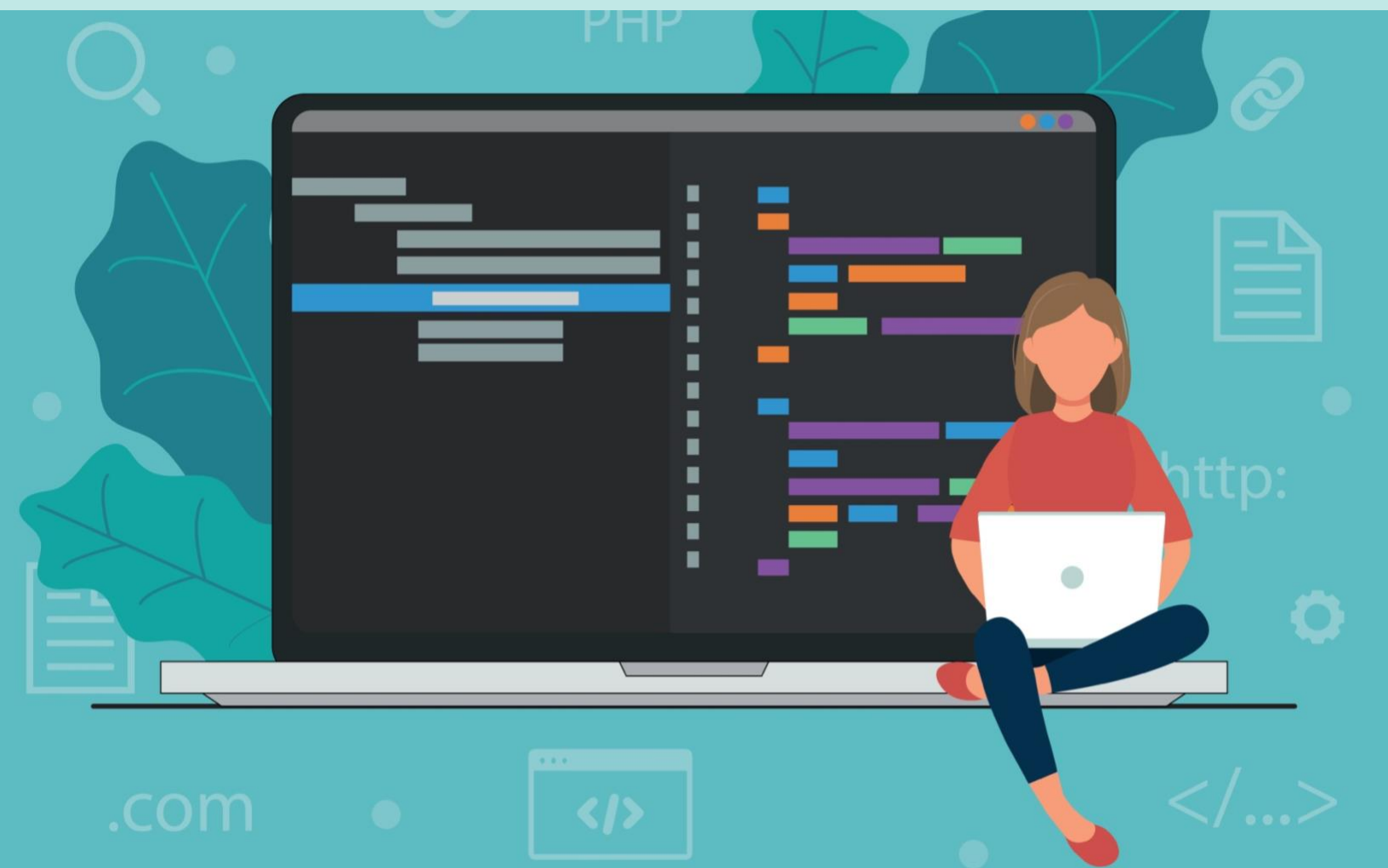


WORKING WITHOUT BORDERS

The Promise and Peril of Online Gig Work

Short Note Series #2: Is Online Gig Work an Opportunity to Increase Female Labor Force Participation?



Executive Summary

This Short Note is part of a series based on the report “Working without Borders: The Promise and Peril of Online Gig Work” that aims to promote discussion among policymakers and practitioners on opportunities in online gig work. **The focus of this short note is on gender differences in engagement with online gig work.**

Women's engagement in online gig work exceeds their involvement in the general labor market in most countries, offering a lifeline to those encountering obstacles in accessing offline job opportunities. Nevertheless, female participation in the online gig economy often falls short of their male counterparts in several countries, primarily due to disparities in internet access. Many women turn to online gig work to supplement their income in the absence of alternative job prospects. Notably, nontraditional social benefits like access to training are highly coveted by online gig workers, particularly among women. Despite the challenges they face, most online gig workers, especially women, express optimism about continuing their participation in online gig work, highlighting its potential to advance gender parity within the labor market.

In this short note, we examine women's participation in online gig work, contrasting their motivations with those of their male counterparts and outlining the typical profiles of male and female gig workers in terms of age, education, working hours, and involvement in freelancing communities. It delves into how these workers identify themselves in relation to the platform or their clients and highlights the key benefits they seek from online gig platforms. The note also identifies critical skills crucial for success in this domain, suggesting potential areas for performance improvement. Finally, it summarizes the aspirations of both male and female online gig workers, offering insights into the industry's future trajectory.

*This short note has been developed by Natnael Simachew Nigatu, S4YE, under the overall guidance of Namita Datta, S4YE Program Manager and Lead Author, “Working without Borders: The Promise and Peril of Online Gig Work”

1 Introduction

The advent of the online gig economy has ushered in transformative changes to the global workforce, opening doors to flexible work arrangements and remote opportunities for 4.4 to 12 percent of the labor force.¹ This flexibility to work remotely on project-based tasks has the potential to draw more women into the labor force, as they face considerable constraints to access jobs due to household and care responsibilities. While such online gig jobs can be an opportunity to increase female labor force participation, a discernible gender disparity persists, with female workers being underrepresented compared to their male counterparts across many countries.

In this short note, we examine the gender aspects of online gig work, factors contributing to this disparity, the differences in motivations and aspirations of male and female gig workers, and the role of skills in order to inform possible policies that can bridge the gender gap and help increase women's access to this new form of work. We also gauge the aspirations of both male and female online gig workers in how they see their career aspirations evolving over time.

¹ Datta et. al. (2023). [Working Without Borders: The Promise and Peril of Online Gig Work, World Bank](#)

2 Women's Participation in Online Gig Work

Women's participation in online gig work surpasses their participation in the general labor market.

The team's global survey conducted in 17 countries found that 42 percent of online gig workers are women, while women's participation in the general labor market in those countries was 31.8 percent.² Figure 1 illustrates a comparison between the share of females in the general labor force and their representation in online gig work for similar countries. Interestingly, many countries are below the 45-degree line, indicating a higher share of female workers in online gig work than in the general labor market.

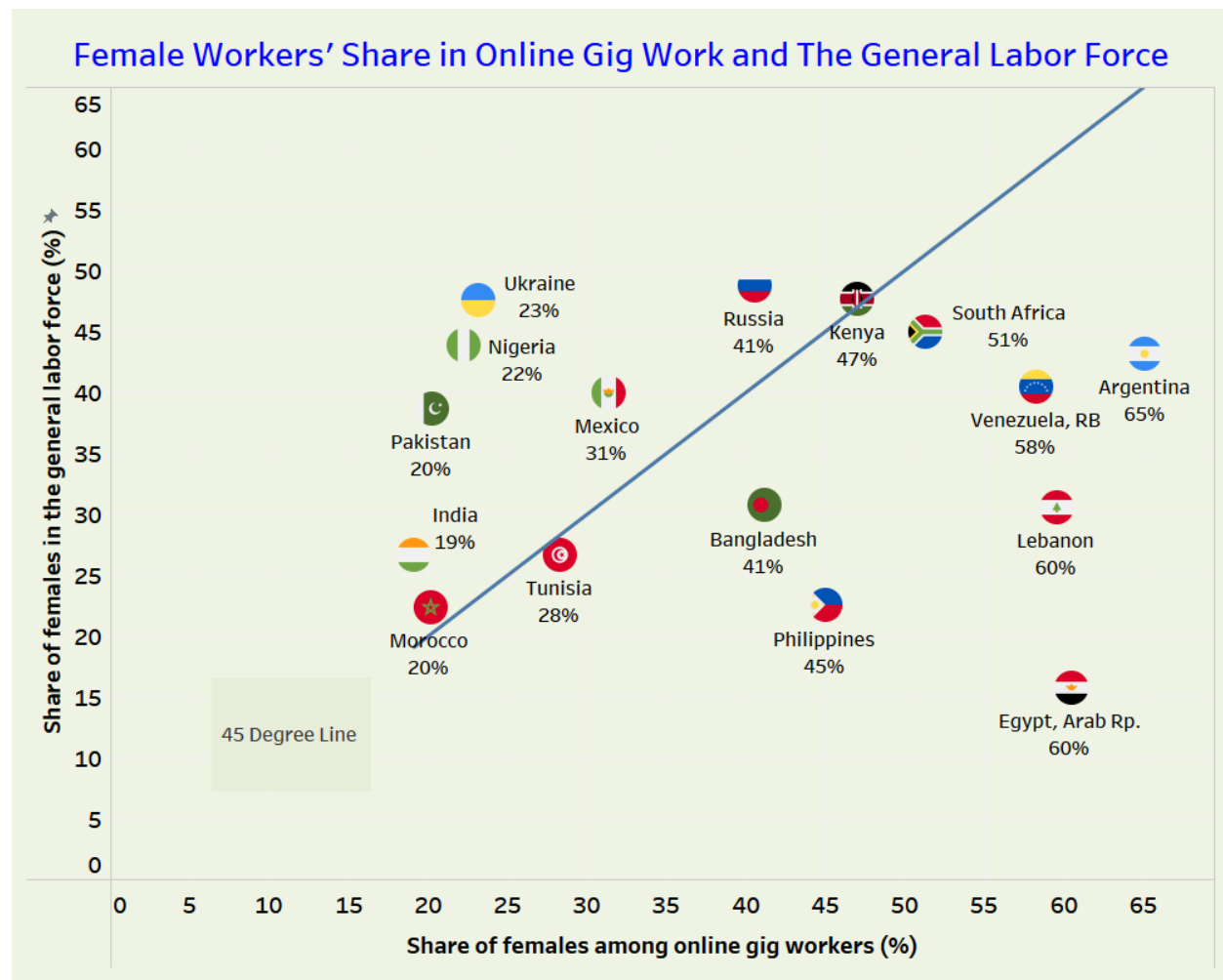


Figure 1: Comparison of Female Participation in Online Gig Work and Informal Work

Source: Team Database and ILOSTAT³

² The figure is calculated based on ILOSTAT data for the latest available year. Moreover, the WEF (2023) [The Global Gender Gap Report 2023](#) estimation shows the global figure stands at 39 percent.

