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Precarity Amplified: Technology, Gender and Informality in India's Paid Domestic Work Sector

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Abstract

The Indian economy is significantly divided between formal and informal sectors, with over 90 per cent of the workforce in the informal sector primarily comprising unskilled and semi-skilled women domestic workers from marginalised communities. Historically shaped by caste relationships, domestic work has remained an urban phenomenon. It is where migrant women tend to seek employment because it is easy to enter even though it is low waged; however, its poor working conditions, negligible social security, etc., further add to keeping them vulnerable. The emergence of digital platforms has deepened this precarity, shifting the master–slave relationship into new forms of technological dependence. Besides the digital economy, the penetration of 'gatekeeping' platforms, such as MyGate, in gated communities in urban areas have further complicated employer–employee relationships, even in traditional forms of domestic work. As such, women domestic workers' relationship with these new forms of platformisation is skewed owing to their low bargaining power especially in the face of algorithmic controls, ratings, lack of digital skills, and continued human bias.

This article examines secondary literature, including feminist scholarship and multilateral reports to understand how technology intersects with the fragile and unregulated domain of domestic work. It interrogates the reproduction of gendered and caste-based inequities under digital regimes, adding to the growing literature of the impact of technology on the care economy in the Global South.

Keywords: Domestic Work, Technology, Informal Economy, Platform Economy

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Introduction

In India, paid domestic work is a highly feminised form of work that is undertaken largely by semi-literate and non-literate migrant women in urban areas. The work is considered unskilled as it is perceived that this 'feminine work' is done by all women 'naturally', and because it is performed in a private space the economic value of this work reduces even further (Oelz and Rani 2015). Given the ease of entry, women take up paid domestic work through their social networks in urban centres. Being poor and marginalised, these women have low bargaining power, which results in the precariousness of the work; it is marked by low wages, poor working conditions and lack of social security coverage. The wages continue to be much lower than the market rate despite many states have notified minimum wages for domestic workers (henceforth, referred to as DWs in this article) . DWs are mostly unprotected by labour legislations except for the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act, 2008 (Ghosh 2013), the benefits of which mostly do not reach the workers due to the informality of their contracts and ignorance about the social security provisions (Sumalatha, Bhat and Chitra 2021). The workplace being a private household makes it difficult to monitor and as a result DWs are highly vulnerable to abuse, harassment and sexual violence (Chandramouli 2018; Ghosh 2021). While they are covered under the Sexual Harassment Act, 2013, the shame associated with sexual violence along with lack of awareness and the systemic failure of implementation of the law, these women continue to remain vulnerable to violence (Kumar, Barua and Bora 2023).

Official statistics report 4.75 million domestic workers in India but estimates from the International Labour Organization (ILO) suggest that the number could be between 20 and 80

million. Despite their large presence, domestic workers have been excluded from basic social protection as there is no clear data on domestic workers in the national statistics (Chigateri, Zaidi and Gosh 2016; Shipra and Sharma 2024).

Paid domestic work consists of tasks such as cleaning, cooking and direct caregiving tasks such as childcare and elderly care.There is a growing crisis of care due to a growing aging population, loss of familial and community support networks because of growing nuclear families in urban centres, which is compounded by neoliberal policies that have cut the social provisioning of care (Fraser 2022).

Paid domestic work is varied basis the nature of the work and the time spent: (i) live out workers – those working for some hours but do not live in the premises of the employer); and (ii) live-in workers – those who work and live in the same premises as their employers. The first category of live-out workers is further divided into two forms: part-time workers (working in multiple houses), and full-time workers (working for a few hours in a single household). These varied forms of working patterns make it difficult to mobilise and collectivise DWs (Chigateri, Zaidi and Gosh 2016). According to Agarwala and Saha (2018) the employment relationship of DWs can be defined as *direct, daily and one-on-one*. The scholars highlight that this one-on-one relationship tends to increase the control of employers over their workers. As such, the different forms of domestic work not only impact wages but also working conditions and levels of control by the employer; live-in workers thus face more control over their time and living conditions by the employers since they stay within the same household.

