

6. Whisper Networks and Workarounds: Negotiating Urban Company's Interface

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Abstract

Most scholarship on the digital platform economy focuses on the unfair practices of platforms and exploitation of workers. This chapter foregrounds the difficulties workers face in dealing with middle-class customers. Drawing on my interviews with beauty gig workers in Hyderabad, I explore the use of WhatsApp groups by workers and the subsequent creation of whisper networks to collectivize, resist, and exercise agency. The term “whisper network” refers to a thriving system of informal communication amongst women to warn each other about male sexual predators within their immediate environment. Departing from the dominant notion that men are the subjects of whisper networks, this chapter uses an intersectional feminist lens to broaden its scope to include caste and class.

Keywords: whisper networks, Urban Company, caste, platform economy, collectivization, solidarity

Introduction

Picture this—nine women cramped into an auto (three-wheeler vehicle in India), taking a *savari* (‘ride’ in Hindi) to their workplace. Two women in *saris* on either side of the driver, three on the seat at the rear actually meant for people to occupy, three on the little wooden slab facing it, fitted to accommodate more people, and one on the iron railing bordering the right side of the auto. The crisis of public transportation (Pucher et al. 2004)

in India forces the working poor to travel in overcrowded buses, trucks, seven-seaters, and auto rickshaws (Jose 2019).

Perhaps the image is somewhat overwhelming in the present context of the pandemic and the mantra of SMS (sanitizing, masks, social distancing), but this is how domestic workers travelled in the BC (Before Corona) era, or so I discovered when I interviewed domestic workers as part of a summer course in 2018 (Friedman 2020).

Brinda,¹ a domestic worker in my neighbourhood, told me how this “auto” arrangement came to fruition. Experiences of harassment (such as being stalked at bus stops), she said, were a common occurrence, and it is this that brought the community of domestic workers in her area to team up to find a solution. They identified a few drivers and struck a deal with them. Six drivers would ferry groups of eight to nine domestic workers each, to and from work. Every passenger would have to contribute INR 8 to 10 per ride (14¢). Brinda also introduced me to her other “auto-mates” who corroborated her story with experiences of their own.

These shared auto rides provide opportunities for the group to discuss a variety of issues related to work, trade stories, and brainstorm solutions as a mini-collective. En route to the workplace (a fifteen- to thirty-minute ride depending on traffic), they would discuss how much each of them earned to fix the “going rate” for their labour in a particular area. It is only reasonable, they argued, that people living in “posh” areas (perceived to be a mix of commercial and residential) pay more than those living in purely residential areas, often categorized as low-income neighbourhoods. They would also discuss the added benefits of working for a particular family, what infrastructure they expected to already be there in a home (washing machine or a mop), and how they could negotiate issues of leave, including getting one of their travel companions to substitute for them. It is also during these auto rides, Maniamma says, that the unspoken rule of not “snatching” work from a fellow worker became a common understanding. As a group, they also decided that a three-day paid leave per month was not only reasonable, but if these days off were not utilized, they could ask to be paid a bonus.

Older and more experienced workers, they said, would warn those new to the trade against working in a particular home during these auto *savaris* (rides). Information about those who were known to abuse their “servant” (whether physically or mentally), was passed on to the new workers. Some of the workers who spoke with me also mentioned abuse but not always as

1 All names used in this chapter have been changed to protect identity.

having themselves suffered it. The abuse and exploitation (both physical and sexual) of domestic workers is reported in the media, but few lodge a formal complaint (Krishnakutty 2020; Agrawal 2020). Most domestic workers are either not aware of the legal provision (Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013) or on account of belonging to non-dominant castes and communities (such as tribal minorities), feel a fight with big people is a losing battle (Saldanha 2017).

The steady rise of on-demand, care-work platforms such as Bookmybai² and Urban Company³ (UC) complicates matters further since platform work is marked by newer forms of precarity—work instability, worker isolation, information asymmetries about ratings, job matching, blended supervision (Komarraju et al. 2021) amongst other things that “seriously weakens workers’ collective organisation [...] by triggering individual and collective anxiety about the future” (Grimshaw et al. 2016, 29).

