Making a "Pro": 'Professionalism' after Platforms in Beauty-work

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Beauty and Wellness work in India happen largely in the informal sector and are heavily gendered forms of work. The arrival of app-based on-demand platforms that aggregate beauticians and spa therapists to provide at-home services in urban India have aimed to create new efficiencies in this work, providing both the service providers and users of these with new means of transacting. This paper presents findings from an ethnographic study of an app-based platform that provides beauty and wellness services. We interviewed stakeholders including platform company employees, customers, beauty-trainers as well as platform-workers. Our results show the ways in which technology is creating new expectations around professionalism and training, which intersect with the ways workspaces and provider-receiver relationships are articulated around wellness work in urban India. We argue that this case offers an insightful example into the future of work - specifically platform work's attempts to create entrepreneurial subjects, and its tensions with the realities of gender, class and caste as they relate to care labor in India.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in collaborative and social computing**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: digital labor, beauticians, care-work, platform-work, gig-work

1 INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of 'digital labor' platforms globally, research within CSCW and adjacent fields has focused on the various configurations of large digitally mediated, decentralized platform-aggregators and their role in transforming traditional work. Research on 'crowdwork'[1, 2] has looked at the structuring of work within Amazon's Mechanical Turk (AMT) and other similar platforms that provide a marketplace for requesting and taking up online micro-work. On the other hand, with the rise of the "gig-economy", there has been a massive "disruption" in the way that service-work was provided, availed and evaluated at-large. Especially given the ubiquity of ridehailing platforms such as Uber, OlaCabs, Lyft, Didi, GoJek etc., HCI researchers have investigated the visible and invisible aspects of labor involved in driving for ridehailing companies. More recently, work has also looked at non-Western users and workers of gig-economy platforms to highlight how the motivations for use (for work and consumption) and the contexts of users can inform their expectations and experience of platforms. However, despite the rapid growth of all kinds of other on-demand, app-based service platforms that seek to "app-ify" every traditional service domain

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related to the body/self (beauty, wellness, adult and childcare) as well as the home (carpenters, plumbers, electricians, cleaners, domestic workers), relatively scant attention has been paid to the conditions of work, experience of platformization, revised notions of 'quality of service' and professionalism, and the overall evaluation of non-ridehailing platform-work. This is important because driving and by extension, ridehailing is masculine work and is also predominantly done by male workers in most non-Western settings. Simultaneously, most research on gig-workers thus far, has only focused on the work-life of such workers, with a focus on individual life stories and immediate socio-economic concerns around work. Less is known about women's experiences of gig-work and the platformization of other kinds of gendered-work such as care-work and its implications for male and female workers. Furthermore, gig-work platforms have not yet been framed as situated technological artefacts, interacting with the respective gender, class and caste discourses of a city and country. Responding to these lacunae, this paper reports on an ethnographic study of beauty and wellness workers in Bengaluru, India, conducted over a period of three months. This study attempts to present a holistic view by looking at the pre-gig lives of workers and their motivations for app-work as an articulation of their larger life projects. We go further and also report on the training process, the platform employees' perspectives on their work and finally, the on-ground challenges that lower and middle-income women workers face while providing beauty services. We show how the technologization of their work adds to their efforts to achieve a 'professional status'. In providing these empirical insights on platformized beauty-work in India, we offer provocations for thinking about 'flexibility', 'care' and the role of technology in supporting stigmatized work.

2 RELATED WORK

2.1 The professionalization of Informal Service-Work in India

Approximately 90% of the workforce in urban India is part of the informal sector which is marked by self-employment, fringe social welfare and patchy work security. In India, informal workers are defined by the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS) as "consist(ing) of those working in the informal sector or households, excluding regular workers with social security benefits provided by the employers and the work[3]." Historically, the phenomenon of enduring informality within work in India has been studied in the transition from agrarian to non-agrarian work, with a focus on manufacturing jobs[4]. After economic liberalization and globalization reforms in 1991, service sector led overall national economic growth[5]. Two outcomes of this historical moment are relevant to our framing: 1) the creation of a post-liberalization consumer-culture in urban India and, 2) easy availability of low-skill service sector jobs in the cities, including beauty and wellness jobs. Especially in Bengaluru where we conducted our study, the IT boom has helped dramatically expand an upwardly mobile "professional middle class", and led in turn to an inward migration of job-seekers from around the country[6–8] This middle class has been crucial in creating and sustaining the demand for a parallel underclass of workers who offer 'help' services for non-specialized work, that for much of the world includes daily chores or tasks one does oneself (such as cooks, nannies, beauticians and masseurs, chauffeurs etc.). As with other cities in India, Bengaluru has a history of help being employed in across middle and upper-middle class households. The relationship of the recipients and providers of such help, often in the form of all-purpose household helpers, is tied in with a complex set of class, caste, and gender relationship with regards to service provision[9]. Bangalore, with its start-up culture, has been the debut city for many gig-economy platforms for ridehailing, delivery and logistics, home-based services but even humans-as-service , as well as the country's first job search site for household service sector jobs such as domestic maids, chauffeurs, cooks etc[10]. In that sense, the growth

of a "consuming, desiring and aspiring middle class" is central to understanding the formation and existence of the service-class in an Indian city[11, 12]. On the work side, past literature in 'Critical Service Studies'[13–15] has noted how diverse arrangements in service-sector employment, including the employee-employer relationship, perception of work as well as socio-cultural and economic factor shaping work, have not been studied adequately outside of the macro-economic concerns around service-work. Scholars have mapped this parallel rise of India's professional class, its globalized aspirations and the parallel emergence of the underclass servicing them such as security guards[4], gym trainers and baristas[16], retail workers[17] and wellness providers [18] among others that are key to maintaining the productivity and leisure lifestyles of high-skilled upper middle-class professionals in urban India. The formalization and standardization of these occupations, in response to the rise of corporate India, did not happen as a welfarist concern. Rather, these happened with the aim of preparing service-workers to plug into their clients' aspirations and expectations of "good service", this very process of "professionalization" across job domains has fixated on inculcating 'soft skills', 'good attitude', 'hygiene' and more recently, 'digital skills' among service-workers[17, 19–21].

