

EQUAL ACCESS, UNEQUAL OUTCOMES: GENDER-SPECIFIC CHALLENGES ON ONLINE LABOR PLATFORMS

Tatjana Hödl, University of Bern, Switzerland, tatjana.hoedl@unibe.ch

Josephine Moritz, University of Münster, Germany, josephine.moritz@uni-muenster.de

1 Introduction

Online labor platforms (OLPs) are digital platforms that use algorithms to match and control individuals from various user groups with tasks, clients, or audiences (Bonina et al., 2021) and have fundamentally changed the way people access and perform work (Möhlmann et al., 2021). Digital platforms such as Uber, Lieferando, and Upwork, as well as social media platforms, have lowered the barriers to market participation by enabling individuals to generate income with little more than a device, an internet connection, and a registered account (Deng & Joshi, 2016). The World Bank estimates that between 154 and 435 million workers globally are now engaged in some form of OLP-based work, constituting between 4.4% and 12.5% of the global labor force (Datta et al., 2023).

This growth has attracted considerable scholarly attention. Researchers in information systems (IS), management, and adjacent fields have documented how OLPs function as IS artifacts whose algorithmic logics simultaneously enable and constrain worker behavior (Cameron et al., 2023; Kellogg et al., 2020; Möhlmann et al., 2021; Parent-Rochelleau & Parker, 2022; Wiener et al., 2023). For instance, OLPs can provide workers with flexibility and access to broad client markets (Deng & Joshi, 2016) while simultaneously generating technostress, undermining autonomy, and creating power asymmetries that workers lack the information or leverage to contest (Cram et al., 2022; Hödl & Myrach, 2023). Hence, OLP work offers genuine opportunities, such as providing work options for relatively low-skilled workers and women who take on caregiving tasks (Datta et al., 2023). Still, there are significant risks, including income volatility (Hödl & Myrach, 2023), absence of social protection (Deng & Galliers, 2024), digital isolation (Glavin et al., 2021), and psychological strain (Cram et al., 2022).

However, current research has not yet examined how these opportunities and risks are distributed across different worker groups. The existing research on OLPs has largely treated platform workers as a homogeneous group, obscuring the role of gender in altering who benefits from platform work and who bears its costs (Hödl & Boboschko, 2025). Nevertheless, women and gender-diverse individuals now account for 42% of the global online gig workforce, exceeding their 39.7% share of the conventional labor force (Datta et al., 2023), yet gender is rarely treated as a theoretical lens in IS research on OLPs.

The few studies that do examine gender reveal a troubling picture. Women on OLPs earn on average 8–10% less per hour than men in comparable task categories (Datta et al., 2023); on major platforms such as Upwork and Amazon Mechanical Turk, women bill 25% and earn 20% less than men respectively, with earnings gaps that cannot be explained by differences in job type, experience, or skill (Foong et al., 2018). Women cluster disproportionately in lower-paid platform categories such as writing, virtual assistance, and care services, while men dominate higher-earning categories such as software development, ride-hailing, and technical consulting (Churchill & Craig, 2019). Critically, the mechanisms that produce these disparities, such as platform rating systems that amplify gendered evaluation bias (Jahanbakhsh et al., 2020; Teng et al., 2023), algorithmic assignment logics that penalize workers with care-related schedule constraints (Micha et al., 2022), and safety concerns that restrict women's participation in location-based platform services (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2016), are embedded in IS artifacts that researchers have studied in detail, yet have rarely examined through a gender lens.

This discrepancy between what we know about OLPs in general and what we know about women's experiences on them specifically points to a fundamental tension at the heart of the platform economy. OLPs are simultaneously presented as equalizing, by offering flexible, low-barrier access to income that may particularly benefit women with caregiving responsibilities or those excluded from formal employment (Hödl & Boboschko, 2025), and, at the same time, as reproducing the same structural

inequalities that have long characterized labor markets more broadly (International Labour Conference, 2021). Practically, in patriarchal societies, women perform on average 2.8 hours more unpaid care work per day than men (Hanna et al., 2023), which limits their availability during peak platform demand periods and compresses their earning potential. Yet, as the IS literature has not systematically examined how gender impacts platform workers' experiences, we currently lack both the theoretical background to explain this tension and the empirical foundation to resolve it. Therefore, we ask the following research questions (RQ):

- **RQ1:** *To what extent do gender-specific differences exist in terms of opportunities and challenges on OLPs?*
- **RQ2:** *What barriers to entry and negative consequences do women face on OLPs?*
- **RQ3:** *What interventions and approaches can improve working conditions for women on OLPs?*

