



The Myth Of Flexibility? A Socio-Economic Analysis Of Work-Life Balance And Precarity In Gig Work

Harshita Kushwaha

Research Scholar

Faculty of Commerce & Management
Rama University, Kanpur, India

Abstract: The current status of work-life balance (WLB) scholarship in industrial relations is assessed in this study. It looks for ways to improve gender parity in the workplace. The way people from different socioeconomic backgrounds handle their work and home responsibilities is both made easier and more difficult by digital innovations. In order to expose the traditional WLB discourse's disproportionate focus on the "time poverty" of wealthy, white-collar workers while largely ignoring the crucial role of financial stability, the study first applies a class-based critique. It goes beyond conceptually we are used to define it, and describes the effects of the broader phantomization of economy on work-life balance. Although gig work is often promoted as a form of independence and so-called "flexibility"—which should in theory help individuals juggling caregiving responsibilities better dictate their schedules—it also comes with glaring institutional loopholes like those that exist in conventional work. The "gig" is not as flexible and carefree as one may imagine, instead characterized by irregular scheduling of work hours, variable income, and intensification of work intensity that leaves the gig workers in a precarious position with little sense of real balance between life and work. The article finishes by advocating for a more thorough and intricate understanding that takes into account the overlapping areas of gender, class, and financial stability as essential for achieving true equality in the workplace for those involved in today's job environment.

Index Terms - Work-Life Balance, Industrial Relations, Gig Work.

INTRODUCTION

This research integrates core themes within Industrial Relations (IR). It specifically examining the intersection of labor, caregiving responsibilities, and the shifting landscape of technological advancement alongside persistent gender and class-based disparities. To contribute to the broader discourse on workplace equity. This study evaluates the current standing of the "work-life balance" (WLB) paradigm. Work life balance paradigm—a concept fundamental to various initiatives aimed at fostering gender equality in professional settings. It specifically contemplates future directions as digitalization reshapes employment in many ways that unevenly affect men and women across different socioeconomic backgrounds.

As Cooper and Townsend (2017) observed, the fundamental nature of labor and its impact on IR are in a state of constant flux. This study is driven by their assertion that while progress toward gender parity in domestic and professional spheres remains "glacial,". The expansion of digitally-mediated work is occurring at an accelerated rate. This speed presents significant hurdles for both academics and policy-makers too. In attempting to navigate rapid transformations, such as the emergence of platform-based labor and the influence of digital communication on the employer-employee bond. Historically, technology has been celebrated as a tool for occupational enhancement. Yet it is also risks intensifying

labor degradation with varying consequences for different demographic groups. Over the last several decades, increasing scholarly attention has been paid to the dual nature of new technologies. Some of offering both opportunities and threats and concerning work–life integration (Wajcman et al., 2008).

Simultaneously, the rise of the global digital economy, particularly the surge in gig or platform employment, has led to polarized predictions regarding whether technological shifts will ultimately benefit or harm the workforce (Wajcman, 2015). Despite all of these debates, the existing gig economy literature has largely overlooked the specific nuances of work–life balance. This study addresses this gap, responding to calls for deeper investigation into the societal ramifications of platform labor (Kaine and Josserand, 2019). By bridging two traditionally isolated areas of IR—the gender-focused work–life balance framework and the emerging field of gig work studies (Foley et al., 2020). This article applies a socio-economic lens to determine if standard WLB strategies can truly achieve equality across class divides in an increasingly precarious digital labor market. The discussion of work-life balance (WLB) and the larger goal of gender equality in the contemporary workforce are closely related. WLB, as a multidisciplinary concept, offers a framework for examining the intricate interactions between personal and professional responsibilities. This draws attention to the enduring gender inequalities that arise at these intersections (Crompton and Lyonette, 2006). The WLB agenda's requirement that researchers look beyond the formal workplace is a significant scholarly contribution. The important connections between paid work and unpaid domestic work done at home have been confirmed by this viewpoint. It is exposing long-standing disparities that become apparent only when work is examined from a comprehensive perspective (Craig, 2020).

WLB has also emerged as a key component of corporate policy and advocacy efforts to lessen gender-based disadvantages. Prominent organisations like the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) have supported these initiatives' well-documented "business case" (Kossek et al., 2010). According to this managerial viewpoint, institutional support for WLB is a "win-win" strategy that helps businesses recruit and retain diverse talent, especially women who provide care, while also enhancing the quality of life for employees (Kelliher et al., 2019). Nonetheless, there are substantial theoretical and practical obstacles to the traditional WLB agenda. There is still debate among academics about the term itself, with some arguing that "life" is too narrowly defined as "family" and that "work" should include non-paid contributions (Fagan et al., 2012). Crucially, WLB research has traditionally concentrated on a limited group of people: partnered women with children in conventional household arrangements (Crouter and Booth, 2004; Ozbilgin et al., 2011). Human resource policies are therefore under increasing pressure to change and take into account the lived realities of a workforce that is becoming more diverse and precarious (Kelliher et al., 2019). The popular WLB narrative in the context of Industrial Relations (IR) has come under fire for endorsing a naive interpretation of "positive flexibility" that prioritises managerial objectives over employee needs (Findlay and Thompson, 2017). This strategy frequently has two main flaws (Loudoun and McDonald, 2014). First, rather than being seen as a structural duty of the employer, the burden of "balancing" is frequently placed on the individual employee, who is typically a woman. Second, rather than implementing systemic changes, current policies frequently restrict themselves to discrete interventions, like parental leave or part-time options. Building on these criticisms, this paper makes the case that current WLB strategies are essentially insufficient for people working in the Indian gig economy, such as service providers on Urban Company or delivery partners for Swiggy. The term "time-squeeze," which primarily affects the middle class with stable incomes, is overused in mainstream discussions. However, financial strain and economic precarity are at the heart of WLB issues for Indian gig workers. The WLB agenda runs the risk of placing the significant issues of income volatility and financial survival squarely on the shoulders of the individual worker by focusing the conversation solely on time management.