As Maitra and Maitra remark of retail-worker training in Kolkata, India, each of these innocuous and otherwise seemingly helpful "skills" are in fact carefully crafted performances of class upgradation that are seen as indispensable changes to the appearance and sociality of low and middle-income service-workers before they can interact with their clients[17]. As they explain, "by sorting employees whose habitus matches the organizational brand image and its clientele, employers successfully engage workers who are 'class privileged and consumer driven'[22], rather than those who look or sound like low-wage workers, struggling to make a living[17]" Our study examines the impact of the proliferation of personal digital technologies as well as the rise of gig-work platforms within service-work at this particular moment in Indian society. Specifically, how does the overall process of technologization including digital participation, training for platform-work, and daily management of productivity alter or further the creation of the professional habitus of beauty and wellness-work in India? What are the class, gender and caste vectors of service-work platforms as artefacts? These questions are yet to be taken up in the human computer interaction community. Similarly, while Sociology of Work scholars have pointed to the persistence of "organized informality"[4] as the hallmark feature of corporatized service-work in India, how technologization might affect alter or reify class, gender and caste inflections in beauty and wellness-work has not yet been investigated.

2.2 Beauty-work as gendered work

For ease of reading, we refer to all kinds of beauty, personal care and wellness work as 'beauty work' in this paper. To contextualize, the beauty and personal care market in India generated a revenue of more than USD 6.5 billion (2016) and provided (documented) required a workforce of more than 7.2 million (2017) in organized and unorganized beauty and salon work[23]. Across South Asia, beauty and wellness-work is predominantly performed by women[9, 24] and is in fact, reflective of domestic or regional migration patterns among women workers[25]. The beauty workforce is also heavily racialized across South Asia, but especially in India where workers from the seven northeastern states are the largest and most visible demographic group. These workers are identified and hired for their "pan-Asian"[29] looks and associated stereotypes of beauty, nimbleness and "soft spoken" attitude. Indeed, not all beauty workers are women and, beauty-work is gendered in different ways for female and male workers[27]. It is also gendered in different ways in same-gender and cross-gender beauty services but in this study, our main focus is on female beauty workers who were only allotted same-gender work.

In terms of the public perception of beauty-work *as work*, scholars have noted a curious duality in how beauty as service is perceived and received as against beauty as work globally. Sharma and Black note how their interviewees felt that their work was undervalued and trivialized in public perception[28]. Their respondents were also reported frustration with low pay and "crusty old lady managers with blue-rinses". In response, they report that workers use their emotional self-management and emotional work as the basis for claiming their professionalism, seeing emotional work as a skill[28]. They also explain that while availing of beauty and wellness services emerged as a positive thing within the consumerist discourse of wellness, those performing the labor of wellness emerged as stigmatized actors, similar to other care occupations (such as nursing, palliative caregivers) where female workers also reported being perceived as "unmarriageable", "dirty" and "morally corrupted" because their work involved high degrees of bodily intimacy with strangers and performing cleanliness-work[29]. Another study reports on the difficulties that women beauty entrepreneurs face due to the negative public perception of their work[30]. It is here that the emphasis on beauty-work as "professional work" and its narrativization as expertise and highly unique emotional labor was seen as an essential strategy for workers. This notion of a 'professional project'[28] is developed by otherwise loose occupational practice groups, in the form of "occupational closure strategies", including the development of standards, measurements and qualifying exams but also in the form of the daily articulation of work as professional practice. We find it particularly helpful in framing our workers' description of their work as 'pampering' and 'relaxation'[31] among other things. There is also a rich intersectional discussion of our work with the growing body of work on paid care work (nannies, lifestyle advisers, hospice workers, adult care providers etc.) in various parts of the west on issues of identity and emotional work within the boundaries of monetized time. The edited volume, 'Caring on the Clock: The Complexities and Contradictions of Paid Care Work', focuses on different kinds of care-work in the US context[32], supports the paradox that we observed in our field study-workers provide relaxation and pampering while constantly checking the time to speed up, to manage upcoming work, and scale back when necessary.

2.3 The Uber bias in platform-studies

With the rise of ridehailing and other algorithmic service platforms, popularly described as 'Uber for X' (where X stands for the service being platformized), a community of 'platform-work' and 'digital labor' researchers has explored various implications for fair work[33], worker rights[34], the granular surveillance and quantification of worker's bodies and emotions[35, 36] as well as the motivations for workers to join on-demand algorithmic platforms. Most of this work looks at the phenomenon in Western contexts although there now exists some work on geographies of platform-work in India[37, 38], Namibia[39], Bangladesh[40] among other Global South places. Two pieces stand out for what we aim to do in this paper, the first is a paper by Surie et al on Ubering in India[41] and the second, work on domestic and care-work platforms[41, 42] by Data & Society researchers. The first paper dwells on the immensely precarious beginnings of Indian ridehailing drivers and attempts to frame their choice of platform-work within the past and desired economic futures. Here, working for ridehailing companies, despite being exploitative in absolute terms, seems to support the life-projects and financial priorities that drivers have. In this paper, we return to the much-denounced notion of 'flexibility' in platform-work as a false choice, to instead, situate it within beauty-workers' own needs and priorities, similar to what Surie et al do. The Data & Society report does not cover beauty-work, but offers crucial insights on domestic and care-work platforms. Thus far, it is also the only prior research that brings together 'care-work' and 'platforms', the two categories our paper speaks to. But the report also makes a meta point that we also return to in our discussion, it argues, "...it's not all about "uberization", the dominance

