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Care, Time and the Platform: A Structured Evidence Review of Flexibility and Precarity in Women's Gig Work

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Abstract

The expansion of digital labour platforms has generated debate over whether gig work creates new employment opportunities for women or reproduces existing gender inequalities. Platform flexibility, particularly the ability to determine when and sometimes where work is undertaken, may benefit women balancing paid employment with unpaid domestic and care responsibilities. However, gig work may also involve unstable earnings, occupational segregation, safety risks, limited social protection and constrained career progression. This paper examines the relationship between unpaid care, time constraints, realized flexibility and employment precarity among women in gig and platform work through a structured evidence review. The review synthesizes 16 verified primary evidence units and four systematic or scoping reviews, after consolidating two companion publications based on the same fieldwork. Evidence was identified through targeted searches, citation tracing and bibliographic verification. As the search did not follow a fully reproducible database-export protocol, the study is presented as a structured evidence review rather than a conventional PRISMA systematic review. The findings indicate that unpaid care responsibilities influence women's engagement with platform work, although causal relationships with platform entry, retention or exit remain unestablished. Platform work can offer meaningful temporal flexibility, but its benefits depend on household responsibilities, earnings, platform governance, occupational conditions and safety. Evidence from India suggests that platform work may accommodate existing care responsibilities without substantially altering their unequal distribution. Thus, flexibility and precarity often coexist, making the economic value of platform work conditional on women's ability to exercise flexibility without disproportionately bearing employment-related risks and costs.

Keywords: gig economy, platform work, unpaid care, women's employment, temporal flexibility, employment precarity

1.INTRODUCTION

The emergence of digital labour platforms has transformed the organization of paid work across a growing range of economic activities. Ride-hailing, food delivery, online freelancing, crowdwork, tutoring, domestic services and beauty services are increasingly mediated through digital platforms that connect workers with customers and clients. Although the institutional arrangements differ considerably across these sectors, platform-mediated work is commonly associated with a degree of flexibility that distinguishes it from conventional employment. Workers may be able to decide when to log in, which tasks to accept and, in some forms of platform work, how many hours to devote to paid work. This apparent autonomy has contributed to the portrayal of the gig economy as a potentially attractive employment arrangement for individuals who face constraints in conventional labour markets.

The question of flexibility is particularly important when considering women's employment. Women's participation in paid work continues to be shaped by their disproportionate responsibility for unpaid domestic and care work. Childcare, eldercare, household production and other forms of unpaid labour compete with market employment for the limited resource of time. Consequently, women's labour-market decisions cannot be understood solely through wages and conventional employment characteristics. The temporal organization of employment can itself influence the attractiveness and feasibility of paid work. A job that provides schedule control may therefore have a different economic value for a woman with substantial care responsibilities than for a worker who faces fewer constraints on the allocation of time.

This observation provides an important economic rationale for examining platform work. Within a labour-supply and time-allocation framework, individuals allocate their available time among market work, household production and other activities. When unpaid care responsibilities impose binding time constraints, the opportunity cost of conventional employment may increase. Platform work may then become relatively attractive because it allows paid work to be fitted around household responsibilities. In this sense, flexibility can possess genuine economic value even when the monetary returns from platform work are relatively modest. However, treating flexibility as synonymous with empowerment risks overlooking the conditions under which flexibility is exercised. Platform workers may experience unstable earnings, weak employment protection, limited access to social security, occupational segregation, customer dependence, algorithmic management and safety risks. Moreover, women may exercise flexibility by reducing their paid working hours, accepting lower-return tasks, avoiding particular working times or locations, or postponing career progression. Under these circumstances, flexibility may enable women to remain economically active while simultaneously reproducing existing inequalities within both the household and the labour market.

The distinction between formal and realized flexibility is therefore central to understanding women's platform work. A platform may formally permit workers to choose their working hours, but this does not mean that workers can exercise such choice without economic or social costs. Realized flexibility refers to the extent to which workers can actually use schedule autonomy to organize paid employment around other responsibilities. The difference between nominal and realized flexibility becomes particularly important when care responsibilities are unequally distributed within households.

