

When Flexibility Becomes a Constraint: The Paradox of Women's Participation in AI-based Gig Microwork

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Background.

This Evidence Brief synthesises emerging evidence on the scope and nature of women's participation in AI-based gig microwork, examining how flexibility, platform design, and digital labour systems create new economic opportunities as well as the structural constraints that influence outcomes such as working conditions and women's economic agency.



- Remote AI microwork has emerged as a significant gateway for paid work for women navigating mobility restrictions, care burdens, and limited formal employment avenues, but evidence on whether it improves economic agency or entrenches precarity remains thin and contested.
- Three paradoxes surface at the core of women's AI microwork: flexibility versus care burdens, open platform access versus algorithmic penalty, and greater digital skills versus exposure to gendered harms.
- Most of what we know comes from short-study windows, urban or semi-urban contexts, and qualitative accounts that, while rich, do not answer sticky questions on long-term outcomes, earning trajectories, and whether the precarity women experience is episodic or structural.
- Two critical questions remain unanswered: Do repetitive microtasks build transferable skills that enable upward mobility, or do they entrench workers in low-value labour? Does platform participation generate stable long-term incomes, or only episodic earnings that fluctuate?

1. India's Role in the Global AI Value Chain: Where Are the Women Located?

The recent expansion of AI has generated new forms of platform-mediated labour, most notably digital “microwork” - which constitutes small, repetitive units of work such as image annotation, data labelling, voice and video recording, transcription, and content cataloguing or categorisation that form the foundation for AI and machine learning systems (Cook & Rani, 2024). For instance, while browsing an online marketplace, we see products precisely matched with images, descriptions, and categories, along with recommendations for browsing similar items. Similarly, when we use a voice assistant, it understands our accents, pauses, and phrasing with striking accuracy. These experiences appear seamless and automated and are often solely attributed to AI. In reality, much of this is produced through human labour, or more specifically, “human-in-the-loop” (HITL) labour.¹

These tasks are rarely performed in-house by large technology firms; instead, global big tech companies often outsource them to Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) firms and crowdwork platforms - often situated in LMICs - to enable scale and reduce costs (Tubaro et al., 2020). Within this global division of labour, India has emerged as a major hub, with estimates suggesting that the Indian data annotation market, valued at approximately USD 250 million in 2020, could grow to over USD 7 billion by 2030, with the potential to generate employment for up to one million workers (NASSCOM, 2021). These tasks are currently performed by thousands of workers who review, classify, verify, annotate digital content, train AI systems pre-deployment, and enable them to function with accuracy and efficiency post-deployment.

In India, opportunities for AI and data value chain microwork are concentrated in Tier 2 and Tier 3 cities, with 80% of data annotators, for example, hailing from non-metro regions (NASSCOM, 2021). Work arrangements can range from full-time BPO employment, often requiring higher education, such as a graduate degree, to part-time remote work requiring basic education and asset ownership (smartphones). The latter is often performed from homes - on personal, sometimes shared smartphones, and borrowed laptops - at all hours of the day and night (Sarangi et al., GxD hub, 2025). Across platforms and geographies, research consistently finds that women, particularly in the Global South, are a distinct and identifiable presence in the AI microwork labour force (in both BPO and gig work models), especially in entry-level roles, combining paid microwork with unpaid household labour (Altenried 2020: 155-164, Berg et al. 2018: 69-70, Kuek et al. 2015: 36; Sarangi et al, 2025). Platform surveys conducted by the ILO reinforce this - across major crowdwork platforms, roughly one out of five workers is a woman in LMICs; with many of these women combining crowdwork with domestic and care duties, and one in five women workers have young children; however, they still average close to 20 hours on the platform per week, often being active during evenings or nights (ILO, 2018).

Remote AI microwork, in particular, has emerged as a viable option for women² because it lowers the entry barriers into paid work by addressing constraints such as limited salaried opportunities for moderately educated women, unequal care burdens, and mobility and social norms that restrict women's access to formal workplaces (Kapsos et al, 2014; Deshpande & Singh, 2021; Chatterjee, Desai & Vanneman, 2019). AI gig microwork is typically home-based, requires no commute, offers flexible timings, and has low formal education barriers for most tasks. Earnings are accessible via mobile phones, making participation feasible for women with limited mobility and/or household responsibilities. This form of employment offers women a source of supplemental income, along with the flexibility of managing domestic responsibilities. Often, women engage in these gigs by squeezing in tasks such as voice and video recording, transcribing audio, or even image validation or annotation, between household chores and carework. This work is typically aggregated and provided by platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk) or community-based organisations such as Karya and Myna Mahila Foundation in India.