of Uber in public understandings of on-demand labor platforms has obscured the different ways technology is being used to reshape other types of services-such as care and cleaning work-in the "gig" economy. In particular, the Uber model does not illuminate differences in regulation, workforce demographics, and legacies of inequality and exploitation that shape other industries."[42] We find this distinction very important because when the focus and reference points for platform-work literature all implicitly draw on the Uber (or ridehailing) phenomenon, business logics and platform-design of one particular model, as well as the work experiences of predominantly male workers and driving as a certain kind of service experience, keep getting plugged as de facto evidence of platform-work, which in fact, is a diverse global phenomenon. Our paper contributes in same direction-tracing the class, gender, national and transnational inflections within which different gig-work platforms come to gain power as charismatic and useful mediating entities, both, for workers and clients.

3 METHOD

As a part of a larger ethnographic project, we started exploring the platform-based service-work ecosystem in India. Based on desk research, we identified leading app-based platforms and reached out to brick-and-mortar salon owners in Bengaluru to understand the landscape of beauty and wellness work. We interviewed 3 salon managers and 11 traditional salon workers over a period of two weeks to understand their daily work routines, their perception of app-based beauty-work and the challenges they face at-work. Workers at the 2 high-end salons said they did not feel the threat of being replaced by apps while workers at the local neighborhood salon said they had explored apps as a possible work avenue. Meanwhile, through personal contacts, the authors were able to gain access to one of the two training centers of India's leading app-based, on-demand service platform called HouseHelp*. After clarifying the purpose of our study ("to study how the platform trains beauticians"), the first author was allowed to "hang out" at the training center for two months. This "hanging out" in the form of marginal and participant observations included sitting through topical training sessions (for e.g. session on waxing, digital skills training etc.), accompanying managers to screening interviews for new workers, observing the final qualifying examination and so on. It was also during this time that the first author conducted 7 contextual interviews with platform-trainees, platform managers, experienced gig-workers, interns at the office as well as expert trainers to gain insights on ongoing work processes. The category managers responsible for the 'beauty' and 'massage' categories respectively connected the first author with individual workers for semi-structured interviews outside the office. In total, we conducted 12 semi-structured interviews in workers' homes and cafes depending on their comfort. Both the authors studied the communication and marketing materials of HouseHelp and its rival companies to frame the interview questions. In addition, to gain an immersive and embodied experience of platformized beauty-work service, the first author ordered an array of platform-based services. Incoming workers were informed of the author's interest in their work and separate interviews were scheduled with those willing to speak to us. Interviews lasted between 35 minutes and 2 hours and each interviewee was compensated with cash vouchers (INR 500=USD 7.2) for their time. The interviews and all observations were recorded, transcribed, and inspected together. The authors also interviewed clients who had taken these services to gain a holistic understanding of service interactions, however that data is not included in the analysis.

4 ANALYSIS

Going into the study, we were interested in the questions of class, gender and technology and that helped us stay attuned to direct and indirect articulations of these categories. However, after we finished data collection, we used an inductive approach to also derive the emergent themes from

our data where we first arrived at 'professionalism'. In our initial round of coding, we classified responses along the lines of 'gender', 'technology', 'discipline', 'service' etc. but as we started further axial coding larger themes such as 'professionalism' as well as 'entrepreneurial invocations' emerged at the intersection of various primary and secondary codes.

5 RESEARCH SETTING AND CONTEXT: PLATFORM-COMPANY TRAINING CENTER

Founded in 2014, HouseHelp is a leading platform company in the 'hyperlocal' segment in India, operating in eight cities across the country, and "partners" with over 150,000 gig-workers across service verticals such as beauty, home repairs, electricians, plumbers, carpenters, fitness instructors and movers and packers. For the beauty and wellness segments, the company requires a minimum 2-years of prior work experience but does not require certification. It provides its own short training (between 5 and 20 days) at a physical training center and has partnered with the Government of India to provide RPL (recognition of prior learning) certificates before workers start work. Importantly, the platform calls these workers "pros" (on the app as well as any worker-related communication). The platform takes 20-30% commission on every job and insists on workers purchasing uniforms, kits and work-materials through the company. The training center established by the company employs a general manager, respective 'category managers' (in charge of specific verticals such as beauty services, spa-at-home etc.), expert trainers (to re-train incoming workers) and interns who help with each step of the onboarding process. Typically, potential platform-workers walk through the door and go through various screening processes before they are granted access to start working through the app platform in any vertical.

6 RESEARCH AIMS

At the beginning of the study, our primary aim was to understand the transformation that an appbased platform brings about in one kind of gendered, informal, traditional service-work. After surveying relevant literature and our exploratory interviews with traditional salons as well as clients, following are the big questions we wanted to answer through our study:

(1) With the introduction of digital mediation within beauty and wellness-work, what, if any, changes are introduced to the existing notions of 'professionalism' within this work?
(2) As digital platforms come to intermediate work that is traditionally heavily shaped by unequal relationships of class and gender, how do they affect these relationships?
(3) How, if at all, does platform-work, interact with the external constraints placed on women's work and the stigma associated with wellness-work in India?