Existing research provides evidence for several elements of this relationship, but these strands of literature have often developed separately. Studies of women's platform work have examined household responsibilities, gender norms and working-time decisions, while other research has focused on earnings gaps, occupational segregation, safety, precarity and career outcomes. Recent reviews have also expanded knowledge of gendered precarity, work-life balance, health and safety in the gig economy. Hung et al. (2026), for instance, provide a systematic review of gendered precarity in the gig economy, while Singh et al. (2025) examine work-life balance, fatigue and health outcomes among female gig workers in India. Other recent reviews focus specifically on gender dynamics and safety.

Although these studies establish the importance of gender inequality within platform work, there remains value in bringing the literature together around a more specific labour-economic mechanism: the interaction between unpaid care, time constraints, flexibility and precarity. The central issue is not whether platform work is inherently flexible or precarious, but how flexibility operates for women whose employment decisions are embedded within unequal systems of unpaid care. Against this background, the present paper examines five questions. First, how do unpaid care responsibilities and time constraints shape women's participation and engagement in platform work? Second, to what extent is the flexibility offered by platform work realized in practice, and under what conditions? Third, what forms of economic and employment precarity coexist with realized flexibility? Fourth, how do these relationships vary across platform sectors, countries and institutional contexts? Finally, what does the existing evidence reveal about women, unpaid care, flexibility and precarity in the Indian platform economy?

The paper contributes to the literature by developing a labour-economic synthesis of these relationships. It does not claim to provide the first review of gender and gig work, nor does it assume that flexibility necessarily produces empowerment or that flexibility necessarily produces precarity. Instead, it asks under what conditions platform flexibility can be economically valuable for women and when that value may be undermined by the risks and constraints associated with platform employment.

1.1 Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

The analysis is grounded primarily in feminist economics, labour-supply theory, time-allocation theory, the opportunity cost of time and the literature on precarious employment. Together, these perspectives provide a framework for understanding why women may value flexible employment while simultaneously experiencing labour-market disadvantage. Feminist economics is important because it challenges the treatment of unpaid care as economically invisible. Household production and care are essential to the functioning of economies even though they are generally excluded from conventional measures of market output. Their unequal distribution affects the time available for paid employment and consequently influences women's labour-market opportunities. From this perspective, women's participation in platform work must be understood within the broader organization of social reproduction. Platform work does not occur in isolation from the

household; rather, paid platform work may be incorporated into existing patterns of domestic labour and care. Labour-supply and time-allocation theory provide a second component of the framework. Individuals face a finite amount of time that must be allocated among market work, household production and other activities. An increase in the time required for unpaid care can therefore reduce the time available for paid employment or increase the cost of maintaining a particular employment schedule. Employment arrangements that provide greater control over working time may consequently become more attractive to individuals facing binding time constraints. The opportunity cost of time further clarifies why flexibility may possess economic value. For a worker with substantial childcare or eldercare responsibilities, the cost of working at a fixed time may include not only foregone leisure but also the need to arrange alternative care. A flexible platform arrangement can reduce some of these costs by allowing work to be shifted around household responsibilities. However, flexibility does not eliminate opportunity costs. A worker who accommodates care by reducing working hours may experience lower earnings or slower career progression. The economic value of flexibility must therefore be considered alongside the costs associated with exercising it. The literature on precarious employment provides the final component of the framework. Platform workers may experience economic insecurity even where they possess substantial control over the timing of work. Earnings volatility, lack of employment protection, occupational segregation, safety concerns and limited access to social protection can coexist with schedule autonomy. Flexibility and precarity should therefore be treated as analytically distinct dimensions of employment quality.