1 “Humans in the loop” (HITL) refers to processes that integrate human participation in the operation, supervision or decision-making of an automated system to ensure that digital outputs remain relevant, accurate, and ethically grounded (IBM, 2025).

2 Our ongoing primary research has found that women are also significantly present in BPO based models in AI data value chain in India, comprising up to 50-60% of entry-level workers in Tier 2 and Tier 3 towns. We will explore their experiences in our forthcoming paper.

However, these opportunities occur within the same structural rigidity of informality, low pay, and weak social protection that shape women's broader labour market participation. Further, these entry-level roles, often concentrated in data generation, annotation, and post-deployment monitoring, are also most at risk of automation and algorithmic management (Sarangi et al., GxD hub, 2025). Set against the uneven landscape of opportunity and constraint, this evidence brief examines home-based and gig microwork, asking whether it expands women's economic agency and opportunity or formalises a new form of precarious, invisible labour. **In the process, three paradoxes surface at the core of women's AI microwork:** flexibility versus care burdens, open platform access versus algorithmic penalty, and greater digital skills versus exposure to gendered harms - highlighting how home-based microwork is simultaneously an entry point and a structurally constrained space.

2. Three Interconnected Paradoxes

Paradox of Flexibility versus Care Burdens

Existing research highlights a central tension within AI microwork: the flexibility that enables women's entry into paid digital work may also reinforce fragmented work arrangements, care burdens, and labour precarity.

Home-based Work as a Gateway for Economic Entry

A large randomised evaluation in Mumbai, Ho and Jalota (2024) shows that offering identical digital tasks as home-based rather than office-based more than doubled job take-up among married, out-of-labour-force women, despite static pay, skill requirements, commute time or childcare availability.³ Importantly, even a minimal requirement for a 2-minute daily check-in - to receive a code that would unlock a smartphone application they were supposed to work on - at an office significantly reduced participation, a pattern difficult to explain based only on domestic responsibilities or childcare, and is more consistent with the presence of a social cost associated with leaving the home. Another RCT conducted in West Bengal (Ho et al., 2024) similarly found that women completing AI-related language data tasks from home tripled their participation compared to working from the office.⁴ Together, these studies suggest that norms around mobility, domesticity, respectability, and social surveillance are likely binding constraints on women's entry into paid digital work, independent of task content or remuneration. In this context, remote AI microwork functions as a gateway for women to engage in paid labour under socially permissible conditions.

Precarity, Overburden, and Performance Constraints

While flexibility enables entry, it also reproduces precarity and overburden. Evidence from LMICs suggests that around 85% of women engaged in microwork perform tasks in the evenings or at night to align with the outsourcing demand from the Global North, layering paid work onto existing care responsibilities (Digital Futures Society, 2022). Qualitative research from rural India reveals that women often struggle to find uninterrupted or private spaces to work, sometimes resorting to working on terraces, in shared rooms, or even in bathrooms to manage domestic interruptions (Varanasi et al., 2022). These constraints also affect performance; in the West Bengal RCT, women working from home were approximately 20% slower and 4% less accurate than those working from office settings, largely due to constant interruptions and fragmented time (Ho et al., 2024).

3 Mumbai RCT (Ho & Jalota, 2024): Study focused on 3,200 married women, aged 18–45, who were out of the labour force, residing in low- and middle-income neighbourhoods of Mumbai. Randomised assignment to 60 days of piece-rate, gig-type job offers that were identical in pay, task type, employer, and duration, differing only in work location and visibility requirements. Basic speech and voice recording tasks used to support the training of AI speech recognition models. Treatment arms included a) Office-based work, b) Work from home (WFH), and c) WFH with a requirement to attend a daily 2-minute office check-in.

4 West Bengal RCT (Ho et al., 2024): Study focused on 1,670 women from lower-middle-income households across urban, peri-urban, and rural areas of West Bengal. Randomised piece-rate, multiple-week job offers varying by location of work (home-based vs outside-the-home), with similar task content and compensation. Language data creation and validation tasks contributing to Bangla and Hindi datasets used for training large language models.