7 FINDINGS

In the findings section, we first present workers' motivations and needs that led them to transition from traditional salon setups to on-demand, app-based platform-work and what they perceive as the future of (their) work/lives. Next, we talk about the construct of the 'entrepreneurial worker' that provides the discursive space for the platform company to prepare and train their version of the 'platform professional' or "pro", as they literally call their workers. Finally, returning to the larger discourse within which beauty-workers in India struggle to gain autonomy, respect and safety, we present insights on what role the 'platform' plays as a technological artefact in remediating or reifying the vulnerabilities that underclass service-workers face.

7.1 Platform as the anti-salon

7.1.1 Compensation. Our interviews reveal that platform-based beauty-work is being pitched to traditional beauty workers as a response to some of the widely experienced issues in this

profession. Traditional brick and-mortar salons typically hired anywhere between one and seven beauty workers, with a range of training and experience. Depending on the specific salon, the work conditions could often be exploitative. Similar to prior reports, in our study as well, multiple respondents noted irregularities with salaries, which often depended on how well the business was doing. On-location work could also be physically taxing. In the physical space of the salon, the worker arrives at a fixed time and puts in a fixed number of hours. During that time, the worker is expected to service as many clients as they are assigned. On a busy day and on weekends, this number could go beyond five customers. In such scenarios, workers had no rest between one customer and another. App-based work allowed better management of time and resources, in that a person could only get a certain number of jobs daily. Workers expressed how the design of platform-work had freed them from the way in which their work was quantified, compensated and invisibilized. In the on-site salon system, the worker is a fixed monthly salary. Doing more work, or as they called it, "bringing more business", did not have any direct benefits for the worker. As one worker estimated,

> "I used to bring a business of about 1-1.5 lakhs a month, but I only used to get paid 25,000 no matter what. But now, with HouseHelp, I get paid directly for the work I do. If I do more work, I can earn more."

This disparity between what a salon makes and what the worker gains from the same work was reported as an issue by all our informants and it was the primary motivation for workers to give the platform a try.

7.1.2 Flexibility. Another motivation for beauticians and therapists to shift from salons to platform-based work was how time-intensive full-time salon work was. As one worker explained,

> "I used to work in a salon before this and they have fixed timings. You have to come in by ten even if there is no customer and you have to stay till seven or eight. Even in the afternoons when the business is slow, if the manager is sitting there, you can't even go out. Worse, on weekends when there is a lot of work, the timings don't matter. You have to stay till they need you. There is no overtime, you only get one day off weekly."

That hours going past 7 PM is the norm for most Indian workplaces meant that on average, salon workers were expected to spend at least nine hours at work daily. The inflexibility with evening hours, which are often the busiest, can raise challenges for managing home tasks, and also flow into the time period with the worst commute in the city. The problems with workplace flexibility were voiced across the sizes and specialties of salons. While smaller establishments could deal with labor shortages, larger establishments such as five-star hotels dealt with privileged customers that they had a harder time turning away. A massage therapist who used to work at a five-star hotel spa explained how one had to plan and inform months in advance to apply for leave. Compared to these temporal exigencies, the platform provides work-hour slots from 9 am to 6:30 pm and workers are told to complete three jobs every day, irrespective of the times they choose to work. But most importantly, the "reserve force" nature of the gig-workforce means that the platform has a revolving-door policy in terms of re-entry. At least four women workers that we interviewed had joined, worked for the platform, left work without notice for more than one month and then returned, only to be re-trained and on-boarded again. The personal nature of separation from on-site salons means leaving a job can have long-term consequences on one's ability to gain a position back in certain networks. While it is important not to simplistically understand platform-based beauty work as more accommodating than traditional salon work, it is useful to recognize that flexibility repeatedly appears in conversations as a major driver of why people chose gig-work. We unpack and situate 'flexibility' as an affordance within Indian women's world of work in the

discussion. But it is noteworthy that the piece-work nature of the "leads" or jobs allotted, as well as the low level of commitment at both ends (worker and platform) was in fact seen as an incentive to work for and return to platform-work.

7.1.3   The Future of Work. An important motivator for workers to switch to the app relates to the imagination of the future of work in this industry. The skilling threshold for entering, training and working in the beauty and wellness industry is low[24], workers do not need formal certification to start on most tasks. Care-work has significant churn and the low entry threshold which has meant that a lot of new migrants to the city or resource-constrained individuals can take this work up for immediate employment. Thus, a number of early stage beauty workers may also be doing this to stay employed[26, 45] while they find a footing in the city and then work their way up to better work-life arrangements. The challenge with beauty and other care-work is the relative lack of progression pathways in terms of earning more or getting into managerial positions, thus making enterprise as the best eventual career goal for most. The increase in income for a salon worker is relatively limited as the cost of services do not change dramatically and tips are largely limited to the number of jobs one can do on a daily basis. Even though professionals reported having regular customers, the premium for someone who becomes an expert is relatively limited. In our interviews as well, when asked what next after app-based work, would they return to a salon setup or switch industries, a majority expressed their desire to open their own small neighborhood salon. Two women had been running their own salons prior to platform-work but each, respectively, for circumstantial reasons, could not sustain the business along with her duties as a homemaker and had hence turned to app-based work to get the flexibility they needed at work. Of them, one woman in her late forties with two pre-teen kids also expressed that after having gained more than a decade of work experience at a five-star hotel spa, she had chosen to quit because her kids were young. In her words,

> "Once you clock in, in these five-star hotels, you can't just leave. Sometimes work goes on till 10 pm, and I felt that if I keep doing this job I can't attend to my kids. After that I had also opened my own salon and spa, here on Banaswadi main road, I spent close to 8 lakhs on renovating and remodeling it, it was working very well. But, whenever I was not there, I started hearing from my regular clients that my workers were stealing my business, they were using my products to go provide personal service. So, I realized that I have to be there full-time or else it will not work. But in this app setup, I don't have any of that headache..."