To answer our research questions, this study examines the opportunities and risks of OLP work for women and identifies the technological, organizational, and institutional conditions that shape those experiences. This workshop paper will present the initial stages of our exploratory sequential mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). As a first step, we will conduct semi-structured interviews with female platform workers within the ride-hailing context, recruited via Reddit Posts, Facebook groups, and Prolific Academic. This approach will enable us to gain an understanding of the ride-hailing platform landscape, highlight diverse life situations, and identify new theoretical mechanisms. We will analyze our qualitative data using grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2014; Urquhart, 2022) and an interpretive research approach (Orlikowski & Baroudi, 1991), after which we will identify features for testing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In a quantitative study, we will assess the prevalence of gender-specific differences, psychological stress, barriers to entry, and coping strategies. Theoretically, we draw on Wilson's (2004) conceptual framework as a lens for studying gender in IS and the job characteristics model (JCM) (Hackman & Oldham, 1975) as our theoretical framework. While the JCM helps understand how work characteristics alter worker experience, Wilson's (2004) framework offers a theoretical lens through which gender differences in these characteristics can be understood. Additionally, we use the algorithmic management literature (e.g., Cram et al., 2022; Möhlmann et al., 2021; Wiener et al., 2023) to shed light on how IS artifacts govern worker behavior.

2 Preliminary Results

The starting point for this study was our observation that online labor platforms (OLPs), and ride-hailing platforms in particular, have begun introducing features explicitly designed to support female workers, for instance, options allowing female drivers to be matched exclusively with female passengers (Olson, 2026). In public discourse, however, reactions to these features are mixed. In Reddit threads and Facebook groups dedicated to ride-hailing drivers, women report starkly divergent experiences: some describe feeling safer and more comfortable when the feature is active, while others report that it led to longer wait times, fewer completed rides, and ultimately lower earnings (Reddit, 2025).

We are currently in the data collection phase and have conducted two interviews with female ride-hailing drivers, in addition to our field research on Reddit. Both interviews took place in March 2026 and lasted 27 and 48 minutes, respectively. The interviewees, who were based in the U.S., were recruited via Reddit and Prolific Academic. One interviewee used both Uber and Lyft, while the other used only Uber. Due to the limited number of interviews at this stage, we will present our findings by describing the two interviews as vignettes and discussing the preliminary similarities and differences. Vignettes are valuable tools for showcasing findings, offering carefully selected examples that illustrate specific concepts or events (Swan et al., 2007; Vaast & Levina, 2006).

2.1 Interviewee 1

The first person we interviewed was Sarah. She is a middle-aged woman who lives in a university town in the U.S. She says that the serious accident her husband had three years ago forced them to relocate and pushed her to start working as an Uber driver. Prior to this, she worked as a human resources

manager. She also mentioned that her grandchildren and daughter regularly need her support. She highlights that ride-hailing platforms give her the flexibility she needs. She usually works at night, starting between 6 pm and 8 pm and finishing between 4 am and 5 am. She works around 30 hours a week, mainly from Thursday to Sunday, frequently driving to the airport. She uses the 'Women's Driver' feature, meaning she has almost exclusively female passengers. She has few safety concerns, attributing this to working in a university town with little industry. She adds that the demand for female drivers exceeds the supply, which is why she always has bookings. As she has no contact with other (female) drivers, she has joined Reddit forums to satisfy her social need for connection. Ride-hailing platforms could still improve in this respect.

2.2 Interviewee 2

The second person we interviewed was Kathleen. She is a middle-aged woman who lives in a large coastal city in the U.S. After studying abroad, she returned to the U.S. in 2019 and was unemployed for a period of time. Ride-hailing apps were the quickest way to find a job, specifically during the COVID-19 pandemic. She works during the day from 2 pm to 8 pm. Her daily target is \$200. She mainly takes journeys to and from the city center, staying near hotels where businesspeople and tourists are staying. Because she does not own a car, she has to rent a new car every time, which is why she works for several days at a time. She says this is because passengers prefer a new car. For this reason, she no longer works at night or in party districts, as drunk passengers have previously vomited in her rental car. This always costs her a day's work, as she has to clean and air out the car to get rid of the smell. She does not use the 'Women's Driver' feature, as she has found that women give little or no tip. Men are better tippers, she says. She tries to position herself strategically near hotels or at the airport to pick up lucrative passengers, such as businesspeople. She has a few safety concerns. For example, she receives new ride requests while driving and has to respond to them. Six years ago, she reported a passenger who was flirting with her and acting inappropriately. However, Uber did not address or follow up on the incident. She is also critical of driver compensation because she doesn't understand the algorithm behind it, and it doesn't correlate with her gas expenses. Currently, gas prices are high due to the political climate (March 2026), yet Uber's compensation hasn't changed. She also mentions challenges of the job that go beyond the app's use. As a woman, she always has to be on the lookout for the nearest restroom and has no contact with other drivers. For this reason, she uses Reddit to ask questions. She states that she would quit immediately if she found a better job and views driving for Uber as a temporary solution that has already lasted quite a while. She doesn't have any care work to report. However, she does side tasks on Prolific and tries to make ends meet by dog- and house-sitting.