Observational evidence from our recent field visits and partnership with grassroots organisations suggest that proximate, women-only, and community-embedded work hubs, with hybrid work arrangements and facilitator support, could potentially relax mobility restrictions while mitigating the productivity challenges, isolation, and overburden associated with home-based work for women.



What's Missing in the Evidence Landscape?

- The existing RCT evidence shows that home-based work doubles or triples participation, but the literature is inconclusive on whether this translates into sustained participation or whether women drop in and out as domestic demands fluctuate seasonally or across life stages.
- Community-embedded or women-only work hubs can potentially relax mobility restrictions while mitigating the isolation, overburden, and productivity issues of home-based work, but there is no systematic evidence yet on whether they meaningfully reduce care burdens or simply relocate them to a different physical setting.
- Almost all rigorous evidence currently comes from urban and peri-urban settings, where the flexibility-care burden trade-off may operate differently for women in rural contexts because of spatial constraints, social surveillance, and care structures.

Paradox of Platform Access versus Algorithmic Penalty

Platform-based, algorithmic work lowers barriers for women in ways that seem neutral and enabling. Tasks are openly listed and available to anyone who qualifies. Some organisations set specific targets for women, requiring them to complete them to get paid. For women constrained by mobility restrictions or excluded from formal employment for various reasons, this opens up new opportunities. Payment is task-based and processed quickly, creating immediate liquidity based on the value added by workers - the logic is straightforward: complete tasks accurately and on time, and earnings follow.

However, this model embeds a structural paradox that systematically excludes women workers:

Algorithmic Management and Lack of Transparency

Algorithms can allocate tasks, score performance, and deactivate accounts or reject submitted tasks without transparency. Productivity metrics rely on uninterrupted availability and consistent accuracy. For example, in voice or video recordings, workers need to be free from domestic interruptions. For women managing care and domestic work, the tasks are quite fragmented and are bound to have 'noise' from domestic rhythms around them (Authors' Field notes, unpublished, April 2026). Exploratory research into how Indian women engage with platforms such as Amazon Mechanical Turk finds that platform labour penalises interruptions, as some tasks carry time targets of seconds, and momentary distractions can result in lost pay with no avenue for appeal (Gray & Suri, 2019). For women managing care responsibilities alongside platform work, this is a constant reality. They accept low-paid tasks aligned with U.S. work cycles and take on night shifts to reconcile paid work with care responsibilities, while facing significant "algorithmic insecurity", driven by opaque task rejections, no grievance redressal mechanisms, and little recourse against sudden account suspension (Gurumurthy et al., 2021; Gray & Suri., 2019).

Fragmentation of Tasks

The fragmentation of tasks and the lack of recognised certificates also limit women's ability to signal their availability or readiness for higher-value or more consistent work, keeping them concentrated in low-paid, low-value, and episodic tasks. As platforms scale, risk is borne almost entirely by the workers. Due to this, there is a persistent fear of sudden income loss as errors are costly, there are long periods without work, and account removals can occur without warning. This algorithmic management has gendered implications as it interacts with women's constrained time, care responsibilities, and weaker bargaining power, increasing income volatility and reinforcing their concentration in the precarious segments of platform work (Gurumurthy et al., 2021).

Role of Alternative, Community-based Models

While algorithmic management can undermine women's prospects of sustained income and economic empowerment, alternative, community-based models offer some reprieve. India-based organisations like the Myna Mahila Foundation and Karya operate differently using a worker-centric, and community-based model. For example, Myna Mahila has a team of Program Coordinators who mobilise and train women residing in urban slums to undertake AI microwork tasks such as voice and video recording and content generation, and offer continuous handholding and grievance redressal support, rather than depending on algorithmic management. In the training, the purpose of the tasks and how they will feed into AI models is also explained (Authors' field notes, unpublished, April 2026). Such approaches promise a human-in-the-loop alternative that does not see digital workers merely as isolated "task workers" and offers a chance at dignified and inclusive work. Expanding these models by integrating human-centred grievance redress mechanisms, worker-facing transparency into platform governance frameworks, and evaluating them on whether they actually provide dignified, fair, and stable work, could begin to correct the structural imbalance that currently places all risks on the worker.



What's Missing in the Evidence Landscape?