³ <https://ilostat.ilo.org/data/>

Similar trends are observed when comparing the share of female workers within the service sector.⁴ These findings suggest that online gig work exhibits greater inclusion of women.

Online gig work presents an opportunity for women who face constraints in accessing jobs in the offline labor market. In countries where women's mobility is restricted or societal norms confine them to domestic roles like childcare, online gig jobs offer a viable alternative, allowing them to work and earn an income while tending to their responsibilities. Moreover, employers on online gig platforms come from diverse contexts, reducing the prevailing pressure of gender biases that constrain women's employment. Figure 2 shows a modest yet positive correlation between prevailing bias against female economic empowerment and the proportion of females engaged in online gig work at the country level.

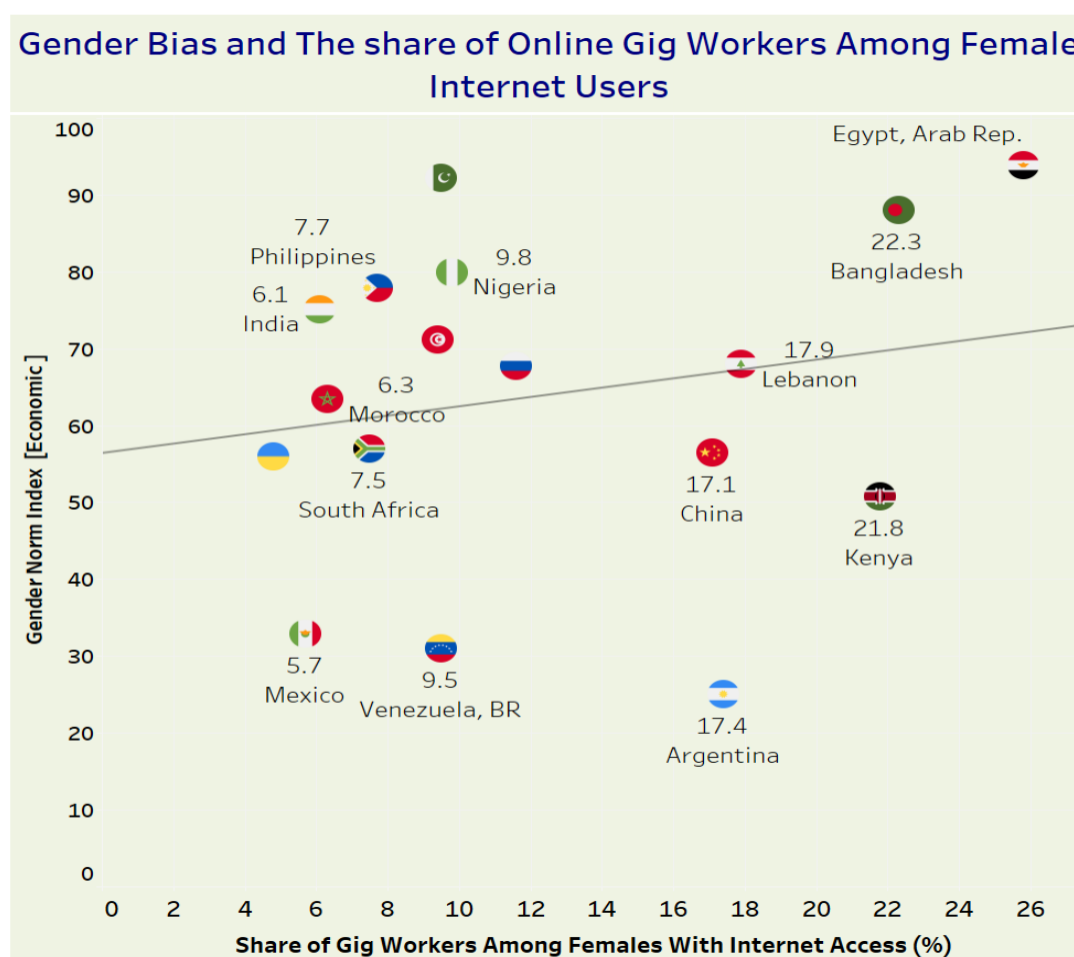


Figure 2: Gender Bias and the Share of Online Gig Workers Among Female Internet Users

Source: UNDP⁵ and Team Database

⁴ Please refer Datta et. al., 2023. [Chapter 4, "Working Without Borders: The Promise and Perils of Online Gig Work,"](#) for a more detailed comparison of the informal sector, general labor force, service sector, and workers in occupations that are similar to that of online gig workers.

⁵ <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2023-gender-social-norms-index-gsni#/indicies/GSNI>

The former is based on the UNDP's gender norm index,⁶ and the latter is based on our global survey. Countries such as Egypt and Bangladesh, where gender biases against women's economic empowerment are more pronounced, tend to have a higher proportion of female internet users engaged in online gig work compared to other countries. It suggests that online gig work could provide opportunities for female workers that they couldn't easily access otherwise in the general labor market. However, it should be noted that this doesn't necessarily imply a higher overall share of female online gig workers in those countries, as the number of females accessing the internet is lower compared to males.

While the correlation does not establish causation, it provides suggestive evidence that online gig work could be a viable option for female workers facing societal norms that hinder their pursuit of good-quality jobs.

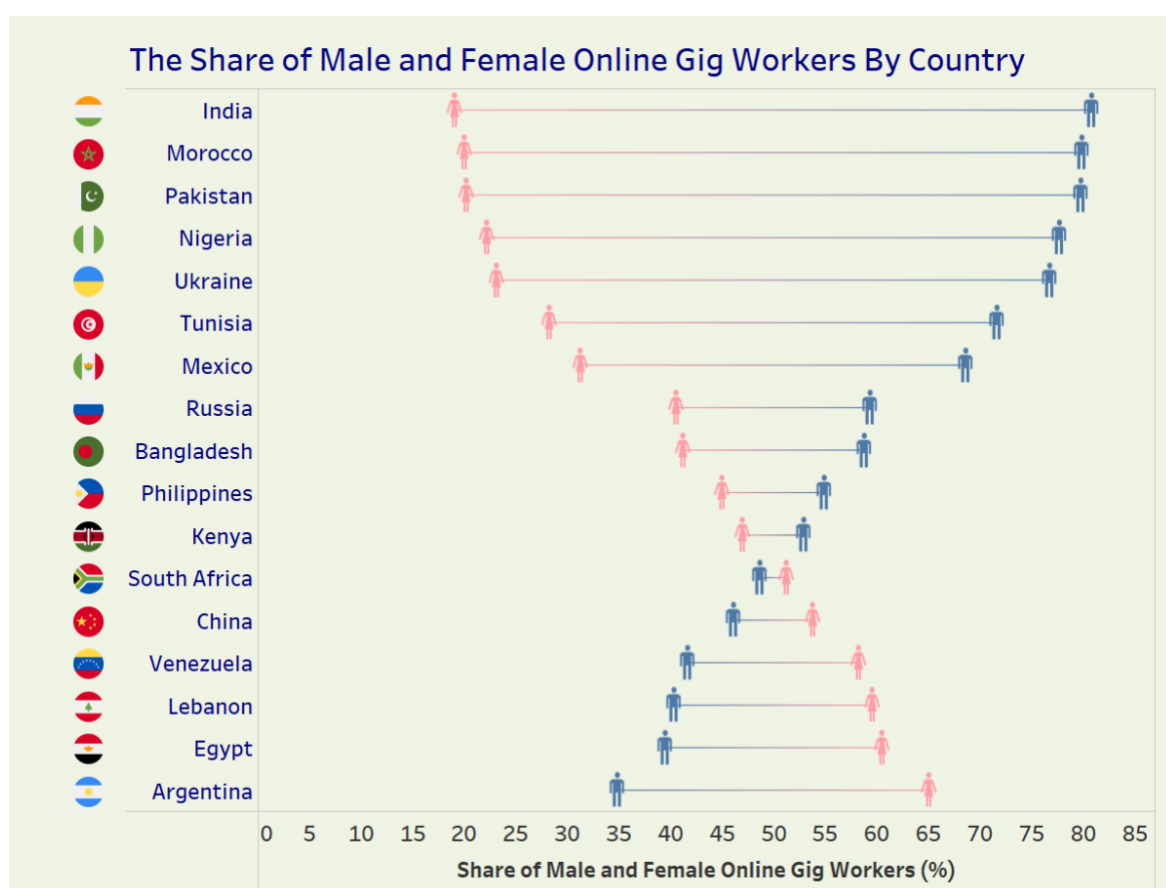


Figure 3: The Share of Male and Female Online Gig Workers by Country

Source: Team Database

However, the gender gap in the share of female online gig workers cannot be solely attributed to differences in internet access. Even among those with internet access, the proportion of female gig workers remains lower than that of men in some countries. The likelihood of participating in online gig

⁶ The Gender Social Norms Index (GSNI) quantifies biases against women, capturing people's attitudes on women's roles along four key dimensions: political, educational, economic and physical integrity.

work is notably higher for males in Morocco, Ukraine, Tunisia, Nigeria, Pakistan, Mexico, and India (Figure 4). But In countries like China, Bangladesh, Lebanon, Argentina, and Egypt, females with internet access are more likely to participate in online gig work than their male counterparts. A better understanding of the factors influencing female participation in the online gig economy helps to develop targeted policies for promoting gender inclusion in this new form of work.