While 'experience' or being experienced was generally seen as a desirable trait while hiring a beauty worker, in interviews, respondents noted that salon managers often recognized good work and promised promotions and pay raise but, in many cases, that never materialized. Across the board, workers reported being dissatisfied with their salaries and annual pay raises and felt that payment was not commensurate to the amount of, and the quality of service they were expected to provide on a daily basis. Also, we observed a maximum of three levels of expertise in both beauty and massage-work- "graduate", "senior" and "director" stylists, distinctions meant to indicate levels of seniority but also fees for doing the same work. Beyond the beginner (or graduate) threshold, these labels are not very helpful in indicating the precise amount of work experience (number of years or jobs done). Moreover, any worker who is not a trainee, is anyway expected to provide their best service on a daily basis, which does not translate to a raise or quick promotion. The difficulty with quantifying 'good work', 'quality of service' as well as the lack of a standard career progression trajectory-all these factors contributed to the anxiety of "What next?" for all the beauty workers we spoke to. Against these normative conditions of the industry in India, they view better pay and entrepreneurship as progress.

7.2 The Entrepreneurial Worker

In this subsection we move from the pre-life of the platform-professional to focus on the creation of the "Pro" or the construction of a certain discourse of what it means to be a 'platform-professional'. While we take up the larger issue of the reputation-relationship between platform and the professional in the discussion section, here, we demonstrate how a certain 'enterprise discourse' is central to the production of the platform-professional wherein the ability and readiness to absorb risk individually is key to exhibiting a kind of stoicism that defines professionalism outside organizational and managerial bounds. Secondly, building on the work we surveyed earlier about aligning the habitus of underclass service-workers[46] to provide what their clients value, we show how the platform optimizes for accountability by seeking out the personal vulnerabilities of minoritized workers. In our interview with the category manager of HouseHelp who is in charge of the preliminary screening interviews as well as the final nod on recruiting workers, the manager told us, "these pros eventually want to become entrepreneurs and we help them in getting there." The platform environment exercises various means of disciplining the workers-the training process, the assignment of jobs, the metrics monitoring, and the customer rating process all help the platform observe its workforce through an analytical prism. We gleaned two important insights on how the entrepreneurial worker is imagined and constructed through the training given to potential platform-workers. This training where the initial work-expectations are set, is also key for when workers return to complain or demand for a change in their work conditions. We present a vignette each, to explain how the discourse of the entrepreneurial self is articulated.

7.2.1 Commitment. The language of commitment, a mainstay of the entrepreneurship discourse, is central to the ways in which platform managers describe the effective worker. In one of our preliminary interviews with the senior platform manager who overlooks the 'beauty' category, we asked about the screening process before workers are selected. Speaking specifically to what they (company) look for in an applicant, the manager explained,

> "Given the nature of Bengaluru as a market and the adaptability of the customer here, we try to be strict during the selection process, whether this beautician will actually be able to pick up 3-4 jobs everydayâĂęwe really try to see if this professional can do this as full-time work or is she treating this as a part-time job? Is she a good fit for the platform - not only in terms of skills but also in terms of her motivations to come. If she is a part-timer, we draw a line there. You probably won't be a good fit for the platform. It's a completely different challenge when she goes to the field, the kind of customers she is coming in contact with on the platform. So, we are of the opinion that if her attention is divided then she won't be able to give her best at work."

At the center of the platform is the 'kind of customer' who gets services delivered to them and wants them on demand. For the platform to be able to effectively service clients spread across the city, getting full-time commitment is critical, since it ensures that the workers they train and on-board will be willing to take multiple jobs daily. If HouseHelp is the only source of income for an individual, it increases their reliability as workers.

7.2.2 The Hunger. In an interview with the category manager for the massage section, we were explained that they look for "whether she (worker) is joining for the right reasons." As the manager said,

> "You know, if she wants to earn more, if she has a hunger or an entrepreneurial spirit. If she says I can see myself earning 40-50k then that is great. Once we have had that selection, we explain how much she has the potential to earn if she works six days a week."

This is key to understanding the articulation and offloading of risk, not at a later stage when a dispute arises in work but rather from the get-go, even when selecting workers who either explicitly understand that the initial promise of "earning more through platform-work" and the number they put on it (40-50,000) is totally possible provided the worker is willing to operate as an entrepreneur, implying the temporal, bodily and cognitive investment of a business-owner and not one of an employee. Where a worker shifts from a brick and mortar salon to platform work, the hunger analogy is used to highlight that HouseHelp is after all a platform that simply acts to enable achievement that emerges intrinsically from the worker's motivation. Unlike in the physical salon, where the worker literally waits inside the confines of the office for the next customer, the worker "goes out and gets" the next customer. In essence, part of the entrepreneurial invocation is to delegate all these responsibilities of reaching on time for a job, of finding, booking and paying for an auto-rickshaw for each job, calling customers to confirm, buying products and also absorbing the risks and costs of a canceled job.