This framework leads to a central proposition. The attractiveness of a work arrangement depends not only on its monetary return but also on the time and scheduling constraints it imposes relative to competing non-market activities. Platform flexibility can therefore have positive utility value for workers facing binding care constraints even when expected earnings are lower than those associated with more conventional employment. Whether that flexibility constitutes an improvement in economic welfare, however, depends on the accompanying risks, income stability, safety and access to employment protections. The resulting relationship is therefore neither linear nor predetermined. Unpaid care may generate demand for flexible work; platform work may provide some degree of flexibility; and platform employment may simultaneously expose workers to forms of precarity. The existence of all three conditions does not establish that one necessarily causes the other. Instead, the relationship is mediated by household arrangements, platform governance, labour-market institutions, occupation and the broader economic context.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This paper adopts a structured evidence-review approach to synthesize research on women's gig and platform work. The methodological objective is to identify and critically organize evidence relevant to the relationship between unpaid care, time constraints, realized flexibility and employment precarity. The review is deliberately described as a structured evidence review rather than a conventional systematic review. The evidence-identification process involved iterative targeted web-based searches, citation tracing and individual verification of bibliographic records against publisher and indexing sources. It did not involve a fully reproducible database-export protocol across Scopus, Web of Science, EconLit and ProQuest. Consequently, the paper does not report PRISMA-style identification and screening counts that cannot be reconstructed reliably. Searches combined terms relating to women and gender with terms relating to gig work, platform work, digital labour, unpaid care, childcare, household responsibilities, flexibility, working-time autonomy, earnings, precarity, safety, social protection and career outcomes. Search combinations were refined iteratively as relevant studies and terminology were identified. Peer-reviewed empirical studies were treated as the primary evidence base, while systematic and scoping reviews were used to situate the findings within the wider literature. Institutional and policy reports were used only for contextual interpretation and were not treated as equivalent to peer-reviewed empirical evidence. The resulting studies were assessed according to their relevance to the analytical framework. Particular attention was given to whether care responsibilities or flexibility were directly measured or discussed, whether the study examined economic or employment outcomes, and whether the evidence permitted causal interpretation. Studies were also examined for potential overlap in underlying samples or fieldwork. Two companion publications by Kwan (2022a, 2022b) were treated as deriving from the same underlying fieldwork involving 30 women platform drivers in China rather than as two independent samples. Potential overlap among a related cluster of studies involving Dunn, Munoz, Sawyer, Kim and associated research could not be conclusively resolved and is therefore treated cautiously.

Following consolidation of the Kwan publications, the review contains 16 verified primary evidence units, alongside four relevant systematic or scoping reviews. The heterogeneous nature of the evidence is important. Some studies use large administrative or platform datasets, while others employ interviews, ethnographic methods, surveys or longitudinal designs. Some directly examine care and household responsibilities, whereas others provide indirect evidence through parenthood, working hours or earnings patterns. The synthesis therefore distinguishes between direct and indirect evidence rather than treating all studies as equally informative about the proposed mechanism.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Unpaid Care and Women's Engagement with Platform Work

The reviewed evidence indicates that unpaid care is an important context for women's engagement with platform work, but it does not establish a simple causal relationship between care responsibilities and platform participation. Qualitative evidence provides the clearest illustration of how care becomes embedded in women's platform work. James (2022), examining women in the UK gig economy, shows that women's experiences of digital labour remain closely connected to existing household divisions of labour. Platform work can be incorporated into women's existing responsibilities rather than replacing them. This suggests that women's engagement with platform work cannot be separated from the organization of unpaid household work. Evidence from India points in a similar direction. Ghosh, Zaidi and Ramachandran (2022) demonstrate that women working in the platform economy continue to operate within unequal gendered arrangements of domestic and care work. Platform employment may provide women with access to income and paid work, but participation does not necessarily redistribute household responsibilities. Instead, paid platform work can be layered onto pre-existing domestic obligations. Islam et al. (2025) provide further evidence through interviews with platform workers in Buenos Aires and Delhi. Their working-lives approach emphasizes the interaction between paid employment, informality, social reproduction and gender norms. For women, platform work can provide a degree of location and temporal flexibility that helps accommodate household responsibilities. At the same time, childcare, domestic work and safety concerns can constrain the extent to which that flexibility can actually be used. The evidence from China provides an important qualification to the argument that women primarily enter platform work because of its flexibility. Kwan (2022a, 2022b), drawing on the same fieldwork with 30 women platform drivers, shows that economic necessity and subsistence considerations can be more important motivations than a simple preference for flexible employment. Flexibility is therefore not necessarily the initial reason women enter platform work; rather, it may become valuable within the employment relationship once women are already participating. Quantitative research also provides evidence of the economic significance of care-related interruptions. Adams-Prassl et al. (2023), using approximately two million tasks from an online labour market together with survey evidence, identify a gender wage gap and find that interruptions are an important contributor to gender differences in hourly earnings. These differences are particularly relevant among workers with children. The study demonstrates that interruptions associated with household responsibilities can have measurable economic consequences, although it does not establish that care responsibilities causally determine whether women enter or leave platform work.