However, as recent protests by beauty gig workers associated with Urban Company suggest, despite constraints, workers find ways to collectivize and protest. In this chapter, I take a different approach to understand how workers resist and organize themselves. By pointing to the difficulties service providers face on account of the master-slave relationship, characteristic of home-based, platformized care-work (Komarraju et al. 2021), I shift attention to the often-neglected issue of the customer-service provider relationship. Drawing on interviews with beauty gig workers in Hyderabad, I point to the creation of “whisper networks” amongst workers⁴ to deal with exploitation by both the platform and customers. While most academic scholarship treats men as the subject of such networks, this chapter uses an intersectional feminist lens to broaden the scope of whisper networks.

Savari: More than a Ride

The lack of comprehensive laws to empower informal and unorganized workers in general and gig workers in particular (especially against extra-legal mechanisms by the platforms) further exacerbates issues of precarity and exploitation (Rajkumar 2020). However, one must refrain from homogenizing groups of people as oppressed and powerless (Spivak 2010), especially because those who occupy positions of power cannot understand how women on the

2 <https://www.bookmybai.com>

3 <https://www.urbancompany.com>

4 Or simply providers, short for service providers.

margins (whose views we centre) exercise agency (Komarraju et al. 2021). This is why the metaphor of the *savari* is interesting: It represents both the literal travel involved and the travel from an individualized experience requiring personalized mechanisms (such as negotiating wages) to that of shared experiences and a collective redressal of issues (however small or informal the effort of collectivization).

In India, trade unions are arguably the most dominant way of collectivizing, given their strong ties with political parties (Elembilassery 2018). The *savari* metaphor effectively broadens how collectivization can be imagined beyond this narrow framework of unionization, and honours women's ways of knowing and sharing. Where trade unions are indeed a manifestation of one kind of collectivization, at FemLab, we wondered if it is possible to identify, and/or energize and enhance informal collectivizations (like the auto *savari* groups) that might already be happening across sectors via digital technologies. For instance, domestic workers' organizations and unions in Indonesia, Thailand, and Hong Kong have used mobile phones and the internet to create virtual solidarities, mobilize themselves to protest against discriminatory laws (such as the proposed minimum two-year contract at a placement agency), and document abuse (Smales 2010).

Closer home, Gurugram-based beauty gig workers were able to mobilize themselves to protest against unfair practices by UC through WhatsApp groups (Mehrotra 2022). While the Gurugram protests in October 2021 received extensive media coverage, there has been little to no coverage about the Hyderabad workers' protest in 2020. Archana, one of the beauty gig workers who led this protest, gave us insights into how women were able to collectivize against all odds. She also clued us in about how WhatsApp groups served as the main tool for mobilizing themselves and protesting outside UC's office in Hyderabad.

Despite the risk of their partner IDs being blocked, workers are still able to find opportunities to collectivize in whatever capacity, with whatever tools available to them. While protests are an example of how workers exercise agency, it is worthwhile to ask what are the main issues of discussion on these groups—to what end are these groups created and sustained?

Since FemLab focuses on “communicative ecologies” of women, our interest is in how media and communication tools are embedded in people's everyday lives, allowing us to capture a non-dichotomous view (public-private, personal-professional, friends-family, work-leisure) of women workers' engagement with technology, leading to insights that may be easy to miss if one were to approach it from a typical ICT4D approach (Tacchi 2015).

WhatsApp Groups: Worker Isolation to Collectivization

We believe it is important to acknowledge that workers are affiliated with multiple communities and networks (these could be caste-based communities or professional communities), leading to the creation of several WhatsApp groups. Each beauty gig worker is a part of several networks of workers and WhatsApp groups. She is a node in the matrix, an actor who may or may not know all the other actors in the network.

As an on-demand home-based care-work platform that connects service providers and customers through leads, UC selects its service providers with care—based on their skills and experience, and vulnerability. Women who are divorced, abandoned, widowed and have a family to look after, or have other kinds of financial obligations (such as loans) are preferred, since they would not be able to leave the platform even if they wish to (Raval and Pal 2019). These selected providers then undergo an intensive training programme to transform themselves into professionals. They are informed about ratings and reviews, but it is only when they start working that they realize the full import of blended supervision (Komarraju et al. 2021). Low ratings would mean undergoing a mandatory retraining programme, valuable time that could have been better spent earning money, says Archana.