The Temporal Trap: Examining the Time-Centric Focus of Work–Life Balance

The current status of work-life balance (WLB) scholarship in industrial relations is assessed in this study. It looks for ways to improve gender parity in the workplace. The way people from different socioeconomic backgrounds handle their work and home responsibilities is both made easier and more difficult by digital innovations. In order to expose the traditional WLB discourse's disproportionate focus on the "time poverty" of wealthy, white-collar workers while largely ignoring the crucial role of financial stability, the study first applies a class-based critique. Temporal strain currently dominates the conceptualisation and assessment of WLB. The Australian Work and Life Index, for example, uses metrics created especially to gauge feelings of urgency and time pressure (Skinner and Pocock, 2011). The amount of time devoted to a role is also emphasised by researchers' modified work–conflict scales (Loudoun and McDonald, 2014). This temporal focus carries over into the policy domain, where flexible

start times, part-time schedules, and maternity or parental leave are the most popular WLB interventions. However, the way these options are applied is gendered; in places like the UK and Australia, women use "flexible" arrangements at a disproportionate rate.

In these situations, the WLB legal framework is supported by the "Right to Request" for flexible working arrangements, such as reduced hours or part-time shifts (NI Direct Government Services, 2020; Fair Work Act 2009). However, a sizable gender gap still exists even in these organised systems because men are still less likely to request these modifications.

We contend that, using the framework developed by C. Wright Mills (1959), "time-squeeze" has effectively evolved from a "personal trouble" into an acknowledged "public issue." By classifying time pressure as a public problem, society recognises that individual workers cannot solve the problem on their own. This transition isn't complete for gig workers, though. While the "myth of flexibility" in platform labour frequently obscures the reality that financial precarity forces workers into "self-exploitation," where they "choose" to work excessive hours simply to survive, traditional employment has shifted toward collective responsibility for time management. Thus, time is still a privatised and precarious struggle for people in the gig economy, even though it is a public issue for formal employees. It is important to acknowledge that not all labour groups are equally impacted by temporal constraints, also known as "work-time squeezes," which should be seen as systemic public issues rather than personal burdens primarily carried by women. A narrow focus on "too many hours" prioritises the problems faced by the middle class's most financially secure segments, reflecting a partial understanding of the work-life balance (WLB) agenda. WLB discourse is often focused on wealthy, white-collar professionals whose main challenge is finding personal time in the midst of demanding, high-status careers, as noted by Lewis et al. (2007). This prevailing narrative largely ignores the priorities of people in working-class occupations and successfully marginalises the worries of middle-class workers who are less secure (Wilkinson et al., 2017).

Innovative scholarship has started mapping the unique class disparities present in WLB in spite of this bias. Two important conclusions can be drawn from these studies: first, the working class faces temporal pressures that are much more complicated than a straightforward "time-squeeze," and second, work-life conflict is frequently primarily caused by the psychological and domestic strain of financial instability. In these households, men frequently bear the burden of obtaining breadwinner-level wages in an unstable market, while women are under tremendous pressure to manage tight family budgets. It is not implied that time is unimportant to the working class by criticising the middle-class focus. In contrast to the career-oriented motivations typical of managerial roles, manual laborers—especially men—often put in long hours due to economic necessity (Warren, 2015; Crompton and Lyonette, 2008). Ironically, these workers also have to deal with the risk of "underemployment"—the worry that they aren't putting in enough hours to make ends meet (Warren, 2016, 2017; Lyness et al., 2012). The "flexibility" that platforms advertise is frequently a myth in the Indian gig economy; algorithmic control and "unsocial" timing take its place. High-speed task demands, tight deadlines, and unpredictable schedules are commonplace for gig workers (Felstead et al., 2020), detaching them from their communities and families (Lesnard, 2008; Williams, 2010). Working-class and gig workers have minimal choice over where and when they work, in contrast to senior employees who relish work-time autonomy (Warren, 2016). Similar to the US (Kossek and Lautsch, 2018), lower-level employees in India may be immediately fired for even the slightest tardiness or compelled to work overtime without warning. Although they are mentioned in the literature, these temporal pressures—unpredictability in the schedule, a loss of autonomy, and the hectic pace of work—rarely take the form of public concerns. In the end, this study makes the case that we need to go over the "time-squeeze" narrative if we want to attain true gender and class equality in Indian workplaces. We need to create a comprehensive view of WLB that views temporal instability and financial precarity as societal problems that call for structural fixes. If flexibility comes with the ongoing risk of underemployment and financial survival, it is not a good thing for gig workers.

Economic Precarity: Why Money is Central to the Work–Life Balance Agenda

In a labor market marked by increased precarity—a reality felt most intensely by the working class—the mainstream WLB agenda, which is frequently constrained by a middle-class perspective, is becoming more and more outdated. Industrial Relations (IR) has been sluggish to include these issues into the WLB paradigm despite the fact that economic fragility and instability have emerged as major themes in studies of flexible labor (Bessa and Tomlinson, 2017). According to this study, WLB is seriously jeopardized when workers are constantly dealing with financial difficulties (Warren, 2015). Promoting a high quality of "Life" in India requires tackling the "money issues" that result in poor nutrition, chronic stress from debt, and subpar accommodation in urban slums. On the other hand,

attaining balance through "Work" necessitates removing the financial hardship that drives Indian gig workers, like delivery partners or ride-hail drivers, to put in long 12-hour jobs or "patchwork" several apps together in order to make ends meet. A secondary time constraint results from workers forgoing sleep in order to maintain daily wages due to this financial incentive.

