be seen.

Legal Context

To understand the legal context and the situation of informal female workers, it is important to observe what policies and/or laws exist in Bangladesh. As relevant documents, we identified and examined those acts and policies that were appropriate for the study. Acts and policies related to labour, domestic work, domestic violence, and the prevention of domestic violence were investigated here. This helps us observe whether existing acts and policies somehow protect female gig workers and find out the flaws in them with respect to the context of female gig workers in Bangladesh.

Interviews

Workers' Interviews

To understand how female workers participate in platform-based gig companies and the process of work, workers were interviewed directly. Female platform workers mainly provide home-based services, such as domestic work, parlour services, and caregiving services. Platforms that provide such services are very new to the existing platform economy. Thus, it is difficult to reach a sufficient number of workers from each platform. Depending on their availability and relevance, a sample of workers from each platform was interviewed. The sample may not be representative of each of these platforms. However, the aim is to better understand why such workers choose to participate in these platforms, what benefits they get, or what disadvantages or precarities there are.

Platforms' Interviews

A representative from each platform was interviewed for evidence or their part of the story. That is, to find out the operation and business model of the platform. They are asked how they assign female workers to their respective platforms as there are socio-cultural constraints and how they ensure benefits and facilities for female workers that are different from or better than the existing system of such services where women work predominantly.

Consumers' Interviews

Similar to the issue of identifying female platform workers, it was also difficult to identify consumers who use home-based services. Because most people are still likely to find domestic workers and caregivers through traditional ways, such as by asking

other domestic workers, caregivers, or relatives. Thus, it was not easy to identify a sufficient number of consumers. Consumers of each platform were interviewed to understand their views regarding home-based platforms, their workers, and their services. Consumers' perspectives are not often covered in the context of Bangladesh. Thus, the purpose is to understand whether gig workers suffer due to consumers' dissatisfaction and how consumers contribute to the precarity that workers face.

Analysis & Putting Things Together

After completing the desk research and in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders, all the information and data were analysed. The information and communication gaps can be observed through this. Both positive and negative pieces of evidence, collected through interviews, were investigated for the purpose of the study.

In this study, the approach was ethnographic. Researchers interacted with workers closely to understand the situation in their working environment. After the fieldwork, researchers use their discernment and experience to focus on specific issues relevant to the study and compile them as   distinct narratives. In each narrative, relevant issues about workers and how customers and platforms are related to them were assembled and interpreted.

This step-by-step approach provides a way to:
a. Finding out workers' stories in the case of all precarities.
b. Examine the perspectives of platforms in the context of the platform economy.
c. Knowing about the perspectives of consumers simultaneously.
d. Analysing primary data and comparing precarities that happened before and after platformisation.

Data Quality, Curation, and Management

The generated data is sufficiently anonymised, and the data handled by the team is processed with attention to data privacy. Additionally, the respondents were informed about the use of the data collected before getting a response from them, and the data were collected only after getting the consent of these individuals.
Considering the quality of the findings and outcomes of the research, the collected data were dealt with with precision, and the data will be cleaned and prepared for the analysis process. The data curation considered both the qualitative and quantitative inputs collected in the study and aims to present the data in an understandable format.

Limitations

During the implementation of our research project, we encountered various challenges regarding the sensitive nature of data collection from platform workers. The majority of these

workers were heavily burdened with their daily workload and, therefore, were reluctant to dedicate time for interviews. Additionally, when asked sensitive questions regarding their experiences with the platform, many workers hesitated to disclose negative feedback. However, we were able to overcome these obstacles by building rapport and trust with the workers, which enabled them to share their candid opinions.

Another challenge we faced was identifying potential consumers to participate in the study. Due to the limited size of this group in society and the platform's liability with its database, it was difficult to find these individuals.

Despite these challenges, we were able to navigate through them successfully and collect valuable data from both platform workers and consumers. Our findings shed light on the experiences and perspectives of these groups, which can inform future research and policy decisions.

ANNEXURE 3: PLATFORM FACTSHEET

Platform Factsheet

There are few platforms in Bangladesh where female gig workers are involved. Only HelloTask, Sheba XYZ, and Amar Astha are found to have a significant number of female workers with diverse levels of education. The purpose of taking these platforms is to observe whether there are similar precarities for female gig workers across different platforms, as those are for female informal workers, and to compare their working conditions depending on the type of work they do or their demographic characteristics.

Three platforms have been selected, e.g., Amar Astha, HelloTask, and Sheba.xyz, for this study.

Platform	Platform Type	Platform Details	Website/ App
Amar Astha	Babysitting/ nurse/ therapy/ diagnostic services at home	Amar Astha is a home healthcare service provider based in Dhaka that enables people to find reliable nannies, babysitters, and caregivers and to have home diagnostic services and occupational and speech therapies easily at home. They have both male and female workers who work as employees (full-time) or as freelancers. Most of these babysitters are mothers themselves and belong to lower-middle-income households.	https://amarastha.com /#
Hello Task,	Home-based domestic services	HelloTask is a platform to help users connect with verified and skilled housemaids on a demand basis, and it gives the helpers income opportunities through a skill-based training program and review rating system. It is the only platform in Bangladesh based in Dhaka, which started in 2018, that consists of only female workers, and it connects customers with domestic workers who offer all kinds of household chores such as cooking, home	https://hellotask.app/

Platform	Platform Type	Platform Details	Website/ App
		cleaning, washing clothes, and many more on demand. Now, they have a team of 50+ trained housemaids. These workers are commonly informal house helpers who are groomed and trained by HelloTask for their platform. In general, they belong to lower-income households in society. They usually have little or no education at all.	
Sheba. XYZ	Home-based cleaning/ plumbing/ electronic repair /chauffeur services/ car rental/ air-con/ home and office shifting/ home salon services	Sheba. xyz is Bangladesh's first and biggest online service marketplace, with 15,000+ service providers. It started in 2016 and gradually grew to 241+ services being offered on our platform and giving services in Dhaka and Chattogram. They provide a wide range of services for the home, including AC servicing, sanitary services, home cleaning, beauty salon services, and so on. In general, Sheba beauticians (provide all kinds of beauty salon services, including facials, manicures, pedicures, waxing, threading, bleach, and hair salon services) belong to lower-middle-income families. But, they have a diverse level of education, from having only an SSC level of education or below it to a tertiary level.	https://sheba-platform.xyz/business/

Table 1: Introduction of platforms

Note: In Amar Astha, since the study is focused on female gig workers, only babysitters were included.

Sheba: Female workers are only found to be in their 'personal beauty care' vertical. This is why only Sheba beauticians are included in this study.

ANNEXURE 4: DATA COLLECTION INSTRUMENTS

The data collection instruments are summarised below:

Instruments		Objectives	Execution Plan	Sample Size
In-depth Interview (IDI)	Workers	To understand how female workers participate in platform-based gig companies and the processes of work.	In-person interviews were taken at workers' places at their convenience. For each platform, six interviews were taken.	18
	Platforms	To know how platforms assign female workers to their respective platforms as there are socio-cultural constraints and how they ensure benefits and facilities for female workers.	One interview is taken from each platform	3
	Consumers	To understand the views of consumers regarding home-based platforms, their workers, and services.	After online communication, interviews were set at consumers' convenience. From each platform, two interviews were set.	6