Taken together, the evidence suggests that unpaid care is an important factor shaping women's engagement with platform work, but the literature does not support a strong causal claim that care responsibilities cause women to enter, remain in or exit platform work. Instead, care appears to influence the ways in which women organize their participation and the constraints under which they work.

3.2 The Reality of Platform Flexibility

The notion that platform work is flexible requires careful qualification. Formal control over working time does not necessarily translate into effective control over the conditions of work. The reviewed evidence generally supports the existence of some degree of temporal flexibility, but it also shows that this flexibility is conditional. Women may be able to choose when to work, but the economic consequences of exercising that choice vary across sectors and institutional contexts. Dunn, Munoz and Sawyer (2021) provide particularly important evidence from online freelancing during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their panel study of US-based freelancers demonstrates how increased domestic and caregiving responsibilities affected women's working patterns. Women were more likely to reduce their working hours as household demands increased. In this context,

flexibility allowed women to absorb an increase in unpaid care, but it did so partly through a reduction in paid work. This finding illustrates why realized flexibility should not automatically be interpreted as an improvement in labour-market outcomes. A woman who can stop working when childcare demands increase has greater temporal autonomy than a woman who cannot. Yet if exercising that autonomy means losing income, assignments or career opportunities, the economic consequences may be negative. James (2022) similarly demonstrates that women's digital labour is situated within broader household responsibilities. Platform work can be arranged around domestic commitments, but the ability to do so depends on the wider organization of household labour. Islam et al. (2025) provide comparable evidence across Buenos Aires and Delhi. Women may use platform work to organize employment around household needs, but their practical flexibility remains constrained by safety, childcare and domestic responsibilities. Thus, the existence of flexibility is not disputed; what is uncertain is the extent to which it represents unconstrained choice. Longitudinal evidence also suggests that these constraints may extend beyond immediate working hours. Kim, Sawyer and Dunn (2025), using five years of data on online freelancers, identify persistent gender disparities and evidence of career disempowerment associated with platform-mediated work. Their findings are important because they shift attention from short-term schedule control to longer-term labour-market trajectories. The distinction between accommodation and advancement is therefore crucial. Platform work may allow women to remain in paid employment when conventional employment would be difficult to reconcile with care. However, remaining employed is not equivalent to achieving equal earnings, occupational mobility or career progression.