Beauty workers who have trained or retrained together, those who are part of a single hub, those who were friends even before joining the platform, come together to form WhatsApp groups. It is through these groups that isolated workers are able to communicate with each other:

In WhatsApp groups, they will have funny chats, if someone has some problem, they will discuss that. If there is too much torture from any client, they will discuss that. If there is any update from the company, they will inform that “such is the update, what can we do about it,” each one will give their solution or suggestion. Sometimes petty fights will also keep happening (Archana, UC service provider, Personal interview).

It is the emergence of these forms of solidarities that indicate the potential of social media platforms in addressing worker isolation and information asymmetry or even sharing about particularly troublesome customers who are known to harass service providers.

From our conversations with beauty gig workers (both male and female), commissions, new subscription plans, offering discounts without consulting the providers, expansion of hubs, lack of emergency funds in case of accidents or other medical emergencies, and difficulties in understanding how ratings

could take an overall dip, emerged as some of the main issues that are discussed in these groups. When the escalation of these issues to the managerial level in Hyderabad did not lead to any kind of resolution, workers were forced to protest and lodge a case against UC at a local Police Station in Hyderabad.

Apart from these grievances, a rarely discussed issue in the public discourse, that of customer attitude and behaviour, was also foregrounded by the providers. Couched in statements like “not all customers are the same” (Arti, UC service provider), are very real issues of being treated with no dignity by middle-class customers, such as not being allowed to access the washroom:

Customers are of all kinds. Some are good, some are bad. Some are like, see we go to fill water in the bathroom, or drain the pedicure machine, wash stuff, but we aren’t allowed to use the bathroom. It is strange. Usually we are careful, since we can indicate slots, we make time for food and bathroom breaks. But in winters, especially evenings, when it is too cold, or in summers when we drink a lot of water. Some customers don’t like it. I am not saying all customers, some are like that. Some are really nice and offer tea and coffee. Some are like this (Bhanu, UC service provider, Personal interview).

In addition to sweeping and mopping the area in which services were rendered, UC established a new Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) during the pandemic:

After all this [services], we will again sanitize the area, that is what ever things we made use of such as stool, chair or bed or tap in the washroom which we have used or doorbell, door handle etc. We have to spray Sanitiser on everything (Sangeetha, UC service provider, Personal interview).

This SOP has to be diligently followed by all service providers in order to obtain the required “hygiene rating” from customers. The idea that pros must “sanitize” whatever they come into contact with or not being allowed to use washrooms cannot be untangled from the discourses of caste and polluting bodies in India. As most scholarship on social distancing during the pandemic note (such as Dey 2020) given the history of sanitation workers in India, the stigma and social ostracization they face on account of dealing with “waste,” the sanitizing of objects that one comes into contact with (indeed, if they even have the right to touch objects that are not their own) or not being allowed to use washrooms are inseparable from that of caste.

Some customers, providers say, are overly critical of their services, pick fights with providers to avoid payment, list several services in the booking but cancel the more expensive ones, and don't allow them to use their mobile phones while at work. Often this isn't explicitly stated but providers learn to read customers' body language, tone, and other behavioural tells to not risk low ratings:

You don't use the phone while at the customer's. I put it on silent and I don't want calls when I am at the customer's place, I don't even take a look at the phone. When I take a call that very urgent call, only then I take, some customers do get angry (Sangeetha, UC service provider, Personal interview).

Archana, one of the lead protestors, says:

Some people are too much, we start feeling is this day mine or not [not being in charge of their day, and in extension, lives], such people will be there. When we get good people we feel very happy but there will be a problem with a few people. Mostly we will try to do the service calmly and come back (Personal interview).

Some of the customers leave providers so frustrated and humiliated that Archana says, "We feel it is torture but for the sake of ratings we have to do. Just for the sake of ratings, whatever their behaviour may be like, we have to accept it."

While UC can be accommodating if providers raise an issue before beginning a service, any conflict between the customer and provider results in the customer being offered a discount:

If we have any problem at the customer point, if we call the company, they will say "you pack your items and leave that place," they will speak to the client as well. But this has to happen before starting work. If the problem happens after we have started work and then speak to the company also, our ratings will be in the hands of the customer (Archana, UC service provider, Personal interview).

The platform doesn't normally take action against individual complaints raised by providers. It is only when several women providers complain about a particular customer or if they refuse bookings from a person repeatedly, does the company call service providers for feedback, and only if it

is established that the customer is indeed a repeat offender, does their ID get blocked.