The undervaluation of domestic work relates to the characteristics of DWs, who are typically marginalised and are subject to intersecting inequalities alongside continued systematic discrimination (Hunt and Samman 2020: 105). DWs experience power beyond

their gender to include their intersecting identities of caste, tribe, class, religion, and migratory status. Consequently, the performance of domestic tasks is often found to be drawn along caste and religious lines. Scholars point out caste and religion-based segregation practices such as providing separate glasses for DWs or the non-usage of toilets, not being allowed to enter/use certain areas of the house (Dey 2014; Chigateri, Zaidi and Gosh 2016; Rathi and Tandon 2021). Workers from higher castes are preferred for tasks such as cooking, which is considered a skilled job and pays more, while women from Dalit communities are primarily offered cleaning tasks (Raghuram 2001; Ray and Qayyum 2010). While increasingly some employers are less prioritising caste identities while hiring DWs, exclusionary behaviour continues and extends to all service persons who belong to lower class. Highlighting an aspect of this behaviour, Sharma (2016) argues how space becomes a matter of distinction and such segregation is derived from the idea of who does not share a similar 'social space'. The access to certain spaces and tasks is also varied and is faced differently by Dalit and Muslim workers, which impacts their ability to access benefits like gifts, better wages and bargaining power (Sharma 2016: 55).

The skills of cooking, cleaning and caregiving are considered *feminine* tasks based on perceived women's gender roles – *assumed to be done by all women* - and thus undervalued. Owing to this perception, DWs struggle to identify as workers and thus have low bargaining skills, which also makes it difficult to collectivise them (Chigateri, Zaidi and Gosh 2016). Further, there is a stigma attached to doing domestic work as it is considered lowly and being conducted in people's private homes (Dey 2014; Sharma 2016; Ghosh 2021). Sharma's observation (2022) on DWs being seen as carriers of 'dirt and disease' by employers became prominent during the Covid-19 pandemic. There were stringent rules of 'hygiene' that was enforced on DWs, often leading to skin irritations (Kumar, Barua and Bora 2023), and many gated communities refused them entry as they were considered 'carriers' of the Corona virus

(Martha Ferrell Foundation and PRIA 2021). The pandemic, along with such negative narratives around DWs, further pushed them to precarity (Ghosh and Bilkhu 2020).

Intersection of Technology with Domestic Work: What the Article Intends to Do

Nancy Fraser's 'progressive neoliberalism' (2017, 2021) describes how domestic work's interaction with technology has privatised care and continues to oppress the marginalised domestic workers, historically and culturally inherent to countries like India. Paid domestic work is now part of the large care economy but continues to be precarious work undertaken by marginalised women from the Global South. Neo-liberal policies (Fraser 2022) has given rise to new forms of 'work' and 'controls' arising with the rapid digitalisation and technological adaptations in the country. This technological advancement has been non-linear; socio-cultural norms along with low literacy and other structural barriers significantly restrict women's access to opportunities in the fast-emerging digital world. This exclusion has resulted in skewed power dynamics, which has only led to further harm, harassment and humiliation of DWs working at the lowest rung of the economic ladder. To demonstrate this, in this section I will discuss two technological phenomena that have grown over the last decade and are controlled and advocated by the 'employers' of domestic workers (households and platforms), impacting DWs' working conditions. These phenomena are: (1) the proliferation of use of 'technological solutions' (Ong 2006) by urban gated communities and (2) the rise of the platformisation of the care economy.

Going forward in this article, I will discuss how DWs unique positionality of gender, caste, religion, and class intersecting with modes of Fraser's progressive neoliberal technologies creates newer experiences of precarity for them. The article will also briefly discuss the opportunities and challenges faced by DWs' groups and unions in collectivising, mobilising, campaigning, and networking using digital tools. Besides, it will also discuss the

difficulties of organising DWs on platform economies, which further impacts their work and wellbeing.

This article draws on review of literature of existing literature and engagement with domestic worker groups and unions in India. While there is a techno-optimism that technology will be an equaliser, techno-pessimism shows that technology and digital means are often exclusionary and negatively impact those on the margins (Finn 2024). Adapting from Fraser's notion of 'progressive neoliberalism' (2017, 2021, 2022), this article is critical of how the growing adoption of technologies is being used to control and keep domestic workers in precarious positions by the state and the market, despite the promise of inclusivity and liberalisation narrative of digitalisation.