3.3 Flexibility and the Multiple Dimensions of Precarity

The literature provides substantial evidence that platform flexibility can coexist with forms of employment precarity. However, precarity is multidimensional and cannot be reduced to income instability alone. One important dimension is earnings inequality. Cook et al. (2021), using data covering more than one million rideshare drivers, identify a persistent gender earnings gap in the gig economy. Their analysis suggests that differences in driving experience, preferences and working patterns contribute to the observed gap. Although the study does not directly measure unpaid care, it demonstrates that formal access to the same platform does not necessarily produce equal economic returns. Foong et al. (2018) identify gender differences in hourly rates within an online labour marketplace, while Litman et al. (2020) document the persistence of gender pay inequality in an anonymous online labour market. These studies indicate that gender disparities can persist even in digitally mediated markets where conventional workplace characteristics are less visible. Adams-Prassl et al. (2023) provide a particularly relevant link between interruptions and earnings. Their findings suggest that gender differences in working patterns and interruptions contribute to wage inequality, with differences concentrated among workers with children. This is important for the care–platform relationship because it indicates a mechanism through which household responsibilities can have labour-market consequences even where work is formally flexible. Precarity also operates through occupational segregation. Galperin (2021) demonstrates that gender stereotyping in online hiring can influence the types of work available to women. Flexibility in an occupational segment characterized by lower returns may not generate the same economic benefits as flexibility in higher-paying forms of platform work. Safety constitutes another important dimension. Cox et al. (2024), examining gender differences in gig-worker safety in Australia, demonstrate that gender shapes workers' exposure to safety-related concerns. Such concerns may restrict the times, locations and types of work women are willing to undertake. Consequently, safety conditions can directly reduce the practical value of nominal flexibility. The Indian literature adds another dimension by emphasizing the persistence of household inequality. Ghosh et al. (2022) show that women platform workers operate within unequal care arrangements, while Bose et al. (2025) examine women workers associated with Urban Company and highlight issues concerning decent work. These studies suggest that platform participation can generate income and some degree of autonomy without eliminating the underlying gendered distribution of unpaid work.

The evidence therefore indicates that women can simultaneously experience autonomy over working time and insecurity over income, protection, safety and career development. These are not contradictory outcomes. They represent different dimensions of employment quality.

3.4 Is There a Flexibility–Precarity Trade-off?

One of the central questions emerging from the literature is whether women deliberately exchange employment

security for flexibility. The evidence does not justify such a strong conclusion. Several studies document the simultaneous presence of flexibility and precarity. Women may value the ability to determine their working hours while experiencing unstable earnings, weak social protection or limited career advancement. Yet the coexistence of two characteristics does not demonstrate a causal trade-off between them. At least three explanations are consistent with the evidence.

First, platform governance may independently generate both flexibility and insecurity. A platform can allow workers to choose when to work while simultaneously shifting income and employment risks onto them. Second, women may use flexibility to absorb unpaid care responsibilities. In such cases, flexibility may protect continued labour-market participation while reducing the intensity of paid employment. The resulting lower earnings are not necessarily a direct price imposed by the platform in exchange for flexibility; they may emerge from the interaction between platform work and unequal household responsibilities. Third, women may select platform work because conventional employment arrangements are even less compatible with their circumstances. A platform job that is relatively precarious may nevertheless be preferable to a rigid job that requires fixed hours, commuting or inflexible attendance.

These possibilities cannot be adequately distinguished by the current literature. The appropriate conclusion is therefore that flexibility and precarity frequently coexist, but there is insufficient evidence to claim that precarity is necessarily the price of flexibility. Establishing a genuine trade-off would require stronger comparative and longitudinal evidence capable of examining workers' outcomes under alternative employment arrangements.

3.5 Sectoral and Institutional Differences

The relationship among care, flexibility and precarity varies across platform sectors. Treating the gig economy as a single category risks obscuring important differences in working conditions. Ride-hailing and delivery work are strongly influenced by geographical mobility, working-time decisions, customer interaction and physical safety. Online freelancing and crowdwork, by contrast, provide greater opportunities for remote work and may offer greater control over working hours, but they also expose workers to competition, interruptions, earnings inequality and career uncertainty. Platform-mediated domestic and beauty services raise another set of issues because the work itself can overlap with traditionally gendered forms of labour. The distinction between paid and unpaid care may therefore become particularly complex in these sectors. Institutional context also matters. Evidence from the United States, China, Argentina, Spain, the United Kingdom and India reflects different labour markets, welfare systems, platform structures and household arrangements. A finding from online freelancing in the United States cannot automatically be generalized to ride-hailing in India, just as evidence from platform driving in China cannot be assumed to represent women working through domestic-service platforms. The heterogeneity of the literature is therefore not merely a methodological limitation. It is itself a substantive finding. The value and cost of platform flexibility depend on the type of work, the institutional environment, household responsibilities and the degree of control workers possess over their employment.

