# Podcast: Platform work and gender inequalities – Case study from India "

## Interview with Sabina Dewan, President and Executive Director of the JustJobs Network, Senior Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research in India, and Lead of the research project on the digital future of work in India commissioned by the German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ)

**Introduction by host:**

**Welcome to the ILO Employment Policy Department's podcast series, "Global challenges – Global solutions: The future of work".**

I'm your host Tom Netter, and today we'll be discussing the impact of digitalization on jobs in India, with a focus on how this is affecting women.

Over the past decade, India has witnessed an increase in the platformization of work and the prevalence of job uptake in the gig economy. That's creating a whole new set of opportunities for work, whether gig work like ride-sharing services, or online work like freelancing or micro-tasking.

There's a pervasive assumption that these trends are creating jobs, which is a good thing. Yet while these developments have also resulted in increased access to work for women, those jobs have often been characterized by higher levels of

uncertainty and lesser incentives for skills- and capacity-building, among other challenges.

What lessons can be learned from India regarding the creation of more equitable access to jobs in the digital economy? What are policy solutions to overcome the challenges in India and elsewhere?

Our guest today is Sabina Dewan, President and Executive Director of the JustJobs Network, a global think-tank that focuses on employment, Senior Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research in India, and Lead of the research project on the digital future of work in India commissioned by the German Agency for International Cooperation or GIZ. Today, we're going to discuss these core questions. Sabina, welcome to the program.

**Sabina Dewan:** Thank you, Tom. It is a pleasure to be here in conversation with you for this podcast series.

**Tom: My first question is that your writing describes two co-existing narratives about technology in India and in other developing countries. One narrative suggests a positive tale about the potential that technological advancement brings and the other advises more caution. Can you elaborate on this? Can you describe how digitalization is affecting the world of work in India and elsewhere and what are some of the positive and negative trends?**

**Sabina:** I think a question that many of us are preoccupied with is how technology is changing the world of work and what it means for lives and livelihoods, the way people live and work. So first, I think it's important to acknowledge that how technology plays out in the Global North is very different from how it impacts, plays out in the Global South. In the Global North you have populations with requisite levels of education. This is not the case in the Global South where, despite high levels of school enrolment, there are many children in youth that have very low levels of education that can largely be attributed to poor quality of education. The Global South also has more diversity in its population and heterogeneity in its labour markets, where access to technology, internet connectivity skills and education to effectively use technology, all of this is still very constrained. You know, what automation brings in manufacturing means something different for the Global North than it does in the Global South. Supply chain disruptions and automation mean that developing countries may not have

the same industrial pathways to development that were available to countries in the Global North. So, their development trajectories will have to look different.

So, the first point is that when we talk about the effect that technology has on the world of work, we need to be very clear about the fact that the experience of technology and its potential is very different between the Global North and the Global South. Assumptions from the developed world about what technology is and what it means for developing countries are not straightforward. It's different, we need to have two separate narratives. Second, there is one narrative about technology that really overestimates its positive impact. Let's not confuse potential with reality. Technology no doubt offers tremendous potential but for us to actually realize its potential and take advantage of technology for development, many things need to actually be in place beforehand. There are those that almost blindly believe that technology will raise productivity in agriculture, it will foster entrepreneurship, deliver education to our children through EdTech platforms, you know, in the third decade of the twenty first century we seem to have come upon the solution that will deliver development at scale. In my view, this is a very dangerous perspective. Technology has a lot of potential for sure but the recipe for success calls for many more ingredients than technology alone.

So, I think when we are talking about leveraging technology and its potential for the Global South, we need to be very careful about dealing with the positives and the potential but also recognizing that we need a broader architecture in place to be able to leverage the benefits that technology has to offer and this is very much true for the Global South.