Technological solutions adopted by residential welfare associations (RWAs) in gated communities

The neoliberal urban landscape (Fraser 2022) has led to the proliferation of fortification of residential spaces for the 'genteel' urban middle class in the form of gated communities facilitated by the representative body of RWAs. Sharma highlights that

> … gated neighbourhoods [GNs] have emerged as self-governing units, which can set their rules and regulations that privilege the residents/employers' needs and interests at the cost of the urban poor who work for them. This show[s] [that] the development of GNs as a unit has enabled the affluent classes in Indian cities to have contact with the urban poor for essential services without compromising their sense of 'safety' (2022: 7).

RWAs are literally the gatekeepers to livelihoods, and the gated community is a workplace

(Rajam and Kotiswaran 2025: 5). So, while the DWs negotiate directly with the employers for wages, leaves and loans, the RWAs have become an emerging body of power whose interest lies in surveillance and control of the urban poor that come in as the service class, which paradoxically is essential for the maintenance of the lifestyle of the affluent in these gated neighbourhoods (Bhan 2009; Baviskar 2015; Sharma 2022). This means invisibilising the service class, which does not match with the aesthetics and aspirations of the urban elite.

India's reliance on high density CCTV surveillance in urban areas for security concerns has also trickled down to personal homes and gated communities. These CCTV cameras are placed in common areas such as parks, lobbies, lifts, etc., and are used for controlling movement, rest periods and the interaction between DWs and other service class. The 'threat' of being captured by these cameras for simply resting can lead to job loss and the blocking of entry into gated neighbourhoods. CCTVs also become a useful tool for the urban middle class in segregation practices such as the restriction of use of 'Resident-only' lifts by domestic and other service classes. Further, they aim to curb any attempts of organising by DWs, which can lead to conflict between employers and the workers, because of which DWs groups and unions find it extremely difficult to enter RWAs.

Increasingly, society management digital platforms such as Mygate, ApnaComplex, Nobroker, etc., are being used for surveillance and control of the entry and exit of the service class into the neighbourhood. These platforms are also useful for marking the attendance of the DWs. During the pandemic, these apps were actively used to restrict the entry–exit of DWs based on their body temperature, vaccine certification, etc., ironically without any reciprocal information being provided to them, leading to many DWs contracting COVID from their employers (Rajam and Kotiswaran 2025). Furthermore, RWAs require DWs to register themselves on these residential apps. This onboarding is done using their photos and

Aadhar details, often without asking for consent — a compulsion if one wants to work in the gated community. While the platforms serve as opportunities to get more jobs — by marking available timeslots for work — they also have a rating system (only for workers), which can impact one's chances of getting a job. Literature abounds on how ratings by employers are subjective but can significantly impact finding jobs, wages, etc., which leaves DWs more vulnerable. These platforms, which can be used as threatening tools, further tilt the power to control DWs' behaviour in the favour of employers; many employers threaten DWs with using the app to lock them out of the neighbourhood, which leads to a loss of bargaining power for DWs. As such the exacting control over workers in the endogenous operations of the algorithm erases the workers' ability to navigate relationships on the platform, entrenching a punitive regime that leaves them perpetually guessing the potential actions that can undercut their economic bottom lines (Gurumurthy 2024:123).

Such controls arise out of the information asymmetry in terms of the functioning of the platform due to low literacy, lack of access to smartphone devices, low digital literacy, etc. amongst the women DWs. The platform also records when a DW enters and exits, which can be a security risk for her as it can encourage stalking and other forms of violence. As such, their precarity gets further enhanced by the controlling technology and platforms, which are designed for the 'safety and security' of the affluent in an era where disadvantaged people are considered a 'threat'.

The platformisation of domestic work

Digital platforms position themselves as both a solution to the uncertainties of navigating informal markets and as a viable response to the 'care crisis' (Ticona *et al.* 2018), a by-product of neoliberal policies and the breaking down of community care. Technology focussed companies that link households to DWs through 'on-demand' platforms are

attempting to disrupt the traditional sector, claiming to offer rapidly accessible, cheap domestic services to households, and flexible, well-remunerated economic opportunities to DWs (Hunt and Machingura 2016). While these digital platforms are a much-needed alternative to placement agencies and word-of-mouth placements as employment trends are indicating that in the coming years domestic and care work is set to be an expanding source of work for women (KPMG 2013), such platforms have been decried for driving down wages and exposing workers to greater levels of risk and precarity (Graham *et al.* 2017).