Research indicates that WLB is largely viewed via a monetary lens rather than a temporal one by the Indian working class. The "all-encompassing" character of corporate roles may be difficult for middle-class professionals in India (Lewis et al., 2007), but they frequently take for granted the financial stability that permits them to take yearly vacations or outsource child care (Fagan et al., 2008). In contrast, even when asked directly about time pressures, working-class Indians, both male and female, consistently cite financial difficulties as the primary obstacle to leading a balanced life (Warren et al., 2009). The "fortunate" management elite, as Williams (2010) points out, can purchase high-quality care or decide to stay at home, while the unstable gig worker has no such options. To comprehend how the labor of many Indians leads to economically precarious existences, we must turn to poverty study. Women in India are suffering greatly as they attempt to provide for their families with inadequate salaries as a result of the 2008 recession's aftermath and the COVID-19 pandemic's more recent shocks (O'Hara, 2015; Beck et al., 2020). In the end, money and time are inseparable. As a protection, financial stability keeps workers from engaging in excessive "self-exploitation" or looking for more "gigs" to make ends meet, which is a glaringly class-based phenomenon. This study comes to the conclusion that rather than being a personal battle, financial security needs to be reinterpreted as a public work-life balance issue. The "balance" in the gig economy is a tenuous illusion in the absence of an economic cushion; once it is lost to the cycle of debt and precarity, it is almost impossible to recover.

Where are we now? Gig work and the potential for work–life balance

Through financial and temporal pressures, this section assesses the Indian gig economy's potential to either promote or worsen work-life imbalances. The scholarly discussions of "gig labor" and "work–life balance" (WLB) have traditionally been kept apart; the latter frequently overlooks gendered experiences completely, while the former places a strong emphasis on gendered home duties. We can assess if the promised "autonomy" for a socioeconomically varied workforce actually translates into well-being by using a WLB lens to examine India's emerging platform economy. In the Indian legal and academic context, gig work—also referred to as platform or on-demand labor—is defined as a contract whereby individuals complete predetermined activities, or "gigs," via digital middlemen in return for compensation (NITI Aayog, 2022). This encounter is typically brief and is made possible by platforms such as Swiggy, Zomato, Ola, and Urban Company. In 2020–21, there were roughly 7.7 million workers in the Indian gig economy; by 2029–2030, that figure is predicted to rise to 23.5 million, demonstrating the magnitude of this workforce (NITI Aayog, 2022). There is still conflicting information on Indian gig workers' real WLB experiences. In order to comprehend the "myth of flexibility," it is necessary to look at how platforms offer themselves to Indian workers. According to Sutherland et al. (2020), platforms use the promise of "time-sovereignty"—a fundamental component of international WLB campaigns—to draw in employees from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. In their advertising, Urban Company, for instance, promises working-class men and women that they can "be their own boss" and "define their own service hours." Similar to this, ride-hailing behemoths like Ola and Uber use catchphrases like "Apni gaadi, apni marzi" (Your vehicle, your option) to appeal to a predominantly working-class male migrant population, implying that driving can be adapted to family life rather than the other way around (Churchill and Craig, 2019). Delivery platforms like Zomato and Swiggy further emphasize this by allowing "delivery partners" to log in and out at will, promising a "flexible work-life balance" (Airtasker, as cited in Warren, 2021).

The Temporal Contradiction: Rebranding Precarity as Flexibility

The platforms' claims to work-providers (employers) and these "positive pitches" are in direct opposition to one another, according to a critical socioeconomic analysis. Although workers are guaranteed autonomy, platforms promote their "on-demand" workforce to companies as a way to "lower operating expenses" and "optimize efficiency" (Ellmer et al., 2019). This "just-in-time" labor paradigm in India keeps labor inexpensive and disposable by enabling businesses to forego standard employment perks like the Provident Fund (PF) and Employees' State Insurance (ESI). According to Rubery et al. (2016), workers' desire for predictable, independent time is frequently subordinated to the organization's requirement for a flexible, immediate workforce. This "flexibility" turns into a fantasy for Indian gig workers, whose involvement is frequently motivated by "distress employment" because they lack regular positions. Although they are theoretically free to choose their own hours, they are forced to work

"algorithmic management" and extremely lengthy shifts in order to get a decent salary in a system that pays little for each activity (Goods et al., 2019). Therefore, the Indian gig economy frequently results in an unbalanced arrangement where precarity is rebranded as freedom rather than a "mutually advantageous flexibility." How do time and platform labor cross, and what impact does this have on the goals of gender parity and work-life balance (WLB)? Theoretically, workers have praised the digital labor market for giving them more time autonomy and unparalleled control over their schedules (Ravanelle, 2019). Because they challenge the strict, male-centric "9-to-5" office model and imply that gig labor might alleviate "time-squeeze" by doing away with commutes, these components form the basis of WLB discourse. This is frequently promoted in India as a means of helping people balance work and home care (Altenreid, 2020), which may help close the gender gap in labor participation (Piasna and Drahokoupil, 2017). However, new research indicates that this positive narrative is frequently at odds with the reality of gig labor. Platform labor often leads to an intensification of work-lives rather than liberty, so weakening the distinction between the personal and professional domains. Platform-lauded "flexibility" is frequently inextricably linked to extreme hourly unpredictability, which causes income instability and financial stress, both of which exacerbate gender inequality and seriously impair WLB.