3.6 Women and Platform Work in India

India provides a particularly important context for examining the relationship between platform work and unpaid care. Persistent gender disparities in labour-force participation, a large informal economy and substantial unpaid domestic work create conditions in which employment flexibility may have considerable economic relevance. However, the evidence base remains limited. The available studies do not provide sufficient evidence for national generalization and are concentrated in particular urban settings and platform sectors. Ghosh et al. (2022) provide some of the most relevant evidence for the present framework. Their analysis of women workers in India's platform economy demonstrates that women continue to bear unequal household and care responsibilities while participating in paid platform work. Their findings also draw attention to wage differences, platform-related inequalities and instances of early exit. These findings suggest that platform work may provide access to employment without fundamentally altering the household institutions that shape women's time allocation. Bose et al. (2025) examine women gig workers within the Urban Company context and contribute to the emerging Indian literature on decent work practices. Their work is important because it situates women's platform participation within questions of employment quality rather than treating employment access alone as evidence of empowerment. Islam et al. (2025) provide additional India-specific evidence through interviews with women workers in Delhi. Their findings indicate that flexibility can allow women to organize work around household requirements, while safety and care responsibilities simultaneously restrict

the realization of that flexibility. The limited number of India-focused studies is reinforced by the recent scoping review of Singh et al. (2025), which identified only five relevant studies from an initial pool of 591 records when examining work-life balance, fatigue and health outcomes among female gig workers in India. Although the scope of that review differs from the present paper, its findings illustrate the relative scarcity of empirical research on women gig workers in the Indian context. The Indian evidence should consequently be interpreted diagnostically rather than representatively. It suggests that platform work may provide women with income and some temporal accommodation while leaving the underlying gender division of unpaid care largely intact. Whether this pattern characterizes women across India's diverse platform economy cannot yet be established. This evidence gap is particularly important because conventional labour-market statistics do not readily capture the full range of platform work. More integrated data are required to examine platform employment alongside unpaid care, working hours, earnings and household characteristics.

3.7 Discussion

The synthesis suggests that the central economic significance of platform work for women lies neither in flexibility alone nor in precarity alone, but in the interaction between the two. From a labour-supply perspective, flexibility can relax a binding temporal constraint. A woman responsible for childcare or eldercare may be unable to accept a conventional job with fixed hours but may be able to undertake platform work during available periods. In this sense, platform work can expand the set of employment arrangements that are feasible. However, the same flexibility may reproduce existing gender inequalities when women remain responsible for managing household care. Instead of redistributing unpaid work, platform employment can allow women to accommodate that work within their own paid working schedules. Flexibility then functions as an adaptation mechanism rather than a mechanism of structural transformation. This distinction explains why platform participation cannot automatically be equated with economic empowerment. A woman may gain income, labour-market access and control over working time while simultaneously experiencing lower earnings, occupational segregation, safety risks and limited career progression. At the same time, it would be equally misleading to conclude that flexibility has no economic value simply because it coexists with precarity. For workers facing severe scheduling constraints, the ability to choose working hours may represent a genuine improvement relative to the alternatives available to them. The relevant comparison is therefore not necessarily between platform work and an ideal secure job, but between platform work and the realistic alternatives available to workers in particular labour markets. The economic question becomes one of net employment value. Flexibility provides benefits by reducing scheduling constraints, but employment risks generate costs through income volatility, insecurity, safety concerns and limited protection. The net effect cannot be inferred without considering both sides simultaneously. This perspective also changes how gender inequality should be evaluated. If women enter flexible employment but continue to undertake most unpaid care, then the platform may have increased their access to paid work without changing the underlying allocation of household labour. If women reduce paid working hours when care demands rise, flexibility may prevent labour-market exit but simultaneously contribute to lower cumulative earnings. If women accept lower-return occupations because those occupations provide greater scheduling autonomy, flexibility may coexist with occupational segregation. The key issue is therefore not whether platform work is flexible, but who can use flexibility, how much control that flexibility actually provides, and what economic costs are incurred in exercising it.