**Tom: Well in this context, how has the COVID-19 pandemic affected these technological and labour market trends?**

**Sabina:** Yeah, well, I think certainly in India and also in other developing countries we see a rise in government use of technology and monitoring health data, for example. We also see an uptick in consumers using technology to avail various services, food delivery, for example. We see more remote work, though this trend has moderated since its peak during the pandemic. And with this greater reliance on technology, Tom, also comes the opportunity for platforms and the proliferation of, you know, the platforms and the development of the platform economy to mediate the delivery of more of these services. So, at the top end what these trends mean is that there are opportunities for more skilled professionals and entrepreneurs, there's a need for more IT professionals, software developers, programmers, et cetera but, on the other end, we see a rise in gig work, both

location-based, so delivery personnel, taxi hailing services and so on. And also online work such as micro-tasking and freelancing. So, these trends came on top of the employment shocks of the pandemic. So, many countries around the world including in India saw a rise in unemployment, some countries saw a rise in informal employment with women and youth particularly adversely affected.

So, if you have fewer jobs, a sector like the gig economy, which has very few barriers to entry, mean that there's a lot of young people, in the absence of other jobs, that are entering gig work. And this oversupply of labour in gig work puts downward pressure on wages and working conditions and it's definitely something we need to watch out for. So, in essence the pandemic really led more people to rely on technology, brought people online, fuelled gig work, but on the other hand we need to be mindful that not all of this restructuring is again a positive story and I can talk a little bit more about that.

**Tom: And I have another question. Now, you also brought up gig work. Can you elaborate on the quantity and quality of gig work?**

**Sabina:** Sure, Tom, so I think the first point to recognize here is that we often think of gig work as creating new jobs but really much of it is breaking up jobs into smaller tasks and distributing it across more people. Platforms are not employers so workers on platforms don't get the employment protections or entitlements and you know many governments including the Indian government are grappling with how to provide this large and growing segment of gig workers with social security coverage. The other important point to note about the quality of work when it comes to the gig economy is that these jobs are demand dependent. So, let's say you're a worker in a small neighbourhood grocery store that's offline, your employer assumes some of the risk in terms of the ebbs and flows in demand but in gig work the worker assumes all the risk with no labour protections or entitlements. The bottom line is that this kind of work, much of it, is actually quite precarious. So, you know, I think many assume that because working conditions for so many in the developing world are already quite poor that gig work offers more and better opportunities and therefore is a step up. In my view, this is categorically wrong for several reasons.

First, there is some evidence to suggest that a significant share of gig workers are leaving regular wage work to join the gig economy. Second, our research as part of the GIZ study and others that JustJobs has conducted in Indonesia, Thailand and Rwanda with our partners, suggest, this research suggests that many of the reasons why people join the gig economy, increased flexibility, for example, don't actually

play out in reality and the jobs are more precarious because the worker assumes the risk without the safety net. So, finally I can't tell you, Tom, how many times I've sat across from people that say well gig work is better than the alternative for many people in developing countries. A, we don't know that for sure and b, is that really the aspiration we want to set for our large and growing youth populations in the developing world, put them all in low-end jobs that are precarious and offer no job or economic mobility? My aspirations for the Global South and my idea of development is certainly very different in that respect.

**Tom: Thanks, Sabina. Now what does the future of work look like for women's work in the Global South?  How do women fare in a world of digitally mediated work?**

**Sabina:** So, this is one of the questions that our study with GIZ explores and in some details. The study hones in on the impact of technology on the overall economy and specifically the emergence of platform work and what it means for different social groups, including women. So, different kinds of platforms offer different opportunities for women's work. E-commerce platforms and marketplaces enable women to sell their wares in an online shop, some women use social media platforms to mark up and sell products that they've purchased at wholesale prices, so, this phenomenon is called social commerce. In terms of gig work, there are opportunities for micro-tasking and freelancing that women can do from home. So, you know, both online gig work as well as e-commerce opportunities facilitated by platforms create opportunities for women to work from home. Home-based work that allows women, enables women to balance domestic responsibilities with income generation. But there's also a cautionary note there, which is that evidence suggests and much of our research suggests that women confront a huge amount of time poverty already, that the demands on them when they're at home are significant and that then you're adding onto that this expectation that not only do they handle a disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities but that they also now generate an income by working from home.

Also, there are implications to changing your place of residence into your workplace and that also needs to be acknowledged. And finally, I think that the tendency to keep women in home-based work can actually backfire in countries that have significant patriarchal norms, like India, where then it becomes very easy for families to say, for example, that women should just stay home, do the housework and generate an income but from home and they don't need to go out into public spaces. So, I think that there are nuances while we want to increase female labour force participation through creating opportunities for home-based

work that platforms facilitate. I think there is a cautionary tale there that we need to be very mindful of, that we actually need to empower women with real choices by reducing their time poverty and giving them a real choice to actually go out of the house should they choose to.