The body of data pertaining to Indian gig workers' actual experiences paints a complicated and frequently conflicting picture. Although official narratives, such as the UK's BEIS (2018a) reports, frequently emphasize employee contentment with "independence," a closer examination of the data reveals substantial discontent with real working hours. In India, the "option" to work is frequently motivated by a lack of formal employment opportunities rather than a desire for lifestyle flexibility, with the gig workforce expected to reach 23.5 million by 2030 (NITI Aayog, 2022). Many Indian "partners" on Swiggy, Zomato, or Ola find their autonomy drastically limited by the necessity to meet subsistence incomes, even though some workers claim control over their schedules. "Just-in-time" job offers or abrupt cancellations further erode autonomy by requiring employees to continually modify their domestic plans. Fear of "deactivation" or being shut out of future lucrative "slots" keeps workers in India from using the very flexibility that was promised. research have shown that gig workers face more intense work and fragmented hours (Fleming, 2017; Wood et al., 2018a), but these research hardly ever relate these demands to the body of existing WLB literature.

Importantly, the gig economy provides advanced types of digital surveillance and time-discipline instead of providing temporal independence (Grimshaw, 2020). According to Ellmer et al. (2019), Indian delivery and ride-hailing applications utilize GPS tracking to measure task completion within strict, algorithmically-determined periods, while platforms such as Upwork use "Work Diaries" and sporadic screenshots to track progress. For example, Indian delivery riders are under tremendous pressure to accept orders in a matter of seconds or risk having their account locked (Goods et al., 2019). Additionally, in order to maintain high ratings and prevent client unhappiness, reputation and rating systems compel employees to perform unpaid labor or unsocial hours (Broughton et al., 2016). In India, "waiting time"—the unpaid time spent looking for or waiting for an order—can account for around 20 to 30 minutes of each hour, which drastically lowers the effective hourly salary (Berg, 2016). This environment creates a "burnout" culture characterized by information overload and chronic stress. For women in the Indian gig economy—particularly those in home-based services via platforms like Urban Company—these time pressures are compounded by the absence of social protections. Unlike formal employment, the Indian gig sector offers no paid maternity leave, parental leave, or caregiver support (Altenreid, 2020). Even where state provisions exist, the risk of "deactivation" for taking leave makes these rights inaccessible in practice. If the temporal reality of gig work poses such significant threats to gender equality and WLB, we must then ask: what are the implications for the financial stability of these workers?

Economic Precarity and the Illusion of Prosperity: A Financial Analysis of Platform Labor

(MTurk) explicitly position themselves as tools for organizations to cut costs and "do more with less" (Warren, 2021). In India, this model has flourished by leveraging a vast labor surplus, which enables platforms to outsource crucial operational costs directly to the workers, such as equipment costs for Urban Company professionals or vehicle maintenance for Ola/Uber drivers. The workers' main motivation for participating is their financial need. Income is the most powerful motivation, according to Indian studies, despite the fact that "flexibility" is frequently mentioned as a secondary benefit (Churchill & Craig, 2019). Many Indian workers "patch together" a living by juggling various platforms in an environment where official employment is scarce. A third of gig workers worldwide use gig labor as a supplement to their existing sources of income, but for another third, particularly in developing nations like India, it serves as their only source of income, according to the International Labour Organization

(ILO) (Berg et al., 2018). Many people live in a state of severe financial instability notwithstanding the prospect of additional income. Due to the gig economy's "distress employment" component, there are far more job seekers in India than there are gigs available. This results in a "race to the bottom" in terms of pay. The majority of gig workers find it difficult to obtain enough regular work to cover their basic expenses, according to reports from the CIPD and BEIS (2018a). This problem is made worse in India by the absence of statutory minimum pay for platform "partners." The absence of social safety nets is where the "myth of flexibility" is most evident. The normal advantages of formal employment, such as provident funds, maternity benefits, and sick pay, are not available to Indian gig workers. The main sources of discontent are these lost perks and the general fluctuations in income. Once gasoline, insurance, and "platform fees" are subtracted, earnings for delivery riders—who are primarily male and work for companies like Zomato or Swiggy—are frequently less than those of regular casual labor (Goods et al., 2019). Additionally, the possibility of "deactivation"—being stopped by an app—essentially cuts off the worker's principal market access and functions as a digital termination without redress (Minter, 2017).

The Indian gig economy has a clear class disparity. A "creative class" of highly qualified independent contractors (designers, programmers) who use platforms for convenience is on one side. Conversely, there is a growing "service class" whose labor directly supports these professionals' work-life balance. This lower-class group handles the necessary domestic and logistical duties, such as child care, elder care, cleaning, and delivery, so that the "creative class" can concentrate on their jobs. Working-class gig workers are giving up their personal security and well-being to maintain the balance of more affluent consumers, as is evident when viewed through the lens of work-life balance. In India, the platform model has supplanted long-term stability with a precarious, task-based existence, displacing conventional working-class jobs like domestic help or taxi driving. In the end, the "flexibility" that is promoted to these workers is a socioeconomic fallacy; rather than promoting gender equality or life pleasure, gig work intensifies labor and increases financial precarity for those at the bottom of the platform hierarchy.