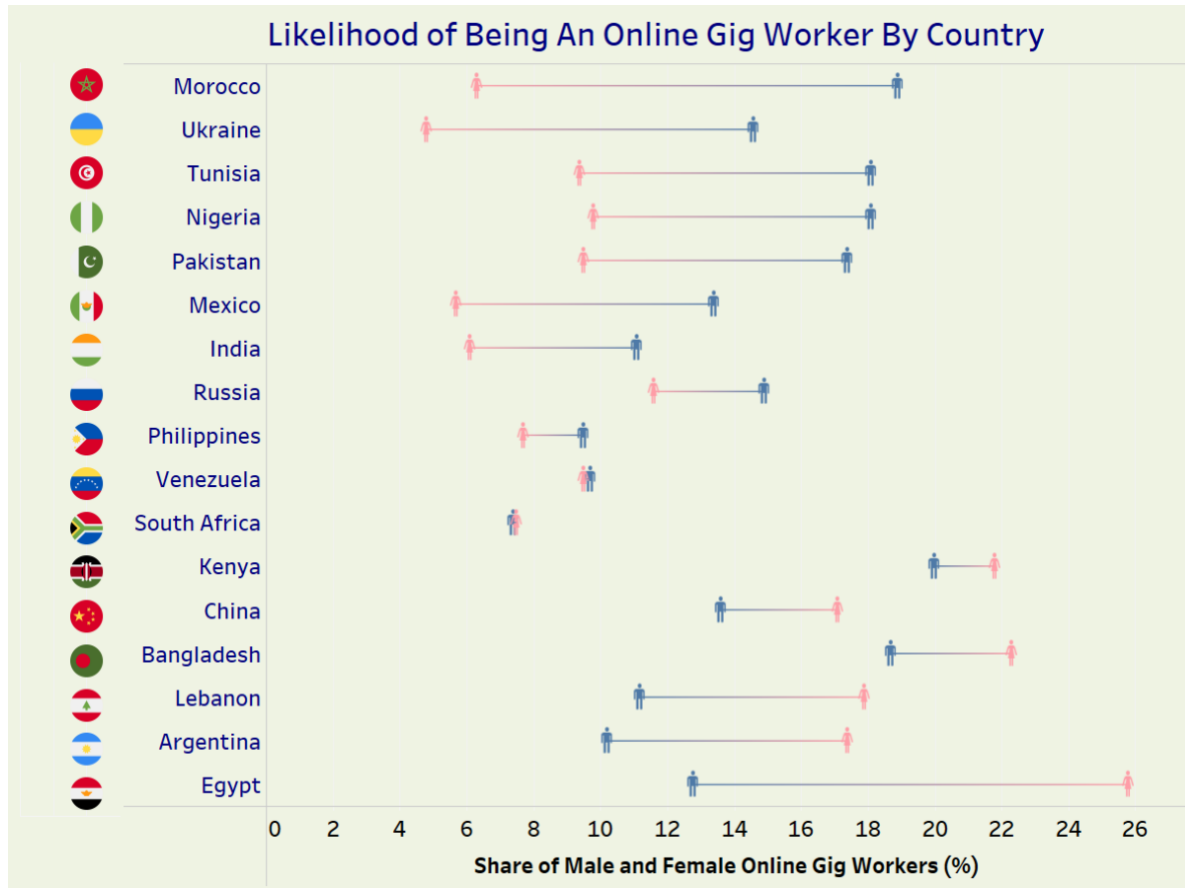


Figure 4: Participation of Male and Female Internet Users in Online Gig Work

Source: Team Database

3 What motivates men and women to participate in online gig work?

Female workers are more likely to engage in online gig work as a way to earn extra income due to lack of alternative job opportunities, while male gig workers are more interested in gig work as it allows them to "be their own boss" and to acquire new digital skills. Both genders value flexibility in terms of location and time, as depicted in Figures 5a and 5b. However, female workers are more attracted to the monetary benefits of online gig work, while male workers are more interested in the non-monetary dimensions. It is worth noting that online gig work not only provides an opportunity to earn extra income but also plays a crucial role in equipping workers with relevant skills.

Online Gig Workers: Exploring Gender Aspects

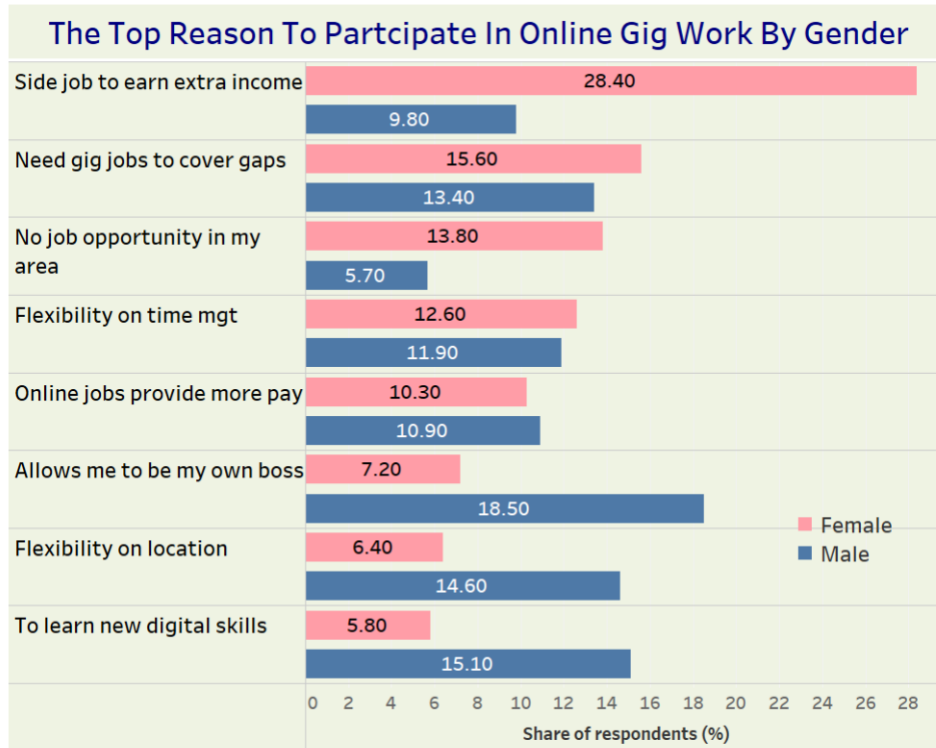


Figure 5a: The Top Reasons to Participate In Online Gig Work

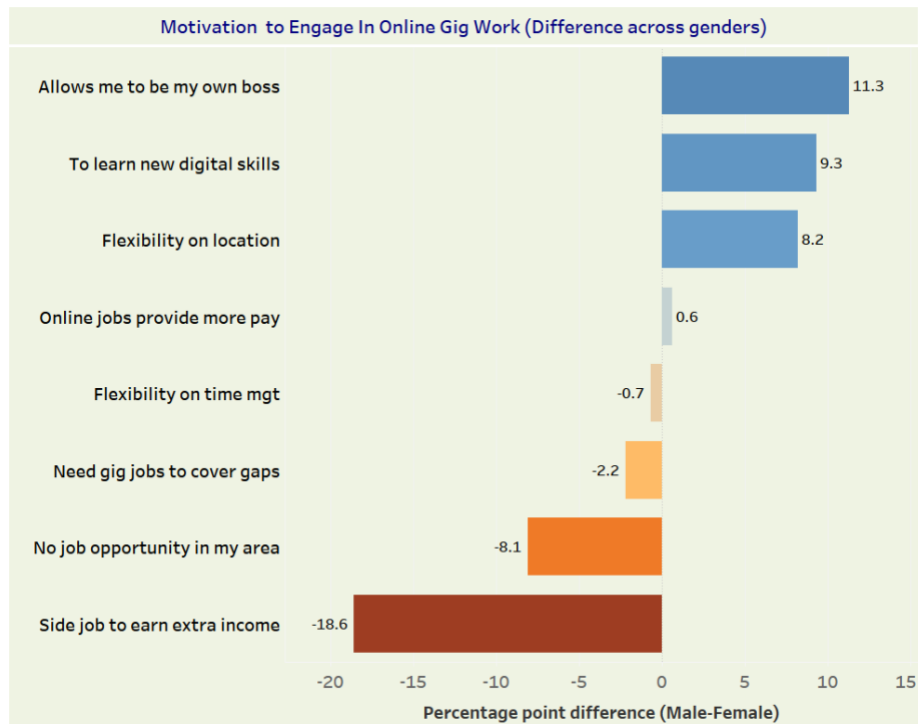


Figure 5b: Motivation to Engage in Online Gig Work by Gender

Source: Team Database

4 Profile of Online Gig Workers

Online gig workers are predominantly young, with a median age of 26 for both male and female workers. Online gig work can, therefore, be particularly helpful for areas dealing with high levels of youth unemployment. The mean age for female workers is five years higher than that of males (33 vs. 28). In fact, nearly a quarter of female online gig workers are above 45, suggesting the need to consider the interests of older demographic groups, too. In contrast, the proportion of males in the same age group is less than 15 percent. Though their numbers are limited, some people perform online gig work post-retirement to support themselves, supplement their retirement income, or increase their overall income. It highlights that online gig work can be used to address the job creation agenda for different age groups.