Platforms are increasingly becoming intermediaries in this space, mediating between the so-called semi-skilled or low-skilled workers from historically marginalised classes and castes and millions of middle- and upper-class employers across urban regions in India (Rathi and Tandon 2021). For DWs there are three types of platforms (Rodríguez-Modroño, Agenjo-Calderon and Lopez-Igual 2024): (i) on-demand platforms, which are companies that provide services or 'gigs' such as cleaning on an hourly basis and called s independent contractors,(ii) platforms which may recruit, verify, train, and sometimes formally employ workers while mediating contracts between workers and households. (iii) platforms that provide an end-to-end placement service for customers, identifying appropriate workers based on a selection criterion, and negotiating work conditions on the behalf of workers who have a higher degree of formality and operate exclusively in the field of care. Carers, as well as care seekers, often prefer a long-term care relationship based on mutual trust rather than one-off service transactions typical of home maintenance, graphic design or data analysis work (McDonald *et al.* 2024: 364). All the three models differ in the way they operate, control over workers and payment design (one time, commissions, subscription, etc.).

In India, mostly women who enter platform-based domestic work/care services have previously worked as traditional DWs and their motivation to join the platforms is to reach

clients. Interestingly, while the platforms could have changed the narrative, they continue to practice stereotypical gendered market practices. These aggregators continue to recruit women for domestic services while hire men for mechanical tasks such as deep cleaning using machines. ISST's research shows how a platform for cooks hired women as home cooks and male cooks for guest houses and restaurants (Ghosh, Zaidi and Ramachandran 2021). Gendered roles in the market system have resulted in a gender wage gap in the platform economy as well, eventually leaving women DWs on the platforms at a lower wage scale, continuing precarity.

There's much emphasis of platforms (and RWAs/individual households) on the verification of workers via police.

> While workers must submit to invasive scrutiny and prove their worthiness, employers face no equivalent verification requirements. This imbalance reinforces the notion that domestic work is inherently suspect and that those who perform it occupy a lower social and professional status (Hiriyur 2024: 15).

Having access to one's own smartphone is critical to joining a digital platform as the entire work is mediated through the platform. Workers also need to have the skills to perform relatively complex tasks on smartphones. These include using the platform's mobile application for reviewing and responding to task assignments, making digital transactions and tracking payment histories and using off-app features such as calling and GPS navigation (Rathi and Tandon 2021: 24). As such, one may need to navigate across the city and hence the ability to move and travel is another vital need for this work.

DW platforms aim to satisfy the urban middle-class aspirations of getting a 'professional maid' and hence there is an emphasis on well-groomed, uniformed, mild-mannered, scooter-riding, English-speaking maids. In fact, platforms train new recruits on

soft skills for a client's pleasant experience, which will result in better client recall and good ratings for workers. There is also an emphasis on the fact that they are not providing '*didis*' or '*bais'* (and discourage workers to introduce themselves in these terms), instead they call them home-managers, home experts, etc. so that they sound more professional and hence are treated more respectfully. Interestingly, some platforms engaged in direct care work stress on the workers positioning themselves as care managers who are different from the traditional DWs. This emphasis on professionalising domestic and care work arises from the need to move away from the stigma of 'dirt and pollution' associated with traditional domestic work done by women from marginally excluded communities. It aims to provide a sanitised version of the worker, bereft of her intersectional identity of caste, tribe, religion.

As a result, these platforms are designed to — and function in a manner that — exclude women DWs with low literacy and digital literacy skills, making them ineligible to join digital platforms (Rathi and Tandon 2021). Further, women in India face strict gender norms around mobility, which also impacts them in getting work. From an intersectional lens, these norms would exclude DWs with disabilities and those from Dalit, tribal and other marginalised communities. There have been instances where caste and religious names of workers that are displayed on the platforms have led to discrimination in hiring, ratings and customer experience, which has led to income precarity (Banerjee 2024; Mantilla Rodriguez and Castaneda 2024).