3.8 Implications for Policy and Research

The findings have implications for both labour-market policy and future empirical research. If flexibility has economic value but can coexist with substantial employment risks, policy should avoid treating flexible work as a substitute for social protection. Platform workers require mechanisms through which social-security entitlements can remain available across platforms and employment transitions. Such protection is particularly important for women whose working hours may fluctuate because of care responsibilities. Similarly, flexible employment cannot substitute for accessible care infrastructure. Childcare, eldercare and other forms of social care can reduce the extent to which women must adjust their own paid employment to accommodate household responsibilities. Policies that improve care provision may therefore increase the effective value of flexible employment by reducing the unpaid-care constraint itself. Platform governance also requires attention. If workers face penalties for reducing availability, rejecting tasks or becoming temporarily inactive because of care responsibilities, nominal flexibility may have limited practical value. Greater transparency in platform ratings, deactivation procedures and algorithmic

management could improve workers' ability to exercise genuine scheduling autonomy. Measurement represents another major priority. Research on women's platform work would benefit from the integration of platform-work indicators with time-use data. Such data could make it possible to examine whether women who undertake platform work actually reduce unpaid care, redistribute it within households, or simply compress paid employment around existing responsibilities. For India in particular, nationally representative research is required. Existing studies provide valuable qualitative insights but cannot establish the prevalence of specific patterns across the country's diverse platform economy. Longitudinal research is also needed to determine whether short-term flexibility produces longer-term gains or losses in earnings, occupational mobility and social protection.

4. CONCLUSION

The growth of platform work has created new possibilities for organizing paid employment around household responsibilities, but it has not eliminated the gendered constraints that shape women's labour-market participation. This structured evidence review examined the relationship between unpaid care, time constraints, realized flexibility and employment precarity in women's gig work. The evidence suggests that unpaid care is an important factor shaping women's engagement with platform work, but existing research does not establish that care responsibilities causally determine platform entry, retention or exit. Platform work does provide forms of temporal flexibility, yet the extent to which women can realize this flexibility depends on household responsibilities, platform governance, earnings, safety and employment conditions. The review also finds substantial evidence that flexibility and precarity coexist. However, the literature does not establish that women necessarily exchange employment security for flexibility. Such a conclusion would require stronger evidence capable of identifying the causal mechanisms underlying workers' choices and outcomes. The most important implication is that flexibility should be understood as a conditional economic resource. For women facing binding care constraints, control over working time can have real economic value. It can reduce the scheduling barriers associated with conventional employment and allow continued participation in paid work. Yet the value of that flexibility may be undermined when women must absorb the costs of care through lower working hours, reduced earnings, occupational restrictions or constrained career progression. The evidence from India reinforces this interpretation. Existing studies suggest that platform work can provide women with income and some ability to organize paid work around household responsibilities, but there is limited evidence that it fundamentally transforms the unequal distribution of unpaid care. The Indian evidence remains too small and heterogeneous to support national generalization, making the area an important priority for future labour-market research. Ultimately, the question should not be whether platform work is flexible. The more economically meaningful question is whether women are able to convert flexibility into improved employment and welfare outcomes without bearing a disproportionate share of the risks associated with platform employment. Answering that question requires moving beyond measures of labour-force participation or schedule autonomy toward an integrated analysis of time, care, earnings, employment security and long-term career outcomes.

5. LIMITATIONS

The findings of this paper should be interpreted in light of several limitations. First, the study is a structured evidence review rather than a conventional systematic review. The evidence-identification process was iterative and did not follow a fully reproducible database-export protocol. Second, the studies included in the synthesis differ substantially in methodology, platform sector, geography and outcome measures, limiting direct comparability. Third, direct measurement of unpaid care is relatively uncommon. Much of the evidence concerning care is qualitative, while quantitative studies often rely on indirect indicators such as parenthood, interruptions or working-time patterns. Fourth, the literature is geographically uneven, with considerably greater evidence from some countries and platform sectors than others. Finally, potential overlap among related studies means that publication counts should not automatically be interpreted as counts of independent samples. These limitations do not invalidate the synthesis, but they constrain the strength of the conclusions that can be drawn. In particular, the review identifies consistent patterns of association and important theoretical mechanisms, but it does not establish causal effects of care responsibilities, flexibility or platform participation.

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