7.2.3 Vulnerability as a Driver. Finally, apart from looking for "that hunger", the managers also reported looking for the "real motivation" of the candidate. As we observed in one such screening interview with a new applicant, the manager asked a female worker why she wanted to do "this" (kind of work), counter-reasoning with her, telling her that she could have continued with her own small salon. He also asked her about her husband's income and wondered aloud why she needed to earn more money as his (husband's) salary seemed sufficient for a family of three. The woman grew increasingly uncomfortable, and finally blurted that she was newly separated and a single mother now. She hesitantly revealed that she had a loan to repay and needed a job. As soon as she revealed this vulnerability, the manager was convinced and assured. He remarked cheerfully, "you should just have told me this earlier *na*, this is not very personal information, is it?" and then moved on to the next steps of the training. Other managers also probed aspirant workers to find out if there were any such obligations (to family, loans) or vulnerabilities (single mother, primary earner, migrant, student) that led the workers to the platform.

As the manager reasoned, since the "human factor" in beauty and salon services is very high, things could go wrong, and the worker could realize they don't want to do this work at any point in the training or after. On the company-side, even the short 5-7-day training and investing in providing uniforms and beauty kits (not for free) and the cost of running a training center and hiring expert trainers, made the platformization process a resource-intensive one. That is why, the manager said, it was necessary to find these "hooks" in the form of needs and vulnerabilities to optimize for reliable workers and hence, eventually build a predictable reserve force of workers. However, not all vulnerabilities were desirable from the platform-perspective. For instance, if an aspiring worker was a young mother, it was understood and reported in the assessment as she was more likely to work less. In that sense, this subsection supports the classic claim by Fournier[47] regarding the extension of the 'professional discourse' in occupational domains that were not traditionally associated with professions. What is noteworthy here is that such an extension is indeed allowing the platform to "govern at a distance" by having instilled the disciplinary logics of accountability and the individualization of risk without having to employ these gig-workers. Further, in the case of HouseHelp, this professional discourse is extended in a very culturally specific way where upwardly mobile urban Indians are offered convenience, comfort (of at-home service) and hygiene as hallmarks of professional service, mirroring what they also often receive from support staff at-work. At the same time, the pros are encouraged to demonstrate professionalism through the individual absorption of risk and the demonstration of vulnerability. The platform comes to hold this asymmetry of power in balance.

7.3 Platformizing Hierarchies

During our observations of the training of the app-based beauticians and massage therapists working with HouseHelp, we documented several issues related to daily work that the workers brought up with their trainers as well as the platform managers. These issues span from customer behavior to technical glitches to difficulties with using the app and so on. A digital, decentralized platform rearranges different aspects of traditional physical work arrangements and the associated normative exchanges that are housed within, in ways that makes it impossible to neatly separate and attribute. In that sense, it is difficult to tease apart how a platform or its features might take on and remediate all the traditionally intertwined interactions of infrastructure, race, caste, class, gender and space, but here we try to illuminate the specific role of platform remediation and the new kinds of considerations it puts on beauty workers.

7.3.1 Temporality as a class affordance. Earlier we reported on how the overall work timings look different in app-based work and critically, how beauty-work is now commodified as piecework. In the platform ecosystem, while workers are technically "entrepreneurs", the company is still in control of setting the rates of services, the time required/promised to execute a job as well as the commission it takes from each job (varying percentage based on the task and overall demand-supply at the time). However, as in other service industry professions, beauty-work has not traditionally been quantified in terms of the time taken for each job (for instance, 'eyebrow threading' is not advertised or availed of as a strict ten-minute activity). Simultaneously, considerations of time (as money), being late to work, doing work too slowly or too quickly as a bad thing-such considerations do not arise in a brick-and-mortar salon setup because of the co-presence of infrastructure and workers in a single physical space. They also do not arise for independent workers providing at-home services because beauty-work is primarily judged for its "experience" where experience signifies relaxation given, the use of good products, hygiene, politeness, the expertise of the worker and their ability to make a customer "look good and feel good." In beauty and wellness work, and other forms of care-work where service and experience cannot be easily converted into piece-units, and where the experience of care is intricately woven with presence and time. There is no standard of how much time spent on a job is enough or how much time translates to a good enough experience. In the absence of a human manager (or as against managing one's own work), disintermediation of beauty-work necessitates unambiguous commodification of service. As HouseHelp and all other platforms in this space do, each beauty service is not only listed with a description of what it entails but also a fixed time limit for each task (for instance, 'full-arms waxing' costs INR600 and has a time-measure of âĂŹ30 minutes' listed next to it). When asked what this time measure is supposed to indicate and who it is meant for (workers or clients), one of the managers at the training center explained:

> "it is for both, the workers and clients but more so for clients...it is often the client who is in a hurry to get things done or requests extra time. For workers, we educate them about these time-values during the training period to ensure that they maintain a certain speed. Clients get irritated if the worker is too slow. Also, if workers complain to us that they can't complete 3 jobs in a day, we need to be able to tell them that they are being slow at their work. So, this time indication is important for all these complaints and disputes."

Despite such disambiguation and quantification, as workers reported, service interactions pan out differently in real life. Some difficulties that workers reported around managing daily-work temporality are as follows. One big problem is that as a platform operating in eight Indian cities, HouseHelp's time slots remain agnostic to the realities of navigating urban spaces (traffic, transport,

safety, finding clients' houses). Given Bengaluru's traffic congestion, most workers reported a huge disconnect between how the app visualizes work time. Like a masseuse said, "Even if the client booked a one-hour massage, I have to call them at least one hour before, then start looking for an Ola auto (rickshaw), you know it's not easy to get an Ola. You have to keep trying. Then after the auto arrives, I have to show him my huge folding bed. They ask for extra money to carry that. Many times, the client gives a location in the app, but that location is not exact. And some clients get irritated if you call them again and again to find the house. So here I am, going in circles and the Ola guy is threatening to just drop me off. There is bound to be delay." Even after reaching the client's home, setting up and creating a salon space within the room (laying out perforated sheets, giving disposable clothes to the client, explaining the service to them, often waiting for the client to attend to their home chores in between the service, but also waiting for the client to shower between two different services such as a body scrub and a massage, these realities are not accounted for on the platform). When we went back to the platform manager with these questions, he explained that this is part of being an entrepreneur, that this would be the reality at-work even outside the platform.