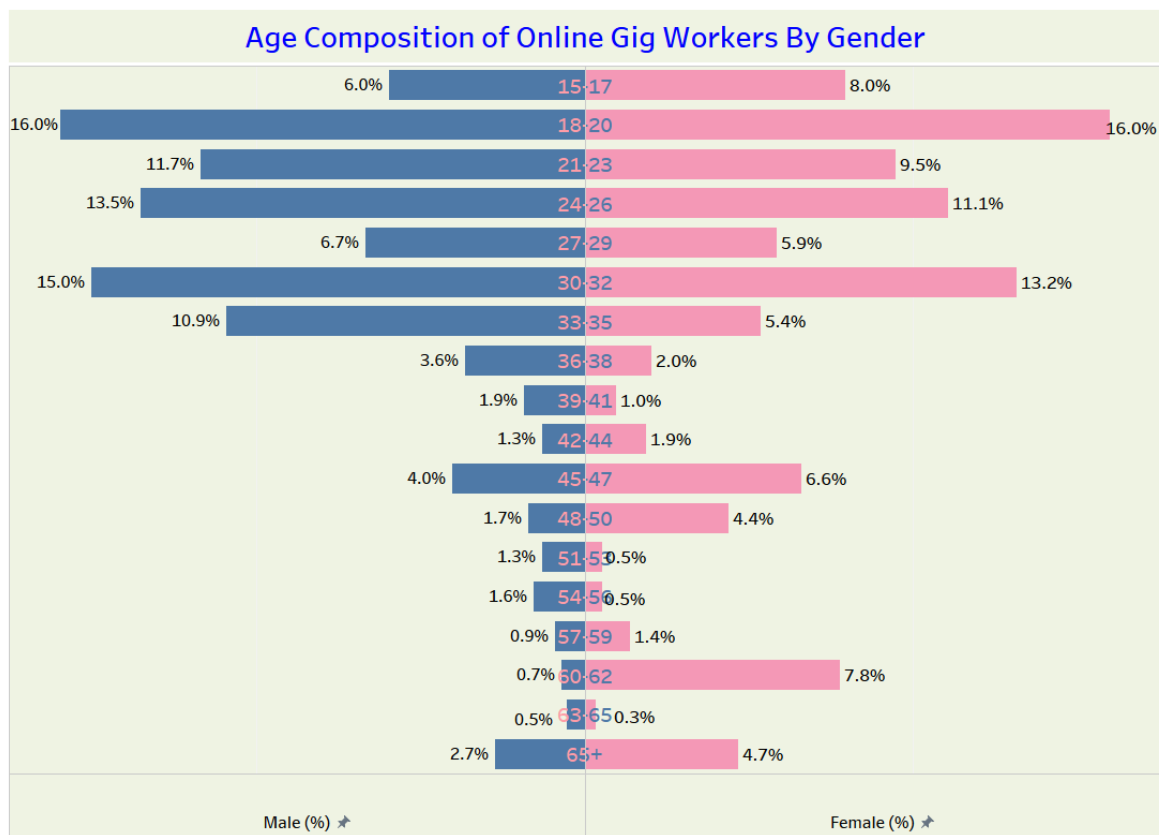


Figure 6: Age Distribution of Online Gig Workers Across Genders

Source: Team Database

The education profiles of male and female online gig workers are pretty similar. Most online gig workers possess at least a high school-level education. Hence, it is higher than the average level of education of the general labor force (Figure 7.) Almost one-third of male and female online gig workers hold a bachelor's or master's degree.

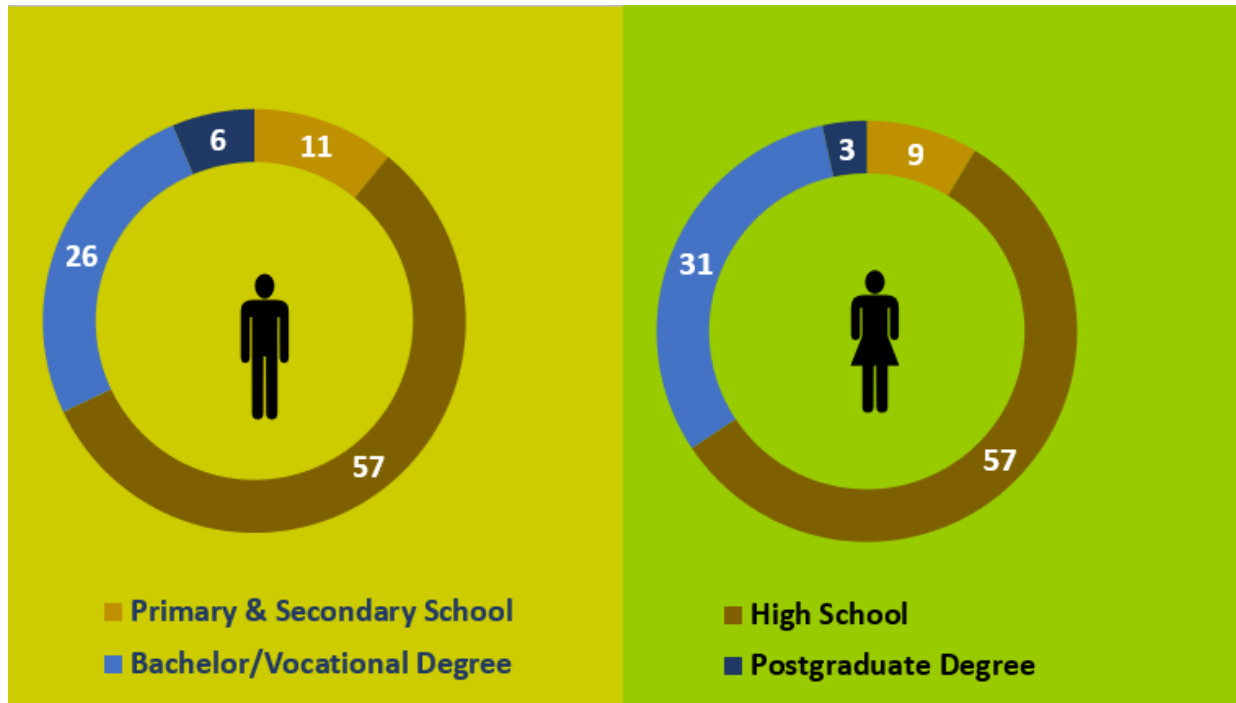


Figure 7: Education Level of Online Gig Workers by Gender

Source: Team Database

While sorting patterns of male and female workers across occupations systematically vary in the offline labor market, online gig work shows a mixed result. Specifically, we have focused on comparing the participation of male and female workers in IT and related fields (which are considered high skill) and microwork (which are relatively low skill). The results are mixed across countries. For example, in Ukraine, the proportion of female workers in IT-related jobs is higher compared to males. About 44 percent of female online gig workers engage in IT-related work, while it is only 18 percent of males. Conversely, in Argentina, there is a higher proportion of male workers in IT-related jobs than females. Similarly, in Nigeria, the proportion of males engaged in microwork is higher, while in Bangladesh, it is lower (see Figure 8).

Online Gig Workers: Exploring Gender Aspects

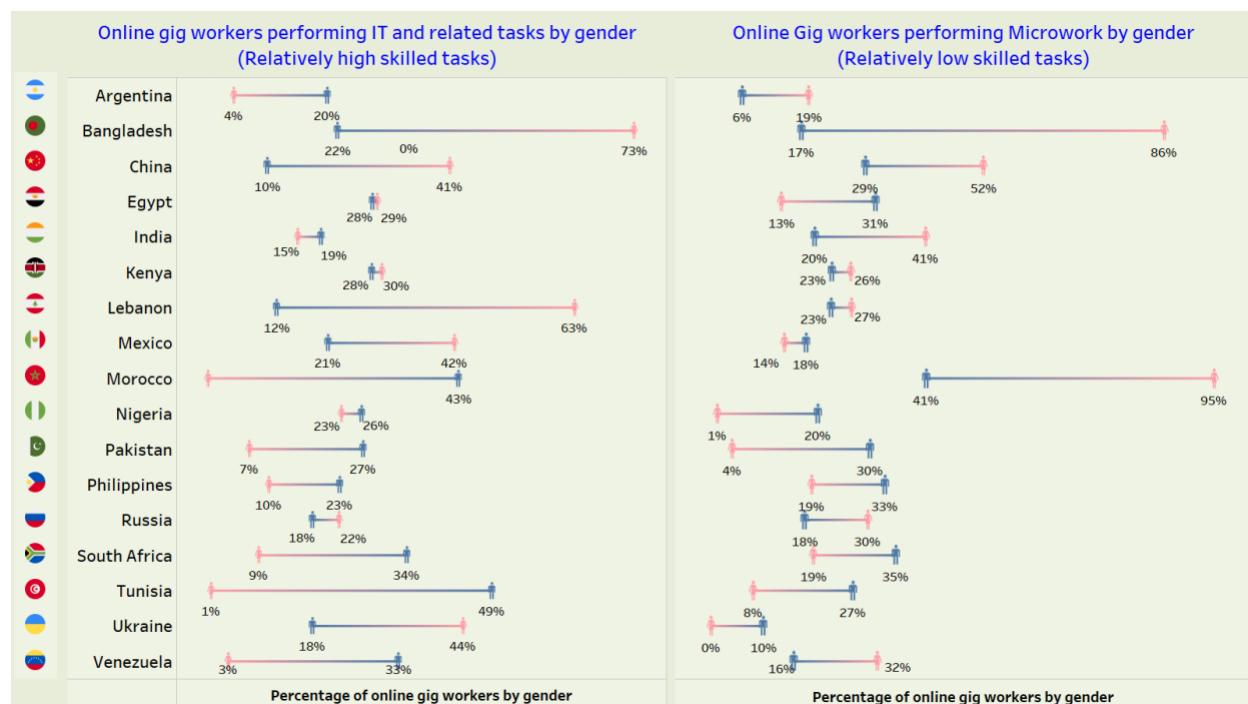


Figure 8: Occupation Distribution of Online Gig Workers by Gender

Source: Team Database

More than half of online gig workers work an average of 10 hours per week or less. Approximately 60% of female online gig workers work for 10 hours a week or less, while the same figure is close to 50% for males (Figure 9a). This gender gap in paid working hours is also evident in the general labor market, as women tend to spend more time on unpaid tasks compared to men.⁷ The low working hours among online gig workers can be attributed, in part, to many of them doing gig tasks as a side job while holding a primary job elsewhere or studying full-time.⁸ It is worth noting that online gig work is mainly project-based and allows interested workers to work as much as they want.