- There is almost no longitudinal evidence tracking women's income trajectories on these platforms. Whether women receive consistent task allocation over time or face boom-and-bust gig cycles driven by platform or aggregator demand (or their own life journey) remains largely undocumented.
- Without longitudinal earnings data, it is difficult to assess whether microwork constitutes a viable and stable income source rather than an episodic one and whether alternative platform models, such as community-embedded designs and transparent wage structures, actually deliver better outcomes - in terms of sustained income, stability, mitigation of algorithmic precarity, and digital skill based career progression - for women workers meaningfully, or whether improvements remain modest and hard to scale.
- How women's trust in digital platforms is shaped by negative algorithmic experiences (opaque rejections, sudden deactivations, inconsistent work, lack of data protection), and whether that trust, once eroded, affects their broader participation in the digital economy.

Paradox of Digital Skills vs Gendered Harms

Digital Skill-building

AI microwork has enabled women outside the formal workforce to participate in digital and data value chains. As they gain exposure through task repetition, they are also building competency, new skills, and digital confidence over time. Research on why individuals choose to do microtask crowdsourcing work also indicates that for certain workers, AI crowdsourcing serves as a way to remain cognitively active and professionally engaged. Others describe the work as cognitively challenging, demanding sustained attention and pattern recognition, which they perceive as sharpening their skills over time (Deng et al., 2016).

Whether these skills are transferable and can be credentialed remains an open question. Recognising this gap, the GxD hub at LEAD is currently working on a AI-Data Skills Framework to identify, recognise, and certify the digital and AI skills that microworkers acquire through platform work, and to map potential career progression and skilling pathways from these roles.

Content Moderation and Invisible Labour

Not all microwork tasks, however, are equal. Alongside simple labelling, voice and video recording, and transcription, content moderation after model deployment has emerged as a notable category. These tasks require workers to review, classify, or filter user-generated material that may include violence, sexually explicit content, hate speech, self-harm, or other disturbing material. This constant exposure to harmful content has critical implications for these workers as moderators effectively absorb the psychological cost of making digital spaces safe for end users (Behal, A., 2026). This type of work is invisible, yet it is also the backbone of platform governance and online safety. A recent study from Africa highlights that these psychological harms, apart from exposure to harmful content, also arise from systemic contributors specific to AI platforms, including productivity and time-bound pressures, inadequate counselling opportunities, precarious contracts, surveillance-heavy monitoring, and a lack of transparency during onboarding and recruitment regarding the content that workers would be exposed to (Abdelkadir et al., 2026). While the evidence is specific to Africa, the structural features are common across global AI platform ecosystems. There is no longitudinal, causal evidence determining the long-term mental health outcomes for moderators in LMICs, including India. Most of the literature is based on qualitative data, thereby limiting definitive evidence regarding the harms and risks associated with content moderation, especially around gendered terms.

Structured Mitigation as Baseline Safeguards

Emerging mental health research points to a structured mitigation approach as the necessary corrective:

- Pre-task psychological screening,
- Mandatory rotation away from high-risk content,
- Capped daily exposure thresholds,
- Trauma-informed supervisory practices, and
- Confidential and regular counselling access.

These mitigation strategies should not be treated as optional; they need to be embedded within AI platform governance frameworks as baseline safeguards, particularly for women workers who have fewer external and internal support systems and less recourse when such harms occur.



What's Missing in the Evidence Landscape?

- Women report that repetitive microwork builds competency and confidence over time. However, the transferability of these skills to higher-value AI roles and the implications of the lack of credentialing remain unexplored in the current literature.
- The evidence on psychological harm from content moderation is largely qualitative and drawn from short windows. There is a need for longitudinal studies that track mental health outcomes for women moderators in LMICs to assess whether harms accumulate, persist, or can be meaningfully mitigated over time.
- Structured safeguards such as psychological screening, content rotation, and exposure caps are recommended in the literature, but almost entirely at the design level; there is limited documentation on how these mechanisms are implemented in practice across industries and sectors, and their impact on reducing harms.