During our observations, we saw one such group discussion where workers unpacked how delays at work as well as the spill-over delays caused by one client into the next job, led to monetary penalties for the worker. They also articulated how, these constant administrative considerations of timekeeping, arranging for transport and dealing with digital or cash payments were in fact getting in the way of the "feel-good service experience" and "relaxation" they wanted to provide. Workers' recounting of their experiences highlighted the class ruptures in the structuring of service time. The way that platform design arranges to make workers available at the clients' convenience but also the way that the company resolved disputes had instilled in the workers that they were on their own at work. Most workers we spoke to said that if the client made you wait because she was cooking or waiting for a phone call, you just have to wait. If the client demanded extra massage time, despite there being the provision to order extra paid massage time (15 minutes), you just gave it to them for free because if you resisted or asked them to pay extra, it would immediately ruin the experience and lead to a bad rating and review. Knowing to wait and inculcating the patience, silently absorbing the material costs of waiting are part of the longer game of performing professionalism, thereby extending one's longevity on the platform by ensuring good ratings and feedback. Even more importantly, smaller acts of privileging the client's time directly contributed to one's "repeat value"- the possibility that the client, based on their good experience, will override the algorithm and handpick the same worker the next time. We were also told of experiences where a "repeat" interaction fell apart because the worker assumed a level familiarity and expected leniency. In response, a worker explained, such experiences were also part of the game where the "client is always right". Several instances where clients canceled the service after workers arrived at their homes or even midway during the service, workers' trained response was to quietly pack and leave.

7.3.2 Professional Enactments. An emergent theme in our observations was the disciplinary aspect of the platform-training that was instituted in very curious ways. For instance, it was not enough for trainers to have instructed the workers to wear their hair in a "donut bun", put lipstick at all times, and, to have emphasized the importance of "uniform at all timesâĂİ when at-work. Trainers did not let workers take their final exam or sometimes, even attend classes if they did not "groom" performatively even during the training. While the insistence on grooming even when not working can be read as classic panoptic surveillance, when we started asking workers about clients' behaviors, they insisted that in most cases clients were really respectful. Further, many explained that one has to dress a certain way and groom well to be taken seriously by the client. As one worker said, while speaking to the authors in her own home,

> "I am obviously not going to go to a client's house like this, wearing what I am wearing right now. If you go like this, obviously the client will take you for granted and treat you like their servant. If you groom well, you dress and act professionally, then they will treat you like a professional."

It is here that we realized that workers had their own sophisticated and complex enactments of "professionalism" and what the term or the attitude could do for them. Interestingly, "acting professional" or asserting that, "I am a professional" also became their diplomatic way of dealing with unsanctioned and unsolicited requests, both within the confines of a paid job but also outside in the world. For instance, while discussing the demands that clients make of workers, many women reported that while the platform only allows for same-gender services (women-to-women), almost all workers had received bookings from male-identifying users. The platform's justification was that men could book services for their wives, mothers etc. as a "surprise gift". To figure out who exactly the service was for, the worker would call the client and clarify and verify their identity. At times when men admitted to having lied and offered huge amounts of money on the phone or hinted at wanting "extra services", the female worker would immediately assert, "Sir, I am a professional, we don't do such things." Here, professionalism served as a polite euphemism to deny sexual favors and undesirable work. In the outside world, while waiting near the client's house or waiting for an auto rickshaw after a job, workers reported being approached by random men in the area, including security guards, who would ask them about their work and question their presence in that space. As a worker narrated, once when she said she is a masseuse, the (stranger) man told her, "this security guard also needs a massage." In such risky situations, the worker would repeat, as if on cue, "Sir I am a professional, I work for this app, you can download it and book a massage. We don't do cross-gender massage, so men can only get male therapists." Interestingly, many workers had a similar script which necessarily involved some explanation about the app, the company and how to book such app-based services and this script, in workers' experiences, successfully diffused the sexual undertones but also aided the professional enactment that they strove to attain throughout their careers. Reflecting on these enactments of professionalism and how the platform symbolically and materially gets configured in them, we want to call attention to a situated discussion of the dignity of labor where donning a uniform or claiming affiliations to app-work can, in fact, further the 'professional project' of workers where informality and unorganized employment are rampant. This does not necessarily have to do with the absolute economic well-being of a worker but is an instance of incidental design of work that supports and safeguards the ability to keep working in socio-cultural contexts (such as India) where working-class women encounter risk on a daily basis.

8 DISCUSSION

The interviews and observations offer a look into motivations, costs and enrolments required of the different actors involved in platformized beauty and wellness-work . In the discussion, we return to the constraints within which women's work is availed of in India and the Global South. We flip the highly situated findings about women's gendered work through a beauty and wellness platform to, in turn, offer other ways to think about good and fair work that do account for informality, consumption cultures and intersectional identities of workers.