2.3 Similarities and Differences

For both interviewees, the initial reasons for starting ride-hailing were tied to a specific event. Interviewee 1 suddenly had to take on caregiving responsibilities, while interviewee 2 returned from abroad. Both acted out of necessity, either because they needed more flexible working hours or because they could not find other jobs. The need for flexibility aligns with findings from earlier studies (Deng & Joshi, 2016). Despite being in different locations, proximity to the airport appears to be a decisive factor for both. Interestingly, both also mentioned that they have no contact with other drivers, which echoes social isolation highlighted in earlier studies (Glavin et al., 2021).

Despite their similarities, the two interviewees differ in some ways. Interviewee 1 seems satisfied with her ride-hailing work. She also told us that she simply turns off the app when her daughter needs her and really appreciates the flexibility it offers. She also feels good about driving women home safely at night. Therefore, her work hours differ significantly from those of interviewee 2, as she primarily works at weekends, when people are going out. Interviewee 1 also reported that her earnings did not change as a result of activating the 'Women's Driver' feature. In contrast, for interviewee 2, driving for Uber was a means to an end—a way to make money—and she was also rather critical of the job. She would take another job at any time if she had the opportunity. Additionally, she works during the day and tries to position herself in the business district, which is also related to the different locations of the two interviewees. Her expenses are also significantly higher since she has to rent a car every time. This

undermines the argument that OLPs and ride-hailing platforms are easily accessible and that anyone can do the job (Deng & Galliers, 2024). It is comparable to gatekeeping algorithmic control used by OLPs, which applies selection criteria to drivers, such as having a clean criminal record (Cram et al., 2022). In this respect, ride-hailing platforms do have vehicle age requirements for safety and insurance reasons (INSHUR, 2026; Setareh Law, 2025). However, as passengers are more likely to book with drivers who have newer or more popular car models, drivers are also encouraged to rent, lease, or buy newer cars (c.f., Deng & Galliers, 2024; Möhlmann et al., 2021). In selected countries, ride-hailing platforms even offer car rental, leasing, and fleet services (Bolt, 2026; Hertz, 2026).

3 Discussion and Next Steps

The two vignettes reveal both similarities and differences in female ride-hailing workers' experiences, underscoring that this population cannot be treated as homogeneous. A central ambiguity concerns the 'Women's Driver' feature: while Sarah integrates it seamlessly without apparent earnings penalties, Kathleen finds it economically unattractive, as activating it would mean forgoing the male business travelers on whom she depends for tips. Unpacking this divergence and the role of location, passenger demographics, and tipping culture in moderating the effects of gender-specific platform features is a primary objective of our continued data collection.

Recruitment has proven more challenging than anticipated, and we are therefore expanding our sampling strategy to include direct recruitment during rides. Following the qualitative phase, we will move into the quantitative component of our sequential mixed-methods design. The long-term goal is to develop a theoretically grounded framework that articulates how gender, algorithmic management, and platform design interact and impact female OLP workers' experiences, and to derive actionable interventions at the platform, community, and institutional levels from that framework.

This study and preliminary results make three contributions to IS research. First, we extend theorizing on algorithmic management by integrating Wilson's (2004) conceptual framework on gender in IS with the JCM (Hackman & Oldham, 1975), thereby emphasizing how gender shapes the job characteristics through which algorithmic management is experienced. Second, we generate one of the first systematic empirical accounts of female OLP workers' experiences in the ride-hailing context, contributing much-needed empirical grounding to a literature that has largely treated platform workers as a homogeneous category. Third, drawing on our empirical analysis, we derive a transferable catalog of interventions — spanning algorithmic transparency, platform design, peer community infrastructure, and regulatory mechanisms — organized by level of intervention (platform, community, institutional). In doing so, we respond to calls in the IS literature for research that moves beyond documenting the negative consequences of algorithmic management toward identifying actionable solutions (Cram et al., 2022; Lippert et al., 2026).

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