Completely run through algorithm management, the platforms' algorithms manage, control and monitor the tasks, often in real time and with minimal human oversight (Rosenblat and Stark 2016). This opacity of algorithm management leaves workers with little space for negotiations with the platforms (Mantilla, Rodriguez and Castaneda 2024). Digital platforms blur the lines between the employed and the self-employed, which is further

concretised by the various laws around platform economy in India (Ghosh, Zaidi and Ramachandran 2021). This opaqueness allows platforms to not identify as 'employers' and thus categorise workers as 'independent workers', which in turn does not oblige them to pay minimum wages or provide other social security. In terms of recent legislation, there is a confusion regarding the status of domestic workers: while domestic and care workers on platforms have been recognised as a new category of workers under the Code of Social Security 2020, 'traditional' domestic workers have been left in the same Code. legislation by various states . Consequently, many 'traditional' domestic workers may pick up a gig or two as an additional source of income. This overlapping of worker status can lead to possible barriers to access any social security that may be meted out under the Code and new state based legislation for platform workers.

Moreover, while the platforms claim that they are not 'employers', they apply algorithmic controls (Ghosh, Zaidi and Ramachandran 2021) and charge a high commission (20 per cent–30 per cent), and the counting in of overhead costs leads to income volatility for workers (Ponnathpur and Ramachandran 2023). Constant feedback collection and worker surveillance further weakens negotiating power, as these place workers in low-power positions vis-à-vis customer interactions and platform penalisation (Rathi and Tandon 2021: 51; Ghosh, Zaidi and Ramachandran 2022). Also, algorithm controls and platform policies change without information (even in the case of fixed income platforms), which can lead to reduced payment. Many workers also complain that with the expansion of the program and increased availability of workers, tasks are beginning to dry up, impacting income security in the long term. Besides, while platforms offer some social security, the implementation or conversion of the same has been patchy and lengthy. Sometimes, while there may be health insurance provided by the platform the premium is taken from the worker. As such, women,

who already earn less, often let go of this opportunity as it would impact their take-home and savings (Rathi and Tandon 2021).

Recently, various on-demand service apps such as Urban Company, Broomies, Snabbit, Pronto, etc., have launched a feature called Insta-maid or Insta-help, which guarantees getting a DW in 15 minutes. Disruptor apps were supposed to be great equalisers, hacking away at prejudices by introducing a tech-mediated structure. Instead, they've either turned a blind eye — including to religious attacks — or actively reinforced biases such as in the case of BookMyBai that allows users to filter by region and religion (Baruah 2025). These platforms are building upon the readily available cheap labour, turning it into an instant disposable income (ibid.).

Most DWs complain that while they are booked for assigned tasks customers often ask them to also do unassigned tasks such as clean toilets or fans. On some platforms, DWs are booked as per time slots and they can be asked to do *n* number of tasks within the same time period. Further, while platforms may nudge the client to offer drinking water and the use of toilets, women DWs have complained of facing segregation where separate utensils are provided, toilet use is prohibited and separate lifts operate for them (Ghosh, Zaidi and Ramachandran 2021; Baruah 2025). Any complaint or argument by them only leads to lower ratings (or the blocking of IDs), which impacts their work and earnings. Hence, they avoid reporting such incidences, even any sexual harassment or violence (Ghosh, Zaidi and Ramachandran 2021).

Resistance Using Digital Means

Domestic worker groups and unions have been using digital platforms like Whatsapp for communication, campaigning and network building. Sometimes social media is also used for campaigning. However, the use of digital tools varies and is based on the capacity and

size of the organisation; currently digital adoption is extremely low amongst DWs groups and unions. In India, in resource-poor communities and where gender norms are more stringent, women generally tend to only have access to a shared device (Ghosh, Zaidi and Ramachandran 2022).

Post-pandemic, one finds greater uptake of smart phones by domestic workers in bigger cities. While some of the younger DWs can operate certains apps like Youtube, Whatsapp, for older DWs, their children often become conduits for passing information. Increasingly, DW groups are using Whatsapp to share information, photographs, meeting details and other mobilization efforts. The DW movement is also realising the potential to use digital means for mobilization and advocacy. Recently, a digital platform for reporting sexual harassment cases to the district Local Committees (under the POSH ACT). The 'MyAmbar'app was developed and piloted by a tech company and organisation working on issues of DWs.

Worker groups and unions have found it challenging to organise workers in gated neighbourhoods as such workers are considered as 'troublemakers' by the residents. As such, DW groups and unions encourage their member workers to get together and take videos and photographs as evidence when one of them is being harassed or being falsely accused of theft. This evidence helps them to negotiate with the RWAs and the police to bring the harassers to justice.