8.1 Situating Platform-work in contexts of work

Thus far, within the CSCW, HCI and adjacent sociolegal literatures, various cycles of platform-work have been studied predominantly as digital labor, where the question of labor has been an economic one. Scholars have been able to illuminate how, software and algorithmic design have been put to use, in the service of maximizing companies' business interests and, to exploit workers economically

by invsibilizing the bodily, temporal, financial and emotional costs of such work. These platform companies also quell any possibility of collectivization and peer-to-peer communication. However, such platforms are not universal apolitical entities. Much like all technological artefacts, platforms, especially gig-work platforms, operate in highly situated socio-cultural contexts of cities. Further, as work- and consumer-platforms, they are also shaped by overarching national and regional gender, caste, class and religious discourses. In fact, these discourses materialize in the form of unspoken, yet widely understood and enacted sets of behaviors that constitute the commonly shared experiences of "Ubering in New Delhi" or "Airbnb'ing as a woman". The same applies on the labor side, depending on who is working, where and how platform-work configures within their situated trajectory of work and life. India is undergoing a "youth bulge" with more than 50% of its population under the age of 25[24]. While high unemployment is a national concern, for some time now, women have also been exiting the workforce in record numbers. Historically, due to the cultural constraints on women's labor participation, harassment at work, lack of legal nondiscrimination protections, as well as the general lack of women's safety in the public sphere, working when woman, especially as a working-class woman, has been hard. As we observed in our study, women coming through HouseHelp's door were enthused about the relative invisibility and "quietness" of app-based work. There were tensions around the social optics of such work. Since there was no physical salon, there was no traceability, nobody from the neighborhood or family was going to see them work in a beauty parlor or spa center. Better, they could quietly cancel jobs or take leave and prioritize the home if needed-it was between them and the app. Many women had not even told their extended families that they worked.

Speaking to the traditional challenges to women's work in India-of commute, of work timings, presence of male colleagues, as well as the problems within salon setups, platform-work offered a liberating invisibility and the required flexibility. Here, we extend Sarah Sharma's formulation of the 'chronography of power'[48] where she urges us to think through the temporal architectures (of the urban and the technological, to point how and how long women are allowed to occupy in a city like Bengaluru and when they are expected to be at-work and at home. Sharma argues that bodies are valued differently temporally and this discourse of temporal affordances as power can be located in our case, in the acts of waiting, being amenable to clients' personal schedule and quietly accepting the delays and monetary damages carried over in other jobs, are intrinsic to demonstrating a temporal professionalism. Raval and Dourish[34] use Gibson Graham's thesis[49], on recognizing the domestic sphere as essential to value-production, to draw attention to the unpaid reproductive labor of male ridehailing drivers. We flip their formulation to look at working-class female gig-workers in India, the others whose movement and work is primarily anchored to the domestic sphere and for whom, the opportunity of platform-based gig-work appears as a socio-cultural opening more than an economic one. In highlighting these contextual priorities and harking back to our findings where the mention of 'apps', 'company' and digital helped working-class women protect their dignity and bodies, we want to call for future work to seriously take up the non-economic considerations for gig-work. The politics of workplace respectability, as it relates to technology, is a critical part of what we see here. The ability of the technological artefact to transform the perceived acceptability of work that is unchanged in its actual function speaks to the agency that technology has in this setting. The service delivery enabled by the technological artefact helps the creation of a new 'professional' subject who blends seamlessly into the meta narrative of a modern entrepreneurial society. We propose that the "better than (other work)" articulation of gig-work by workers is not false consciousness but rather, a recognition of the non-economic. Even further, each line of work has its own challenges too. Such as the overall absence of a professional status in beauty-work. The same applies to the blanket emphasis on invisibility and emotional labor in platform-studies. As demonstrated above but also by Star and Strauss[50], not all invisibility is

inherently bad. Similarly, in the beauty-work context, echoing Sharma and Black, the emotional performance in beauty-work comes to aid the professional ambitions of workers. It's not just more work, it is how workers demonstrate expertise and seek to reverse stereotypes of manual labor and banality about their work.

8.2 Do platforms care?

Similar to the point that the Data & Society report makes, we find, while studying this particular iteration of gig-work that not all platforms are the same-in terms of function (marketplace, aggregators) but also in terms of how they design for control. We approached this study with the prior knowledge that popular gig-work platforms such as Uber and Olacabs (ridehailing) or Swiggy and Zomato (food delivery) provide minimal, often video-only training to new workers in India. HouseHelp and other such home-service platforms on the other hand, need to provide much more intensive in person training (5-20 days). Also, the company was eager to lend its reputation (through uniforms and training) to workers, encouraging them to self-identify as a "pro". Pros are heavily hand held through the initial days of work and subsequently given remote support through a call-center. HouseHelp's success depends on the "repeat value" of a pro. They encourage and strive to simulate the relationships of familiarity and loyalty that traditional beauticians build in their work. It is not so much that HouseHelp altruistically cares more about its workers than Uber or Swiggy for its workers but rather that, when we move away from the "Uber model" as the default imagination of gig-work, we find a spectrum of care-configurations, often emerging from the traditional models they have disrupted. Our motive is not to suggest that some platforms may care more but that if we study gig-work platforms for their biopolitical management and juxtapose them against practices of care within traditional setups, it would problematize the general notion that "platforms don't care about their workers." Instead, we might want to start asking how they care and tend to workers and what that might tell us about biopolitics and work ("why and when does the platform care?") in the post-organizational era.

9 CONCLUSION

This paper presented a study of beauty and wellness work as it is being platformized in Bengaluru, India. It attempts to cover not only how app-based work happens through the platform but also how experienced female beauty workers are being retrained to serve as "platform professionals" (or "pros" as the company calls them). In this process, we document the motivations for workers to switch to a gig-work setup. As discussed in the paper, beauty and wellness work in India is constituted at the intersection of the discourses of middle-class consumerism, globalization, technologization of work and gendered labor. In mapping the process of platformization and the daily experiences of platform based beauty workers we discovered how the 'platform' as a sociotechnical artefact comes to mediate traditionally gendered service-work.

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