Strategic Interventions: Bridging the Regulatory Gap in India

The state, platforms (organizations), and the collective voice of workers are the same crucial stakeholders that the "gig rights" movement and the "WLB agenda" share, notwithstanding their historical isolation. The findings from WLB study are essential for developing policies that might promote true workplace equality in the Indian context, where the gig economy is usually a part of a large informal sector. The solutions needed to stabilize platform labor and the long-standing struggles for gender equity are examined in this final analysis. Global precedents, such as the EU Work-life Balance Directive (2019), demonstrate that the state can establish a "solid floor" of rights—including paternity leave and the right to request flexible hours—to encourage gender-neutral caregiving roles. However, in India, such protections have historically been tied to the "standard employment relationship" (Den Dulk et al., 2013). The absence of this formal bond is the primary obstacle for Indian platform workers, who are often categorized as "partners" rather than employees.

India has seen a landmark shift with the Code on Social Security (2020), which for the first time recognized "gig workers" and "platform workers" as distinct categories entitled to social security schemes. However, much like the debate surrounding Uber's driver classification (Foley et al., 2020), challenges remain regarding the implementation of these rights. The Indian state faces a choice: create a new, potentially restrictive category of "dependent contractors," or move toward a more radical, inclusive definition of "worker." The UK's Trades Union Congress (TUC, 2017) and scholars like Graham et al. (2017) argue that labor rights—such as maternity protection and redundancy pay—must be decoupled from traditional job titles to keep pace with the modern digital market.

Addressing "Distress Employment" through Social Welfare

Strengthening the larger social safety net is an essential state-level intervention in a socioeconomic environment like India's, where "distress employment" is prevalent. Strong welfare programs from the government, such universal basic income or increased unemployment insurance, lessen the desperation that drives people to take on dangerous, exploitative gig jobs. The solution, according to Churchill and Craig (2019), is to treat platform workers with the same respect and legal protections as those in the formal sector, since the gig economy is really a digital expression of precarious labor. A final hurdle in the Indian context is the borderless nature of digital labor. Since many platforms operate globally, it can be unclear which national regulations apply (Graham et al., 2017). However, because demand for platform labor is concentrated in high-growth markets like India, the Indian government holds a "strategic point" of leverage. By mandating minimum hourly rates, maximum

"logged-in" hours to prevent burnout, and mandatory contributions to a Social Security Fund, the Indian state can transform the "myth of flexibility" into a regulated, balanced, and sustainable model of work. The ultimate goal for an Indian WLB agenda must be the pursuit of state-level protections that treat all laborers equally, ensuring that "flexibility" does not come at the cost of socio-economic survival.

The Organizational Challenge: Business Case vs. Human Cost in India

The struggle for workplace gender parity through enhanced work–life balance (WLB) has historically seen significant progress at the organizational level. Companies are often motivated to adopt robust WLB policies because they improve recruitment, lower attrition rates, and enhance employee progression. By investing in the health and job satisfaction of their staff, firms reduce the costs associated with replacing and retraining workers while simultaneously boosting overall productivity. As established in the "business case" for WLB, these strategies are vital for promoting gender equality, even if they remain narrowly focused on managing "time-squeezes" (Warren, 2021). However, can the movements to protect Indian gig workers mirror these organizational victories? A fundamental conflict exists: traditional WLB success is predicated on a model where the firm views its workers as long-term assets worth investing in. In sharp contrast, the platform economy is built on the premise of "outsourcing" and "de-linking." Platforms like M-Turk and Upwork market themselves as ways for Indian corporations to protect their "valued" permanent staff by offloading "low-value" tasks to a peripheral gig workforce (Warren, 2021). In this hierarchy, the gig worker is not viewed as a human asset but as a variable cost. Securing organizational support for gig workers in India is further complicated by the "multi-app" reality. While corporate policies assume a single-employer relationship (Kelliher et al., 2019), Indian gig workers often juggle tasks across Swiggy, Zomato, and Dunzo simultaneously to achieve a living wage. When the bond between the worker and the platform is fleeting and transactional, firms feel little incentive to provide for the worker's long-term well-being.

One potential lever for change lies in the "Corporate Social Responsibility" (CSR) and ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) agendas. Just as WLB initiatives were adopted by firms to burnish their public image, Indian platforms are increasingly vulnerable to "reputational risk." Public outcry over the "appalling employment practices" of global giants like Amazon and Uber (TUC, 2017) has found a parallel in India, where strikes by Blinkit or Zomato delivery partners have garnered significant media attention and impacted brand perception. There are emerging attempts to redefine this relationship. Some platforms globally have experimented with "equity ownership" for drivers (CIPD, 2017), and in India, discussions are evolving around "Fairwork India" ratings, which rank platforms based on fair pay, conditions, and management. To dismantle the "myth of flexibility," Indian firms must be pressured to move beyond viewing gig labor as a cost-cutting tool. Campaigns should encourage organizations to adopt "Good Practice" codes and engage only with platforms that ensure a social safety net for their workers. Ultimately, the successful history of WLB advocacy at the firm level proves that sustained pressure can force organizations to improve their labor practices. However, this shift in the Indian gig economy will depend heavily on the strength of the collective "worker voice" and the ability to link gig worker rights to the broader gender equality and CSR movement.

Collective Action and Worker Voice: Resistance in the Indian Gig Economy

The role of "worker voice," primarily through trade unions, has historically been the most effective mechanism for securing labor rights and narrowing gender-based inequities. In the realm of work–life balance (WLB), collective bargaining has successfully moved private domestic struggles into the public policy sphere (Gregory and Milner, 2009). However, where unions have remained absent, WLB is often dismissed as a marginalized "woman's issue," and flexible work-time is frequently viewed with suspicion as an employer-led tool to erode standard rights (Brochard and Letablier, 2017; Gregory and Milner, 2009). In India, the challenge of fostering worker voice is amplified by the nature of platform labor. The geographic dispersion and isolation of gig workers make traditional collective action difficult (Grimshaw, 2020). As Altenreid (2020) notes, crowdworkers often find themselves in direct competition with a global labor pool, making withdrawal of labor (striking) risky, as they can be instantly replaced by others across the country or the globe (Graham et al., 2017).