⁷ <https://blogs.worldbank.org/opendata/time-after-time-how-men-and-women-spend-their-time-and-what-it-means-individual-and>

⁸ See Datta et al., (2023). [Working Without Borders: The Promise and Perils of Online Gig Work](#)

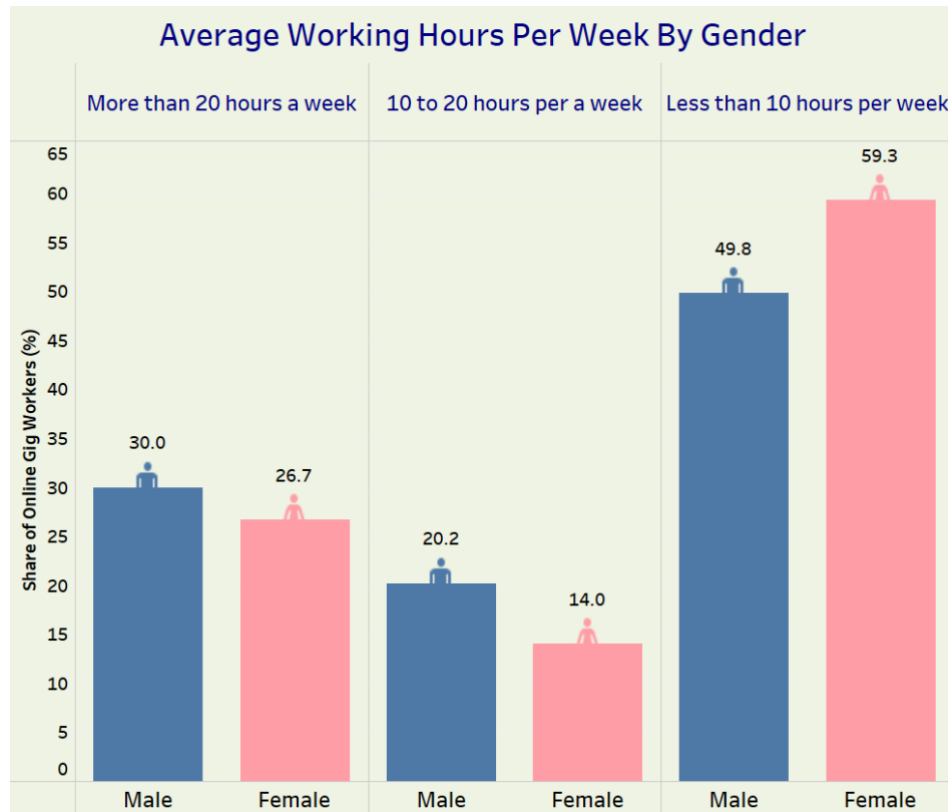


Figure 9a: Working Hours Per Week on Online Gig Work By Gender

Source: Team Database

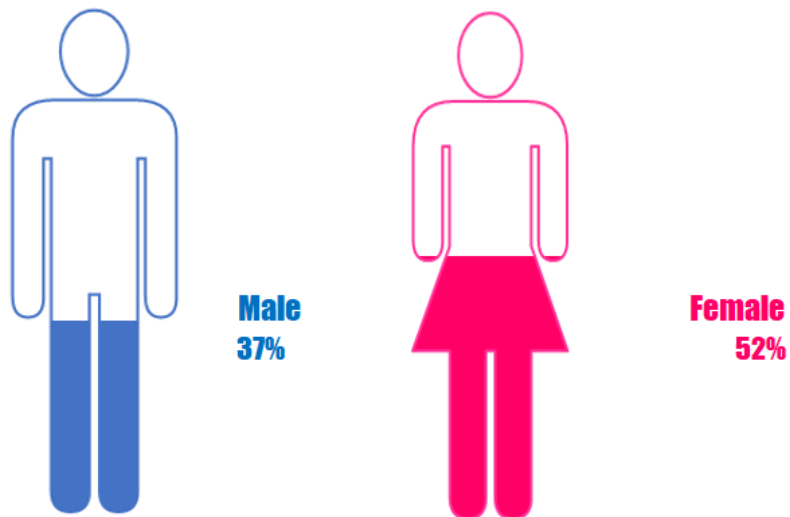


Figure 9b: Share of Male and Female Workers That Earn More than Half of Their Income From Online Gig Work

Source: Team Database

Around half of female online gig workers earn between 50 to 100 percent of their income from online gig work, while only 37% of male online gig workers do the same (figure 9b). This may seem surprising given that female online gig workers work shorter hours. However, it is important to note that this does not necessarily mean female workers earn a higher hourly wage. Rather, it is because male online gig workers have diversified income sources, which dilutes the share of their earnings from online gig work. In contrast, female online gig workers may focus on only a few online gig jobs, which means that much of their monthly earnings come from those activities only.

More than half of female online gig workers can be classified as secondary online gig workers. To understand the engagement of male and female online gig workers, we followed the classification suggested by Brancati, U. et al. (2020) and categorized online gig workers as main, secondary, and marginal based on the number of hours worked per week and the share of their monthly income from online gig work. Accordingly, 36% of male and 27% of female online gig workers are categorized as main (Figure 10). Interestingly, 53% of female workers are secondary, while only 31% of males are in this category. The remaining workers are classified as marginal online gig workers, who work fewer hours and/or earn a small share of their monthly income from online gig work.

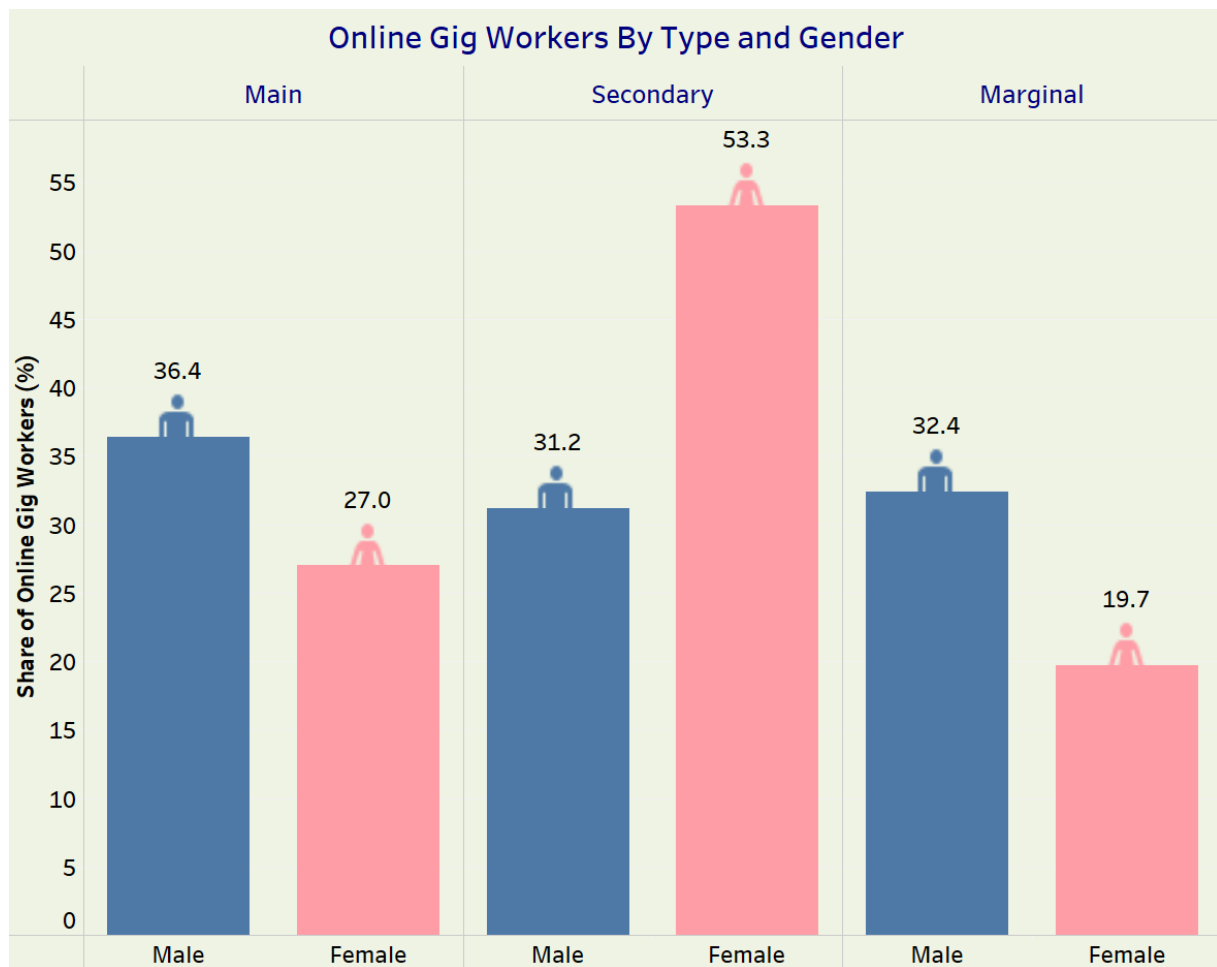


Figure 10: Online Gig Workers by Intensity of Work and Gender

Source Team Database

Nearly three-quarters of online gig workers are associated with freelancing communities to varying degrees. It takes the form of platform-based communities, social media groups, or in-person communities. Notably, approximately one-third of female online gig workers are members of platform-based communities, compared to only 15 percent of males. Conversely, 24 percent of male online gig workers are members of social media community groups, while the same figure is 15 percent for female online gig workers. In-person community membership stands at 18 percent for males and 14 percent for females. For both genders, around a quarter of online gig workers are not affiliated with any community (Figure 11).