The DW groups have been organising DWs since the early 1980s. Even now, most of them continue to organise traditional DWs, mainly in specific geographies of the cities, on issues of working conditions. On the other hand, the platform economy poses challenges to collectivisation strategies, as mentioned before, which have evolved over decades of struggle by DWs in India (Rathi and Tandon 2021). The care workers and DWs on the app work in

isolation (much like live-in traditional workers) and are often unaware of other workers or the existence of such groups and unions. In recent times, DWs have become more aware of such platforms and are trying to gain more information about them — trying to locate women in the communities where these platforms recruit from as these platforms have no designated offices and their back-end offices tend to be impenetrable. Also, each platform varies in its algorithmic make up, work conditions, etc., so the strategies also must differ accordingly. The lack of a 'virtual' organising method hinders greater penetration. Further, with low resources and capacity and the continues struggle for decent working conditions for domestic work, these groups are unable to expand their constituents and agenda. Interestingly, platform unions, hugely male dominated (Ghosh Zaidi and Ramachandran 2021), concentrate on sectors such as ride-hailing, food delivery and logistics and beauty workers. Interestingly, issues of beauty platform workers, another highly feminised sector traditionally, have gained traction over the last few years (Dhar and Thuppilikkat 2022), while issues of care and domestic workers still seem invisible in their organising strategies and goals. However, with the rise of more women-oriented worker groups such as Gig Worker's Association (GigWA) and Gig and Platform Services Workers Union (GIPSWU), there is a wider possibility of reaching out to the 'invisible' platform workers.

Conclusion

A highly feminised form of work, paid DWs work in one of the most informal forms of work. Low waged, with negligible leaves, job security and social protection, women DWs suffer from perennial precarity. The intersectional social identities of gender, caste, religion, and class intersect to push them to the bottom of the job market. Considered 'unskilled', doing women's work results in low negotiating power with employers, the urban middle class.

This article shows how the growing world of digitalisation negatively impacts both traditional DWs and the new care and domestic workers in the platform economy. The adoption of technological solutions, such as CCTV surveillance, by the RWAs of gated communities and the use of society maintenance apps such as MyGate, ApnaComplex, etc., put additional controls and surveillance on workers' movements, beyond the employers' home. Class 'purity' is established and maintained through use of these technological adoptions while the workers' jobs become more precarious — one must mind where to sit, whom to talk to, how to walk so as not to hurt the aesthetics of the urban middle class and lead to job loss by being locked out of the gated community.

The platform economy has become the new 'go-to' for gaining a 'professional and mild-mannered' maid and carer. These platforms perpetuate the gendered market trends of hiring women workers doing the *feminised* tasks of cleaning and cooking. While considered as independent contractors and not as employees by most platforms, the precarity continues through algorithmic controls, customer ratings and constant surveillance and tracking through the app. The status-quo of the clients continues to be maintained and habits of segregation and demands for more work (without compensation) continue in these new forms of work.

These two instances are indicative of the overall precarity of domestic work and how urbanism and market systems continue to strip women DWs of dignified jobs, thus continuing the perennial loop of vulnerability. This is indicative of Fraser's 'progressive neoliberalisation', which co-opts social movements and makes it 'individual centric', thereby stripping social dialogue, which expands this precariousness. Evident in the gender digital divide that exists along with structural barriers and systematic failures, technology has become exclusive to serve and feed Fraser's (2022) neoliberal market forms, continuing the

discrimination and exploitation. It continues to be blind to the intersectional identity of the DWs — caste, religion, class, migrant status.

To move forward, DW unions and worker groups need to be resourced to strengthen worker's solidarity and break the information asymmetry, which keeps women in the lower bargaining power position. Legislation and policies need to be labour oriented, and since dignity of labour cannot be compromised the strict implementation of these needs to be enforced. Women DWs need to identify themselves as workers to be able to challenge the status quo, and collectivisation is an important factor for them to gain a voice and take control. Addressing the gender digital divide goes beyond providing smartphones — true agency comes from education, working on negative norms and providing women with more assets — and needs a much deeper intervention to be able to reverse the exploitation via the use of digital, algorithmic and automated controls in the workplace.

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