Despite these structural hurdles, the Indian gig economy is witnessing a surge in digital and physical resistance. For years, the "myth of flexibility" went unchallenged, but Indian gig workers are increasingly utilizing "digital insights" to organize. This mirrors global examples like Turkopticon, where workers rate employers to protect the "crowd" from exploitation. In India, this has manifested in the rise of specialized organizations like the Indian Federation of App-based Transport Workers (IFAT) and the Telangana Gig and Platform Workers Union (TGPW). These bodies have moved beyond informal online

support forums (Wood et al., 2018b) to demand formal recognition and social security. Indian unions are increasingly taking a cue from global successes, such as the UK's GMB union or the Transport Workers Union in Australia, which successfully fought for minimum wage and holiday pay for couriers (Duggan et al., 2019; Foley et al., 2020). In India, worker voice has been critical in pushing for the inclusion of gig workers in the Code on Social Security (2020). Furthermore, initiatives like the Fairwork India project—supported by international unions—now provide public ratings of platforms based on fair pay and management, similar to the "Fair Crowd Work" platform in Europe. To dismantle the precarity inherent in the Indian gig economy, the "worker voice" must bridge the gap between "old-style" union activities and new digital strategies (Lehdonvirta, 2018). If platform workers are to achieve genuine work–life balance and gender equality, collective mechanisms are essential to ensure that the "flexibility" of the app does not become a tool for socio-economic exploitation.

Conclusion

This research has evaluated the current landscape of work-life balance (WLB) within Industrial Relations and identified the necessary shifts required to foster workplace gender equality in an era of digital disruption. By bridging two historically isolated fields—the gender-centric WLB discourse and the class-blind gig economy literature—this study has applied a holistic model that integrates "money matters" into the traditionally time-based WLB framework. Applying this lens to the Indian context reveals that while platform labor is marketed as a tool for autonomy, it frequently functions as a mechanism of socio-economic precarity. In India is a WLB agenda that remains largely "class-blinkered." Existing policies primarily target formal, white-collar employees, treating the "time-squeeze" of the middle class as the ultimate challenge. Following the framework of C. Wright Mills, while time poverty has successfully transitioned from a "personal trouble" to a "public issue" in the formal sector, the financial hardships of the working class remain privatized. In the Indian gig economy, where "distress employment" is rampant, low pay and income volatility are not individual failures but systemic "public work-life issues" that demand state and organizational intervention. This study cast a critical eye on the "myth of flexibility" because Indian platforms—such as Swiggy, Zomato, and Urban Company—explicitly use the promise of autonomy and supplementary income to attract labor. If these promises were fulfilled, the gig economy could theoretically narrow the gender gap by allowing women to balance care with earning. However, the evidence suggests a contrary reality: for many Indian gig workers, the experience is one of profound work-life imbalance driven by both temporal surveillance and financial insecurity. For the Indian labor market requires a dismantling of the siloed approach to research. We need a deeper investigation into the gendered household contexts of Indian gig workers and how algorithmic management ripples through their domestic lives. The transition of "time-squeeze" into a public issue provides a roadmap: just as stakeholders united around time-based rights, they must now unite around a more inclusive WLB concept that accounts for class and economic survival. The rapid growth of the Indian gig economy, formalized under recent legislation like the Code on Social Security (2020), offers a unique opportunity to overhaul obsolete WLB definitions. To achieve genuine gender and class equality in these uncertain times, a close dialogue is required between the Indian state, platform organizations, and emerging worker unions like IFAT. Only by recognizing that financial security is a prerequisite for "balance" can we move past the myth of flexibility and ensure a sustainable future for all workers in India's digital age.

References

1. Altenreid M (2020) The platform as factory: Crowdwork and the hidden labour behind artificial intelligence. *Capital & Class* 44(2): 145–158.
2. App Drivers and Couriers Union (ADCU) (2021) WE WON – Co-lead claimants and ADCU score UK Supreme Court landmark victory over Uber. Available at: <https://www.adcu.org.uk/news-posts/supreme-court-landmark-victory-over-uber> (accessed 19 February 2021).
3. Beck V, Fuertes V, Kamerade D, et al. (2020) Work and life after Covid. In: Parker M (ed.) *Life after Covid*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
4. Berg J (2016) Income security in the on-demand economy: Findings and policy lessons from a survey of crowdworkers. *Comparative Labor Law and Policy Journal* 37(3): 543–576.
5. Berg J, Furrer M, Harmon E, et al. (2018) *Digital Labour Platforms and the Future of Work*. Geneva: ILO.