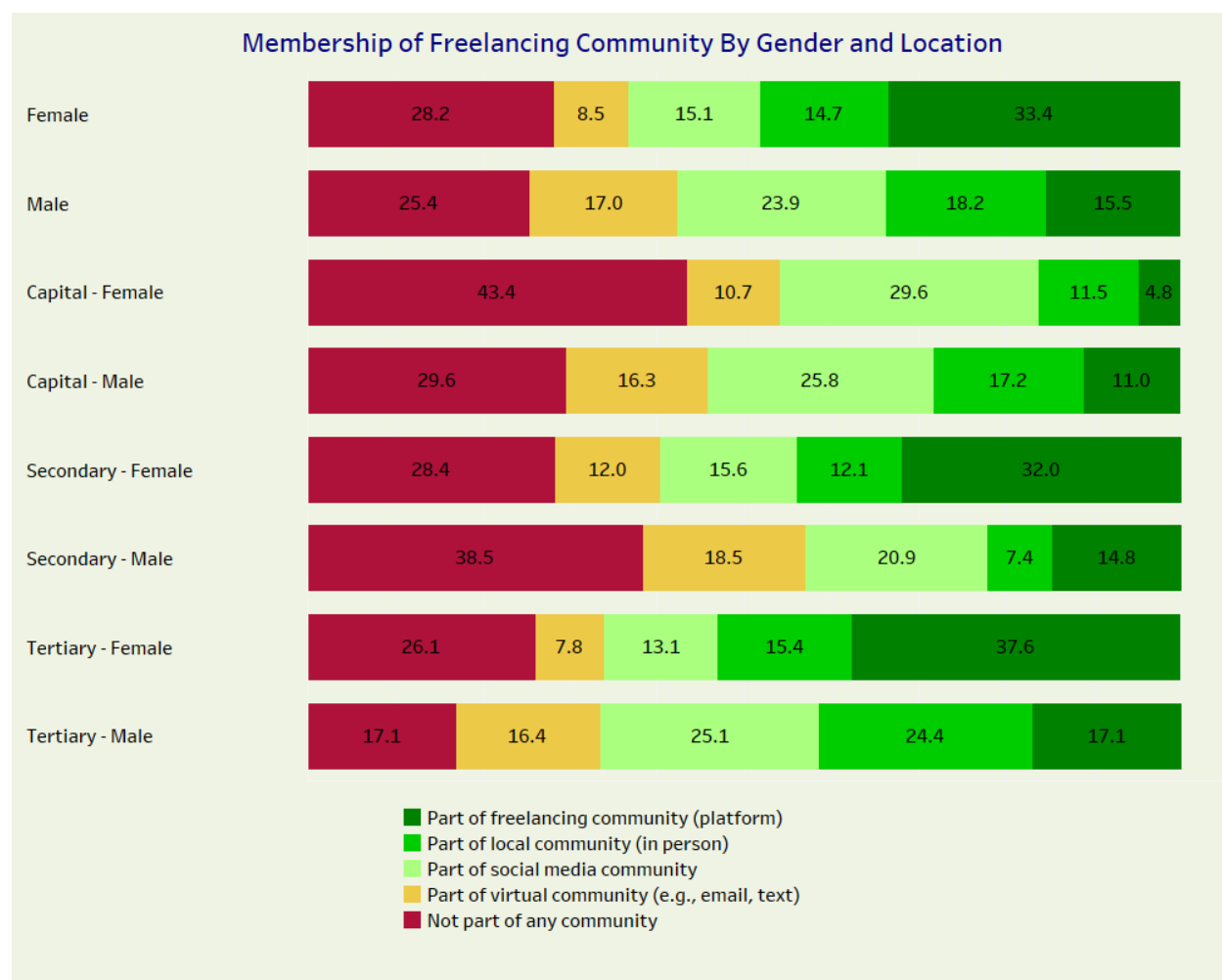


Figure 11: Community Membership Among Online

Source: Team Database

The share of community membership is notably lower for females in capital cities, where 43 percent of them remain unassociated with any community as compared to 29 percent for males, indicating a general trend of reduced membership in capital regions for both genders. Conversely, in-person

community membership appears higher in capital regions, especially for females. This observation could be attributed to factors such as improved transportation options and social norms that facilitate greater mobility for female workers.

In secondary and tertiary cities, female workers are more interested in platform community membership than their male counterparts, who tend to lean towards social media communities. Membership in freelancing communities proves valuable for networking opportunities, skill enhancement, support and guidance, advocacy, and collective bargaining. Although a majority of workers are already affiliated with freelancing communities, providing additional support to such worker organizations or communities tailored to their preferences could further support gig workers.

5 How do male and female online gig workers describe themselves?

The classification of gig workers has become a contentious issue, with most platforms treating workers as independent contractors so that they are not eligible for employee benefits like health insurance, sick leave, etc. Several developed countries have introduced regulations to clarify situations where gig workers would be classified as employees or independent contractors. (See detailed discussion on this issue in [chapter 6](#) of the main report.).

Female online gig workers who are college graduates or skilled are more likely to describe themselves as "self-employed," i.e., independent contractors or entrepreneurs compared to their low-skilled female counterparts. Similarly, the share of skilled male workers who identify themselves as "self-employed" is marginally higher compared to low-skilled male workers. However, the share of low-skilled male workers who identify themselves as "employees" (either of the platform or the client) is substantially higher compared to low-skilled female gig workers (Figure 12). These results vary from platform to platform and require further research. Furthermore, more than half of the main female online gig workers identify themselves as self-employed, while only 17 percent of male workers do the same. In contrast, most main male online gig workers consider themselves employees. For secondary and marginal types, males are more likely to identify themselves as self-employed. In capital cities, online gig workers are more likely to identify themselves as employees than self-employed for both genders, especially for males. In secondary cities, three-quarters of females identify themselves as self-employed. These descriptions influence the type of benefits and regulations online gig workers wish and expect from the government.