3. Invisibility of Digital/AI Data Labour

The care and double burdens, opaque platform management, and specific gendered harms described above do not operate in isolation, as a compounding effect, they deepen the existing invisibility of digital labour, manifesting across three categories:

Statistical & Regulatory Invisibility⁵

Microwork remains significantly undermeasured in labour surveys in India (and globally). National occupational classification codes have not kept pace with the lived realities of platform work. While the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation (MoSPI) treats all market activities performed for pay or profit - including gig work - as economic activity, the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS), including its 2025 revision, does not yet carry a specific classification for gig or platform workers. Despite their legal recognition under the Code of Social Security 2020, these workers are folded into a broad category such as “self-employed” or “informal workers”. The classification problem runs deeper than the PLFS alone. The National Classification of Occupations (NCO) 2015 does not specifically account for gig workers or microworkers as distinct occupations. The National Industrial Classification (NIC) 2008 predates the digital platform economy entirely - and as a result, platform labour is routinely misclassified as informal or traditional self-employment. Together, these frameworks produce a systematic undermeasurement of AI microwork platform workers, making evidence-based policy formulation difficult. For women microworkers in particular - whose platform labour is already rendered invisible within the domestic sphere - the absence of statistical recognition further compounds an erasure that operates simultaneously at the household, platform, and policy levels.

Normative Invisibility

Women’s digital gig labour is often fitted between domestic responsibilities and not recognised as income-generating work within households. Evidence from the Mumbai study found that women earned an average of Rs 2,500 per month, 21% of their household incomes (Ho et al., 2024). However, this income often remained “invisible”. While 70% of women in these roles identified as workers, only 64% of their husbands agreed, frequently viewing the work as a hobby (IWWAGE, 2023). Moreover, women’s income is often tolerated only if it does not disrupt household hierarchies. Earnings are framed as “time-pass” or self-improvement rather than actual labour, actively constraining women’s ability to demand better pay, stability, or recognition (Varanasi et al., 2022). Home-based microwork sidesteps these constraints, but the flexibility paradox, algorithmic penalties, and psychological harms of platform work mean participation remains precarious and fragmented. Rather than enabling women to renegotiate their domestic roles, microwork is absorbed into them - the income is indeed real, but it rarely translates into a recognised form of work. A woman performing voice recordings between cooking and childcare is still, in the eyes of her household and community, primarily doing cooking and childcare. These forms of invisibility compound the structural vulnerabilities that women already face on these platforms.



What We Don't Know: The Invisibility Layer

- Do sustained earnings shift intra-household recognition of women's microwork, or does visibility require something beyond income - credentialing, formal status, or external legitimation?
- Would the statistical reclassification of platform workers in national surveys like the PLFS meaningfully change policy attention and resource allocation for this workforce?

⁵ We are grateful to Deepti, Research Associate, GxD hub for sharing her ongoing work on this aspect of AI labour.

Implications for Further Research and Evaluation

The three key paradoxes mapped in this Evidence Brief, and the evidence gaps within each, suggest that research is still catching up with the scale and speed of AI microwork/HITL labour. Most of what we know comes from short study windows, urban or semi-urban contexts, and qualitative accounts that, while rich, do not answer sticky questions on long-term outcomes, earning trajectories, and whether the precarity women experience is episodic or structural.

The most consequential questions remain open. For example - whether repetitive microtasks build transferable skills and serve as a bridge to higher value work, or keep workers entrenched in low-value labour; whether this kind of work (and what specific interventions—credentialing, discoverability, on-ground support, etc) can lead to stable long-term incomes, instead of episodic earnings that fluctuate; and whether participation in AI micro/gig work - especially for women - can translate to recognition, bargaining power, and legitimacy. There is also limited evidence on the role of microwork opportunities and platform experiences (positive or negative) on women's trust in digital and AI systems more broadly, with consequences for their future participation.

AI microwork has emerged as an alternative income-generating opportunity and pathway to paid work for women, enabling upskilling, household legitimacy, and a sense of financial independence. At the same time, it entrenches a 'triple burden' as precarious labour and platform management are layered onto existing care responsibilities. As Gray and Suri (2019) put it, invisibility is both a condition and a consequence of this work. Recognising the unique characteristics of this form of work and its implications for women's participation, agency, and wellbeing is an important step towards strengthening the evidence base needed to inform more inclusive platform design, labour protections, and public policy responses.

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About GxD hub

The Gender x Digital hub (GxD hub) is a cross-disciplinary platform dedicated to advancing meaningful digital connectivity among women and girls in India. GxD hub is an initiative of LEAD at Krea University (IFMR). LEAD at Krea University is an action-oriented research centre housed at the Institute for Financial Management and Research (IFMR), a not-for-profit society which is also the Sponsoring Body of Krea University.

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