Some of the customers' behaviour is described as "torture" and "vulgar," so much so that providers often report about these customers in their WhatsApp groups, a mechanism they have found more effective in forcing UC to acknowledge that there is a problem.⁵ In such cases, WhatsApp groups function as whisper networks that help women warn one another about potential abusers.

Intersectional Feminist Lens: Expanding the Scope of Whisper Networks

Whisper networks are usually described as an informal system of communication meant to warn/alert fellow women about "men who need to be watched because of rumours, allegations or known incidents of sexual misconduct, harassment or assault" (Meza 2017). They function "as informal feminist justice networks" (Rentschler 2018, 505; Powell 2015) and these networks exist across industries—academia, media, entertainment, and so on.

As McDermott (2017) notes, whisper networks are a function of and not a solution to toxic environments. In the absence of legal mechanisms to lodge formal complaints or when these mechanisms fail to hold men accountable, women rely on whisper networks for validation and solidarity (Peterson 2017). Digital technologies help scale-up these issues with such speed that they eventually lead to movements like #MeToo and #Losha⁶ (Donegan 2018; Gajjala 2018). Typically, men are often the subjects of these networks in both popular discourse and academic scholarship. Even though harassment is defined in broad terms, inclusive of verbal, non-verbal, physical, and mental, rarely is there an attempt to examine experiences of harassment, abuse, and exploitation from the lens of gender, caste, class, and often religion, to expand the scope of whisper networks.

For instance, the apathy that middle-class women customers have towards providers belonging to marginalized communities and their issues, and

5 Urban Company has now decided to initiate a customer sensitization programme: <https://entrackr.com/2021/10/week-after-women-led-protests-urban-company-slashes-commission/>

6 A crowdsourced List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (LoSHA) compiled by Raya Sakar in 2017, which raised questions about due process and generational divides amongst feminists in India. For more, read Gita Chadha's (2017) insights: <https://www.epw.in/engage/article/towards-complex-feminist-solidarities-list-statement>

the way they are treated inside customers' homes cannot be understood in terms of gender alone, but also in terms of caste and class. Historically, the Brahmanical discourses of purity and impurity and ritually polluting bodies dictate the boundaries of what a woman worker from marginalized caste and class can and cannot touch, and what work she can and cannot do (Sarukkai 2009).

It is here that an intersectional feminist lens that is sensitive to the dimensions of gender, caste, and class lends us the necessary theoretical tool to widen the scope of whisper networks. Caste, class, and religion play an important role in home-based services since such work is characterized by the master-slave relationship. It is here that we get a glimpse of how providers resist exploitation by both the platform and customers. Worker agency can take many forms—protests that are oppositional, and other subtler, covert ways in which it is expressed—such as forming WhatsApp groups and creation of whisper networks.

Just as auto rides serve as a space for collectivization, WhatsApp groups function as a space where these issues are discussed. Women partners warn one another about particularly difficult customers. Since no one knows which customer is assigned until the partner has accepted the booking, often partners bear cancellation charges rather than provide their services because these women would anyway not give them a good rating, leading to an overall dip in their ratings, which leads to disappointment on part of the workers and also to their IDs being blocked. These whisper networks are incredibly important to avoid a domino effect on the physical, mental, and financial well-being of the partner.

Conclusion

It is crucial to note that these WhatsApp groups, much like the auto *savari* groups, aren't created for any instrumental purposes (such as collectivization). They are created to discuss their personal lives, opportunities for work, forward messages or memes, update each other about policies related to UC, features launched, and even share information about difficult customers, thereby serving as a knowledge-sharing platform.

Following the communicative ecologies' approach from an intersectional feminist lens also means that we necessarily move away from the utilitarian or developmental angle that pays little or no attention whatsoever to the leisure-oriented practices of the "third-world" populations (Arora 2012, 2); acknowledge multiple, non-dichotomic identities such that women are

human beings, workers, friends, and members of many communities; and as members of multiple communities with multiple identities, they are positioned variously within power relations—experiencing exploitation as well as exercising agency.

The feminist approach views workers/providers as more than their work or more than “just service providers,” they are people who experience life fully in all its complexity. Their WhatsApp groups, therefore, are not meant for the sole purpose of mobilization, but leisure, levity, petty fights, and of course, to function as whisper networks. This approach “rehumanizes” workers, a move that is critical in economies that are increasingly being platformized and algorithmized.

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