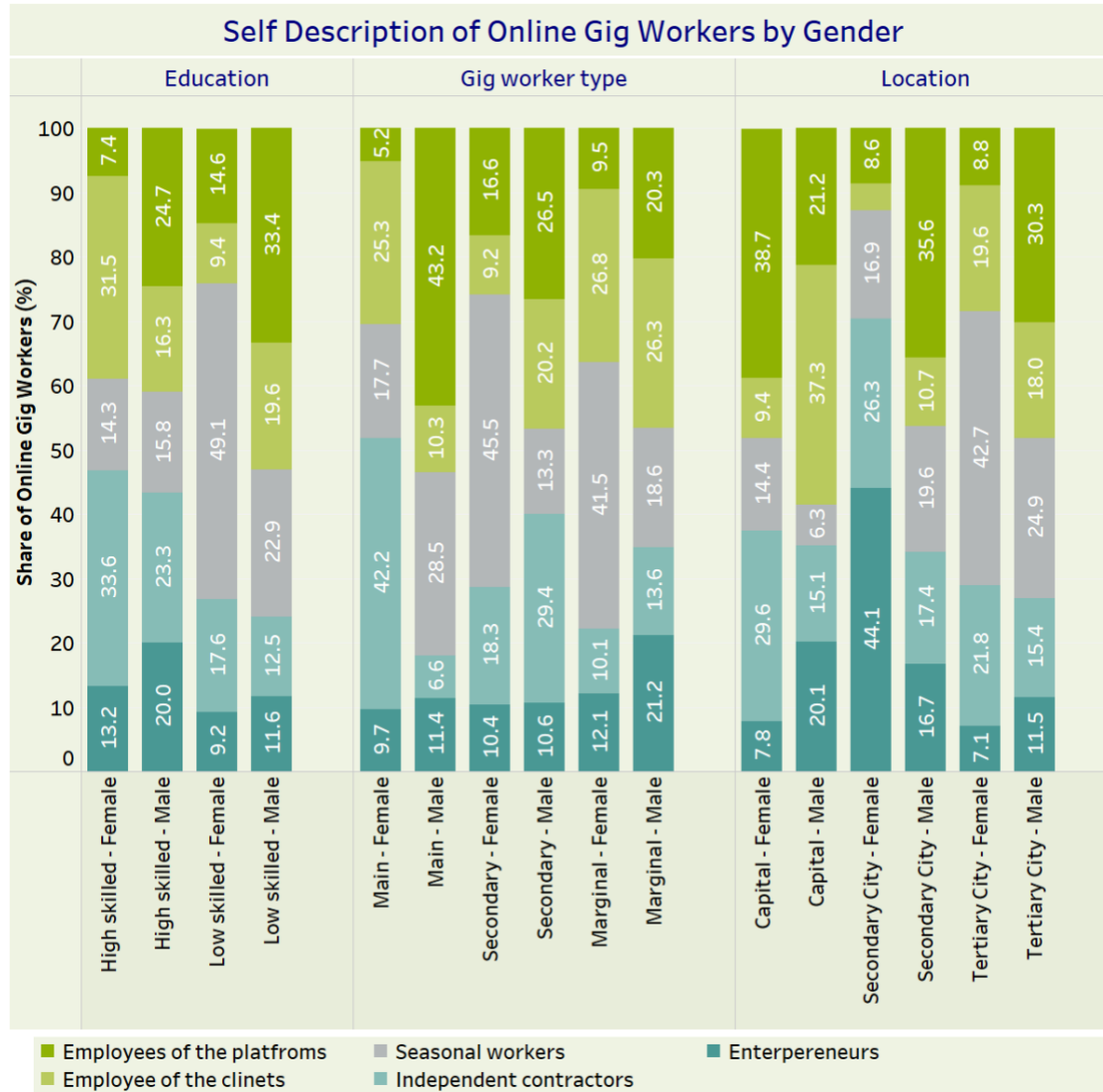


Figure 12: Self-description of Online Gig Workers By Gender

Source: Team Database

6 Benefits Sought By Online Gig Workers

Access to training is the most coveted benefit among online gig workers on digital labor platforms, especially among females. Interestingly, these workers show greater interest in non-traditional benefits like training opportunities and access to credit rather than conventional perks such as health insurance, pensions, and paid leaves, as depicted in Figure 13. For every three female online gig workers, one considers access to training as the top priority from digital platforms, compared to one in four of their male counterparts. This difference indicates that female workers place a higher value on receiving training, suggesting the need for targeted training programs to bridge the gender gap.

The second most desired benefit is access to credit for purchasing equipment like computers. This indirectly indicates that there are entry barriers in this industry, as acquiring quality computers can be financially challenging for online gig workers from disadvantaged backgrounds. Improving access to devices could promote opportunities for new types of technology-enabled jobs. Additionally, there are other gender differences in the sought-after benefits. Female online gig workers value health insurance more, while male workers prioritize old-age pensions and paid annual leave. These distinctions highlight the importance of designing an inclusive benefits package for online gig workers that considers both their common and unique preferences across genders.

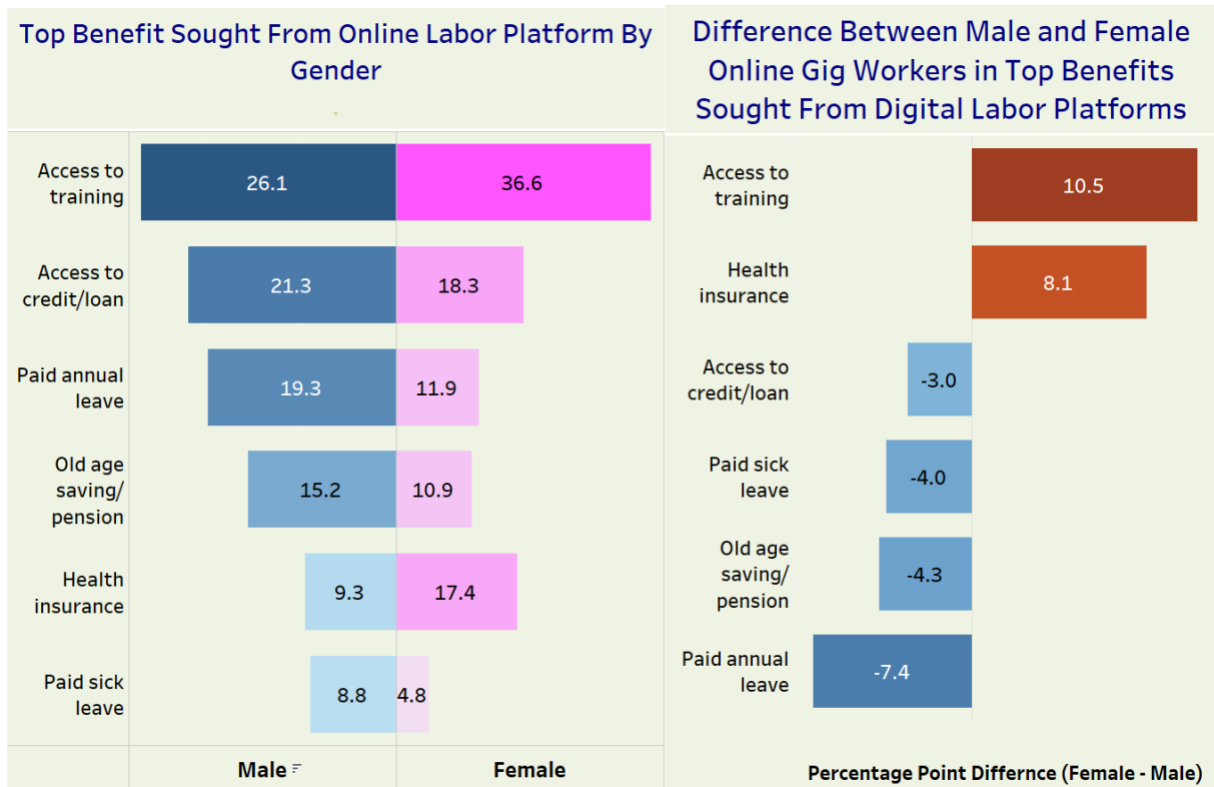


Figure 13: Top Benefits Sought from Online Gig Platforms By Gender

Source: Team Database

Soft skill training is identified as the most crucial factor for success in online gig work, regardless of gender. The top three skills ranked by online gig workers as essential for success are time management, communication, and self-confidence (see Figures 14a and 14b). Interestingly, female online gig workers attach more significance to these three factors compared to their male counterparts. For instance, 88 percent of female online gig workers regard time management as a very important skill. In comparison, the same figure for males is 82 percent, resulting in a six-percentage point difference. Similarly, the difference is 7 and 9 percentage points for communication and self-confidence, respectively.

Surprisingly, female online gig workers attribute relatively lower importance to technical training. Only 55 percent of them consider technical skills to be very important, while the figure is close to 70 percent for male online gig workers, indicating a 15-percentage point discrepancy. This is surprising given that

one might assume technical skills are more relevant for female workers, especially in IT-related fields. Nevertheless, more than half of female workers still acknowledge the importance of technical skills, albeit to a lesser degree compared to males. Young females place a higher value on technical training.

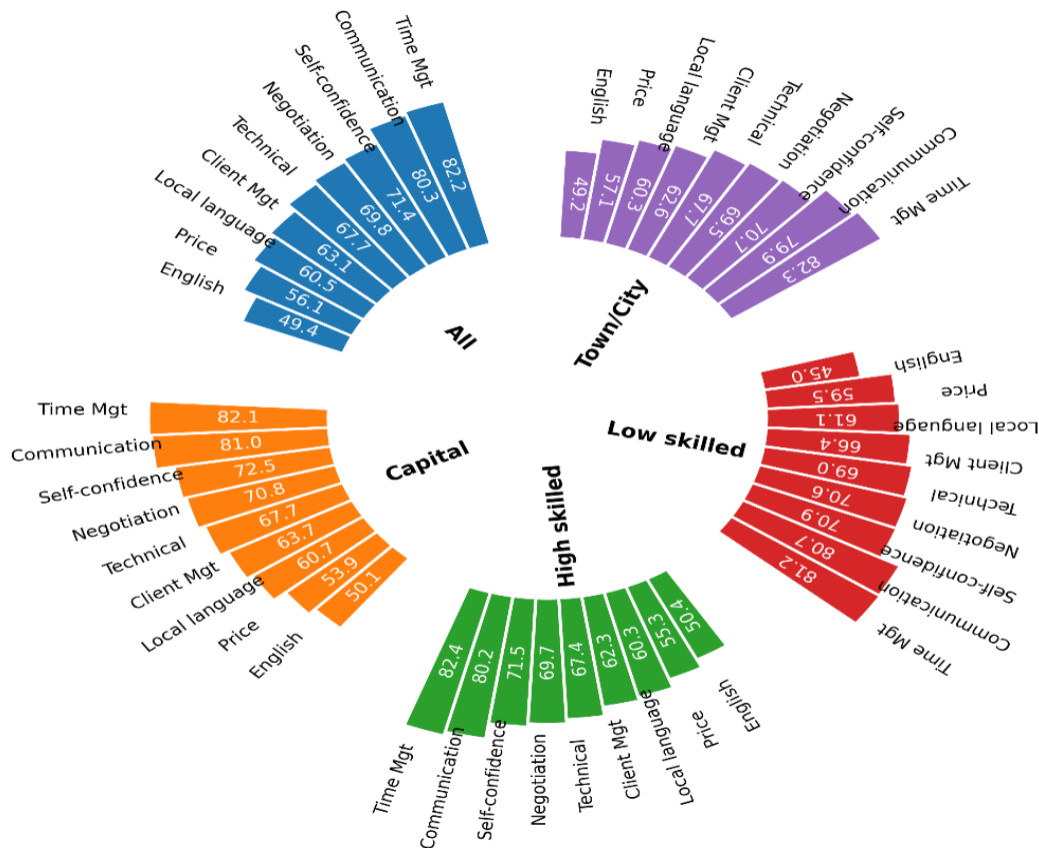


Figure 14a: Male online gig workers' opinion on the importance of skills

Source: Workana Platform-Based Survey

Therefore, training programs aimed at addressing the needs of online gig workers should consider that soft skills require more attention. While technical training remains relevant for most online gig workers, women, in particular, require support with the soft skills needed to be successful freelancers.