6. Bessa I and Tomlinson J (2017) Established, accelerated and emergent themes in flexible work research. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 59(2): 153–169.
7. Brochard D and Letablier M-T (2017) Trade union involvement in work–family life balance: Lessons from France. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(4): 657–674.
8. Broughton A, Green M, Rickard R, et al. (2016) *Precarious Employment in Europe: Patterns, Trends and Policy Strategies*. Brussels: European Parliament.
9. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) (2017) *To Gig or Not to Gig? Stories from the Modern Economy*. London: CIPD.
10. Churchill B and Craig L (2019) Gender in the gig economy: Men and women using digital platforms to secure work in Australia. *Journal of Sociology* 55(4): 741–761.
11. Cooper R and Townsend K (2017) Industrial relations now: Where are we? Where to next? *Journal of Industrial Relations* 59(2): 117–121.
12. Craig L (2020) *Contemporary Motherhood: The Impact of Children on Adult Time*. London: Routledge.
13. Crompton R and Lyonette C (2006) Work-life balance in Europe. *Acta Sociologica* 49(4): 379–393.
14. Crompton R and Lyonette C (2008) Mothers' employment, work-life conflict, careers and class. In: Scott J, Dex S and Joshi H (eds) *Women and Employment. Changing Lives and New Challenges*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
15. Crouter AC and Booth A (2004) *Work-Family Challenges for Low-Income Parents and Their Children*. London: Routledge.
16. Den Dulk L, Groeneveld S, Ollier-Malaterre A, et al. (2013) National context in work-life research: A multi-level cross national analysis of the adoption of work-life arrangements in Europe. *European Management Journal* 31(5): 478–494.
17. Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) (2018a) *The Characteristics of Those in the Gig Economy*. London: BEIS.
18. Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy (BEIS) (2018b) *The Experiences of Individuals in the Gig Economy*. London: BEIS.
19. Duggan J, Sherman U, Carbery R, et al. (2019) Algorithmic management and app-work in the gig economy. *Human Resource Management Journal* 30(1): 114–132.
20. Ellmer M, Herr B, Klaus D, et al. (2019) Platform workers centre stage. Taking stock of current debates and approaches for improving the conditions of platform work in Europe. *Working Paper 140*. Available at: <https://d-nb.info/119775251X/34> (accessed 12 April 2021).
21. Eurofound (2016) *Sixth European Working Conditions Survey*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the EU.
22. Eurofound (2017) *Non-Standard Forms of Employment*. Dublin: Eurofound.
23. European Union (2019) Directive 2019/1158 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 20 June 2019 on work-life balance for parents and carers. *Official Journal of the European Union*. 12 July 2019, 188/79-93.
24. Fagan C, Lyonette C, Smith M, et al. (2012) *The Influence of Working Time Arrangements on Work-life Integration or 'Balance': A Review of the International Evidence*. Geneva: ILO.
25. Fagan C, McDowell L, Perrons D, et al. (2008) Class differences in mothers' work schedules and assessments of their 'work-life balance' in dual-earning couples in Britain. In: Scott J, Dex S and Joshi H (eds) *Women and Employment*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
26. Fair Crowd Work (2016) Shedding light on the real work of crowd-, platform-, and app-based work. Available at: <http://faircrowd.work/unions-for-crowdworkers/frankfurt-declaration/> (accessed 1 July 2020).
27. Felstead A, Gallie D, Green F, et al. (2020) Unpredictable times: The extent, characteristics and correlates of insecure hours of work in Britain. *Industrial Relations Journal* 51(1–2): 34–57.
28. Findlay P and Thompson P (2017) Contemporary work: Its meanings and demands. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 59(2): 122–138.
29. Fleming P (2017) The human capital hoax: Work, debt and insecurity in the era of uberization. *Organization Studies* 38(5): 691–709.
30. Foley M, Williamson S and Mosseri S (2020) Women, work and industrial relations in Australia in 2019. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 62(3): 365–379.
31. Gerstel N and Clawson D (2018) Time management: Work schedules and families. *Annual Review of Sociology* 44: 77–97.

32. Goods C, Veen A and Barratt T (2019) 'Is your gig any good?' Analysing job quality in the Australian platform-based food-delivery sector. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 61(4): 502–527.
33. Graham M and Woodcock J (2018) Towards a fairer platform economy: Introducing the Fairwork Foundation. *Alternate Route* 29: 242–253.
34. Graham M, Hjorth I and Lehdonvirta V (2017) Digital labour and development: Impacts of global digital labour platforms and the gig economy on worker livelihoods. *Transfer* 23(2): 135–162.
35. Gregory A and Milner S (2009) Trade unions and work-life balance. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 47(1): 122–146.
36. Grimshaw D (2020) International organisations and the future of work: How new technologies and inequality shaped the narratives in 2019. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 62(3): 477–507.
37. Henly JR and Lambert SJ (2014) Unpredictable work timing in retail jobs: Implications for employee work–life conflict. *ILR Review* 67(3): 986–1016.
38. Kaine S and Jossierand E (2019) The organisation and experience of work in the gig economy. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 61(4): 479–501.
39. Kässä O and Lehdonvirta V (2018) Online labour index: Measuring the online gig economy for policy and research. *Technological Forecasting and Social Change* 137: 241–248.
40. Kelliher C, Richardson J and Boiarintseva G (2019) All of work? All of life? Reconceptualising work-life balance for the 21st century. *HRM Journal* 29(2): 97–112.
41. Kelly EL, Moen P and Tranby E (2014) Changing workplaces to reduce work-family conflict: Schedule control in a white-collar organization. *American Sociological Review* 76(2): 265–290.
42. Kossek E, Lewis S and Hammer L (2010) Work–life initiatives and organizational change. *Human Relations* 63(1): 3–19.
43. Kossek EE and Lautsch BA (2018) Work–life flexibility for whom? Occupational status and work–life inequality in upper, middle, and lower level jobs. *Academy of Management Annals* 12(1): 5–36.
44. Lehdonvirta V (2018) Flexibility in the gig economy: Managing time on three online piecework platforms. *New Technology, Work & Employment* 33(1): 13–29.
45. Lesnard L (2008) Off-scheduling within dual-earner couples. *American Journal of Sociology* 114(2): 447–490.
46. Lewis S, Gambles R and Rapoport R (2007) The constraints of a 'work-life balance' approach: An international perspective. *International Journal of Human Resource Management* 18(3): 360–373.
47. Loudoun R and McDonald P (2014) The impact of employment-level characteristics on work–life interference in school-aged children. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 56(4): 508–526.
48. Lyness KS, Gornick JC, Stone P, et al. (2012) It's all about control: Worker control over schedule and hours in cross-national context. *American Sociological Review* 77(6): 1023–1049.
49. Mills CW (1959/67) *The Sociological Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
50. Milner S (2016) Trade unions and work-life balance: The impact of the Great Recession in France and the UK. In: Lewis S, et al. (eds) *Work-Life Balance in Times of Recession*. London: Routledge.
51. Minter K (2017) Negotiating labour standards in the gig economy: Airtasker and Unions New South Wales. *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 28(3): 438–454.
52. NI Direct (2021) Flexible working and work-life balance. Available at: <https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/flexible-working-and-work-life-balance> (accessed 12 April 2021).
53. O'Hara M (2015) *Austerity Bites: A Journey to the Sharp End of Cuts in the UK*. Bristol: Policy Press.
54. Ozbilgin MF, Beauregard TA, Tatli A, et al. (2011) Work-life, diversity and intersectionality. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 13(2): 177–198.
55. Palier B (2018) The politics of social risks and social protection in digitalised economies. In: Neufeind M, et al. (eds) *Work in the Digital Age*. London: Rowman and Littlefield.
56. Pedersen VB and Lewis S (2012) Flexible friends? Flexible working time arrangements, blurred work-life boundaries and friendship. *Work, Employment and Society* 26(3): 464–480.
57. Perry-Jenkins M and Gerstel N (2020) Work and family in the second decade of the 21st century. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 82(1): 420–453.
58. Piasna A and Drahekoupil J (2017) Gender inequalities in the new world of work. *European Review of Labour and Research* 23(3): 313–322.