And then there's a whole other story, Tom, about location-based work such as home provision of beauty services where women are drawn to this because of the flexibility that it offers. But then again, you know, there are other considerations like is it actually safe for women to go out of the house and to work in people's homes? Are these promises of flexibility actually panning out or do women end up fighting heat exhaustion and traffic and actually don't have as much agency over their time as we think? So, these are all considerations when it comes to women and women's work in the gig economy.

**Tom: Thanks again. Now, as technology changes the world of work and a new world of digitally mediated work emerges, do education and skills need to adapt as well? What new skills are needed for the future and for the reskilling of workers? Are the future of work and the future of learning converging?**

**Sabina:** Yeah, those are great questions, Tom, and absolutely, I think one of the biggest challenges is reforming education and skill systems, particularly in the Global South, where, as I mentioned earlier on in this podcast, that we are still struggling to deliver requisite levels of good quality education. So, enrolments have gone up significantly and there is gender parity in terms of enrolment in education. But the quality of education is still lacking. And what all of this comes down to is really two things. One is that without a basic level of education and the soft skills that go along with it, the analytical abilities, the communication abilities, no job is going to be able to deliver on good outcomes, right? Good economic outcomes. So, we need to really look at first and foremost, in this twenty first century technologically driven economy, how do we create requisite levels of education, good quality education, people with analytical minds, people with good communication skills in general and then use that to kind of enable them to partake in increasingly higher skilled technology driven occupations.

I also don't think that we can silo education and skills. So, this idea that, you know, you can have a bad quality education but then slap on a three-month, six-month one-year or even two-year training program, and that that's going to allow people to have meaningful livelihoods, is I think a little misguided. I think we need to think about inculcating. First, we need to think about breaking down silos between education and skills, we need to think about inculcating good quality education,

analytical skills, communication skills and digital skills throughout one's learning trajectory and then I think we can foster employability that the current world of work calls for.

**Tom: Thanks very much, Sabina. Now one final question. What needs to happen to harness the benefits of digitalization while minimizing the costs so that more people, particularly women and youth can benefit?**

**Sabina:** That's a great question, Tom, and I think the place to start there is to recognize that we are really in a moment of tremendous amounts of change right now. There's rapid and large transition and restructuring that's taking place and technology is a huge factor but it's one factor. There's also climate change, there's also pandemics and all of these different forces are acting together to restructure how we live and work and restructure labour markets. In the context of this large and rapid change I don't think we can isolate one problem and its solutions. I think the solution has to be large and architectural. So, what do I mean by that? What I mean is that governments need to build appropriate social safety nets, appropriate social protection because whether a worker is affected by technology or climate change, it doesn't matter. We still ultimately need to provide those workers with safety nets and this ultimately comes back to building social protection structures that can facilitate adaptation for workforces for our workers as they undergo these massive transitions. So, what needs to happen is that we need to really prioritize building institutions, building the architecture for effective investments in human capital, skills and education.

We need to invest in good social security systems. We need to think about how we can create a workforce that is resilient, that is equipped to deal with the demands of a constantly changing labour market and this really calls for large investments in what is often called social infrastructure. Otherwise, economies will suffer as well.

**Tom:  Thanks, Sabina, that's a great concluding answer and thank you so much for joining us today.**

**One thing is clear. There's definitely a future of new jobs and development in India's digital cloud. And that cloud seems to have a silver lining.  Some would say that India is becoming the Global South's Silicon Valley. And that sounds like a good thing.**

**But it all depends on the reality on the ground. And as we have heard today, along with increasing opportunities, there are also many challenges—especially for women working from their homes or in the gig economy.**

**Like other things, the reality is not always what we want it to be. People want simple answers. The question is, are there any simple answers? Only time—and the policies that emerge—will tell.**

**I'm Tom Netter and you've been listening to the ILO Employment Policy Department podcast series, "Global Challenges, Global Solutions: The future of work". Thank you for your time.**