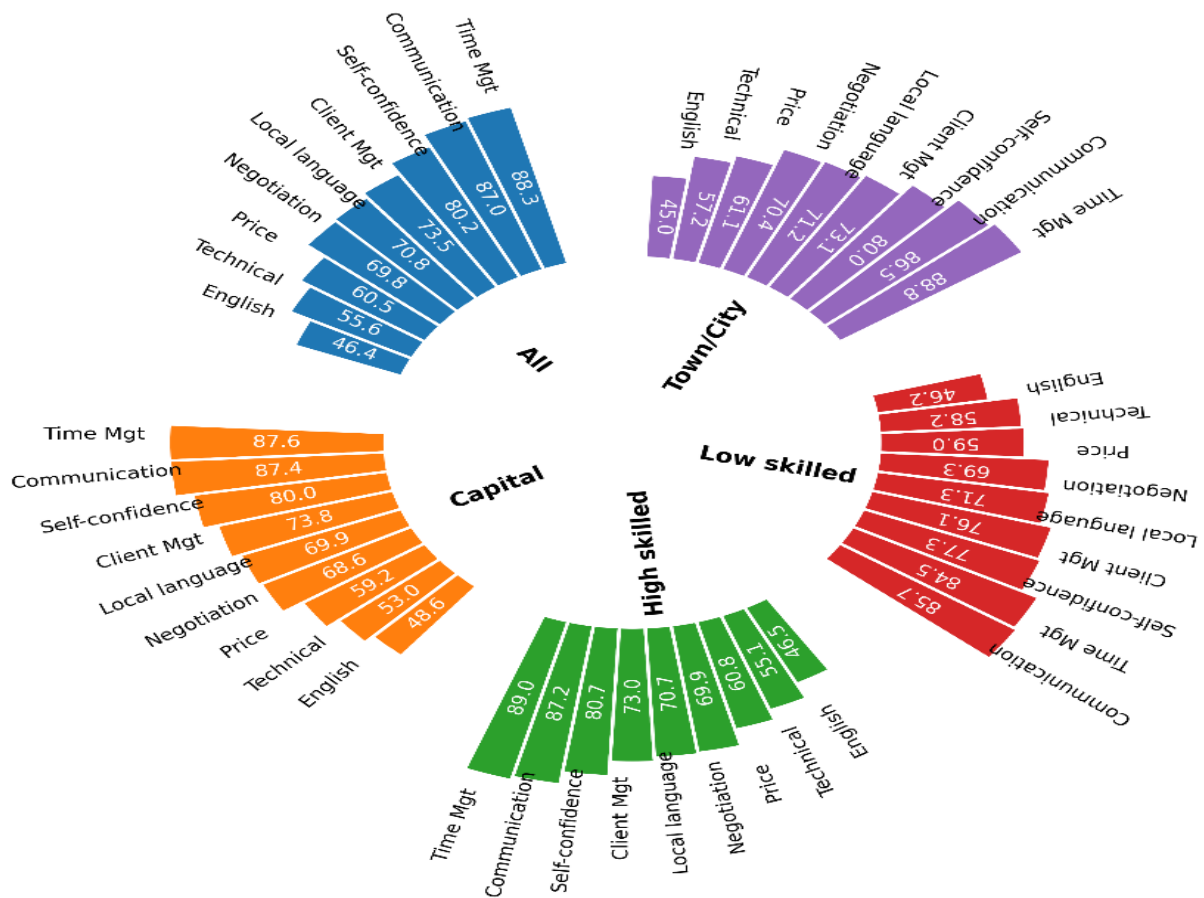


Figure 14b: Female online gig workers' opinion on the importance of skills

Source: Workana Platform-Based Survey

7 Career Aspirations of Online Gig Workers

Most online gig workers, regardless of gender, express optimism about continuing to participate in gig work. Specifically, about 83 percent of female online gig workers and 79 percent of male workers want to continue participating in online gig work in some capacity (see Figure 14). However, a closer examination of the responses reveals some differences across genders. Male workers are more interested in starting and growing their own freelancing agency compared to females (12% vs. 7%). In contrast, female workers are more likely to be interested in earning money as full-time freelancers (55%

vs. 48%). Additionally, the share of male workers who want to find a better full-time job other than freelancing is slightly higher compared to their female counterparts.

Location-wise, the aspirations of online gig workers living in the capital regions and smaller towns are similar for both genders.

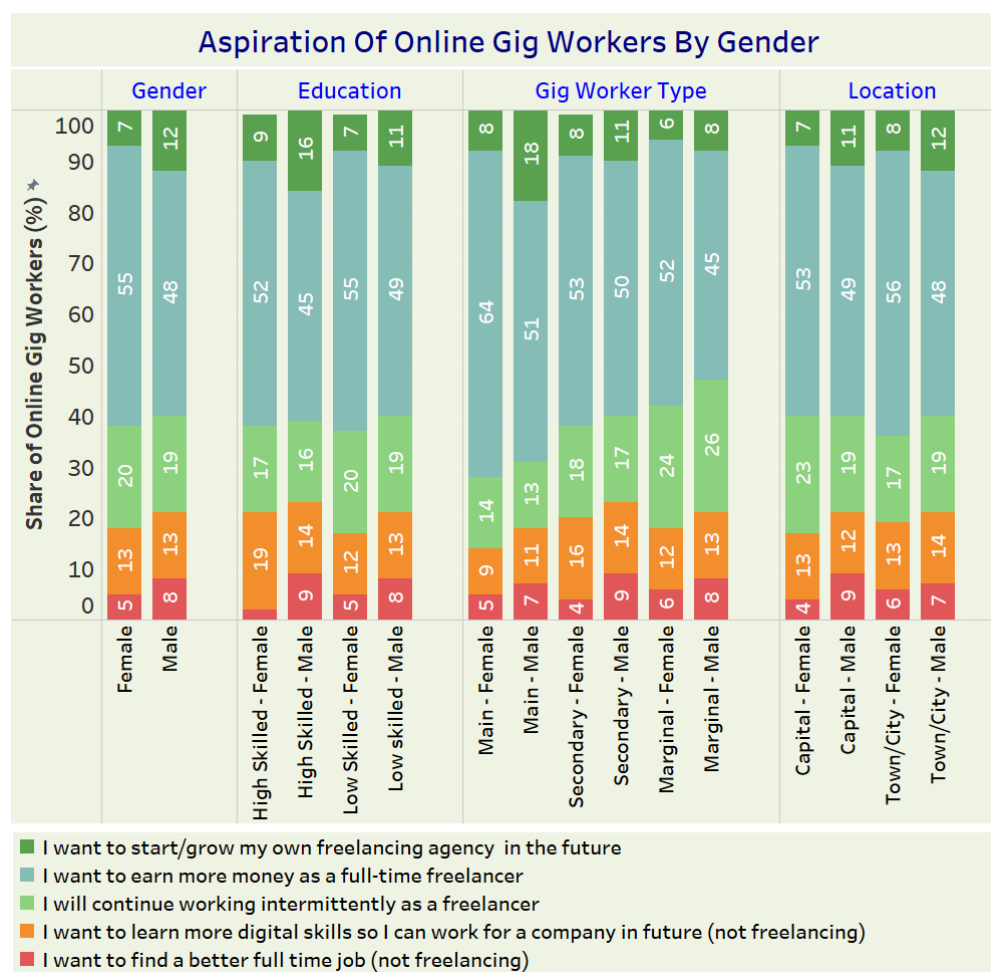


Figure 14: Aspiration of Online Gig Workers by Gender

Source: Team Database

Disaggregating the responses of males and females across different categories of college graduates (high-skilled) and non-graduate (low-skilled) workers reveals qualitatively comparable results, though the magnitudes differ slightly. The data also shows an interesting pattern when comparing the aspirations of main, secondary, and marginal online gig workers. The share of online gig workers who want to do full-time online gig work or focus on their own freelancing agency is slightly higher among women and progressively declines as we move from main to secondary and secondary to marginal online gig workers. The share of online gig workers who want to work intermittently is higher for the marginal gig workers.

8 Conclusion

Women's participation in online gig work surpasses that in the general labor market. Online gig work presents an opportunity for women facing challenges in seeking employment outside their homes in the labor market. Female workers are more likely to engage in online gig work as a means of earning extra income and due to a lack of job opportunities. In contrast, male workers are more interested in being their own boss and acquiring new digital skills. However, the participation of women in the online gig economy remains lower compared to their male counterparts in many countries.

To ensure gender parity in accessing earning opportunities from online gig work, one of the most critical areas is the expansion of internet access, particularly for women. Providing access to affordable devices is another way to increase female labor force participation in digital work. Additionally, providing tailored training programs that focus on developing soft skills such as communication, time management, and problem-solving can help improve the success of female online gig workers. Moreover, supporting online gig communities and forming peer support groups could be especially helpful for women in accessing their growing form of work and income-earning opportunities.

Reference

Brancati, U., Pesole, A., & Fernández-Macías, E. (2020). New evidence on platform workers in Europe. *Results from the second COLLEEM survey*.

Namita Datta and Rong Chen (with Sunamika Singh, Clara Stinshoff, Nadina Iacob, Natnael Simachew Nigatu, Mpumelelo Nxumalo and Luka Klimaviciute et al.), 2023: "Working without Borders: The Promise and Peril of Online Gig Work." World Bank, Washington, DC.

WEF. (2023) The Global Gender Gap Report, World Economic Forum, Geneva

Appendix

Table 1A: Classification of Online Gig Workers

	Less than 10 hours a week	Between 10 and 20 hours a week	More than 20 hours a week
Less than 25 percent of personal income	Marginal	Secondary	Secondary
25 to 50 percent of personal income	Secondary	Secondary	Main
More than 50 percent of personal income	Secondary	Main	Main

Source: Adapted from Urzi Brancati, Pesole, and Fernández-Macías 2020.