59. Presser HB (2004) Employment in a 24/7 economy: Challenges for the family. In: Crouter AC and Booth A (eds) *Work-Family Challenges for Low-Income Parents*. London: Routledge.
60. Ravelle AJ (2019) *Hustle and Gig: Struggling and Surviving in the Sharing Economy*. Oakland: University of California Press.
61. Rigby M and O'Brien-Smith F (2010) Trade union interventions in work-life balance. *Work, Employment and Society* 24(2): 203–220.
62. Rubery J, Keizer A and Grimshaw D (2016) Flexibility bites back: The multiple and hidden costs of flexible employment policies. *HRM Journal* 26(3): 235–251.
63. Schneider D and Harknett K (2019) Consequences of routine work-schedule instability for worker health and well-being. *American Sociological Review* 84(1): 82–114.
64. Skinner N and Pocock B (2011) Flexibility and work-life interference in Australia. *Journal of Industrial Relations* 53(1): 65–82.
65. Sutherland W, Jarrahi MH, Dunn M, et al. (2020) Work precarity and gig literacies in online freelancing. *Work, Employment and Society* 34(3): 457–475.
66. The Guardian (2021) Uber drivers entitled to workers' rights, UK supreme court rules. *The Guardian*, 19 February 2021.
67. Todolí-Signes A (2017) The 'gig economy': Employee, self-employed or the need for a special employment regulation? *Transfer* 23(2): 193–205.
68. Trades Union Congress (TUC) (2017) *The Gig is Up: Trade Unions Tackling Insecure Work*. London: Trades Union Congress.
69. Trades Union Congress (TUC) (2019) *Platform work in the UK 2016-2019*. London: TUC.
70. Trades Union Congress (TUC) (2021) Role of the union rep: Work-life balance. Available at: <https://www.tuc.org.uk/resource/role-union-rep-worklife-balance> (accessed 12 April 2021).
71. Wajcman J (2015) *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
72. Wajcman J, Bittman M and Brown J (2008) Intimate connections: The impact of the mobile phone on work/life boundaries. In: Goggin G and Hjorth L (eds) *Mobile Technologies*. London: Routledge.
73. Walters S (2002) Female part-time workers' attitudes to trade unions in Britain. *British Journal of Industrial Relations* 40(1): 49–68.
74. Warren T, Pascall G and Fox E (2009) Innovative policies for gender equality from Europe: implications for low waged women in England. *Gender, Work and Organization* 16(1): 126–150.
75. Warren T (2015) Work-life balance/imbalance: the dominance of the middle class and the neglect of the working class. *British Journal of Sociology* 66(4): 691–717.
76. Warren T (2016) In search of working class work-lives in times of austerity. In: Lewis S, et al. (eds) *Work-Life Balance in Times of Austerity*. London: Routledge.
77. Warren T (2017) Work-life balance, time and money: identifying the work-life balance priorities of working class workers. In: De Groof S (ed) *Work-Life Balance in the Modern Workplace*. The Netherlands: Kluwer Law International.
78. Wilkinson K, Tomlinson J and Gardiner J (2017) Exploring the work–life challenges and dilemmas faced by managers and professionals who live alone. *Work, Employment and Society* 31(4): 640–656.
79. Williams JC (2010) *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
80. Wood A, Graham M, Lehdonvirta V, et al. (2018a) Good gig, bad gig: Autonomy and algorithmic control in the global gig economy. *Work, Employment and Society* 33(1): 56–75.
81. Wood A, Lehdonvirta V and Graham M (2018b) Workers of the Internet unite? *New Technology, Work & Employment* 33(2): 95–112.