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Hustle and Resistance in Digital Sex Work

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Abstract

This paper seeks to understand the interplay of hustle, resistance and the politics of respectability within the realm of digital Sex work, emphasising on how Sex workers navigate online platforms and applications amidst increasing surveillance, algorithmic bias, moral policing, and platform capitalism. Based on notes taken on the field and discussions with the stakeholders, it explores how marginalized bodies engage with technology to sustain livelihoods. The study highlights the digital hustle not just as economic necessity but as an act of everyday resistance against structural exclusions, particularly in the case of Sex work. It further questions the politics of visibility shaped by platform economies that create risks of criminalization and erasure. By understanding the experiences of digital sex workers in India, the paper argues for a more inclusive digital policy framework that acknowledges sex work as labor and emphasizes the need for a digitally just system.

Key Words

Hustle, Resistance, Digital Sex Work.

Introduction

Situating Digital Sex Work in India

With the advent of technology in its most nuanced self, India stands witness to the transforming shift in labor. The digital economy is a click away from tapping to the human potential in terms of both, leisure and labor. Expansion in broadband connectivity and cloud computing twinned with innovations in ICT¹ have enabled monetary and data-related transactions/transfers. The ILO flagship report explores how the contemporary platform economy is transforming the world of work and takes into account two broad categories of work within the digital realm: online web-based platforms and location-based platforms. Elaborating online web-based platforms as platforms where tasks or work assignments are performed online or remotely by workers.²

Digital Sex work is no exception if transformation of labor across multiple sectors is to be considered. Questions relating to branding, marketing, advertising, selling of services, the shift from cramped up spaces to digitally mediated spaces, the changing forms of danger and surveillance remain a dominant part of discussion

in this context. These questions need brainstorming in order for literature to travel in time. Internet has undeniably increased the access to resources that were once difficult to reach, especially for those surviving in the margins. Most of the literature that has been produced in this light has discussed digital Sex work as a homogenized category, taking away all other forms of Sex work such as webcamming, the technicalities involved in the usage of dating apps, and Prodommes[#] a section of Sex workers rarely discussed in research.

In the Indian context, Sex work has been relegated a gray zone legally, where it is an occupation is given a sanction to be exercised but the ways in which it can exercised remain a point of contestation. Soliciting, running brothels, and lure into Sex work, for instance are considered illegal under the ITPA 1956.⁴This is primarily because of the manipulated use of categories such as ‘Sex trafficking’ and ‘prostitution’ about which much has been written with passion than objectivity implying that trafficking is conflated with prostitution and migration, taking away voices of workers who enter the occupation by will and conscious choice. The COVID-19 pandemic is a living testament to this argument, when a large number of people in the country were left with no choice but to compromise ethics and morals to fight hunger, unemployment, and sudden displacement. With restriction on mobility and shutting down of the red-light areas, digital spaces emerged as important sites for economic survival and labor negotiation where client acquisition, content creation and availability of options became clearer and seamless. The dating apps saw an upsurge in customers and to the Sex workers, it meant a safe source of continuing their source of income. Only Fans, ManyVids, Facebook Messengers and WhatsApp emerged as sites of negotiation and bargain.

This shift to the digital world, however seamless it seems, has not been an easy translation for the marginalised, especially the Sex workers. With newer financial opportunities, also came algorithmic suppression, unpredictability, and danger, alive in all its forms, thereby handing over decision making to those scrolling through social media pages and reporting content that does not serve the upper-class, upper caste lens. Rampant bans and deplatforming[#] impacts digital Sex work disproportionately and further marginalises them in an already precarious economic situation. Certainly, what happens to the electronic content produced cannot be controlled and that the fact that all responsibility is dumped to the creator/producer is also biased and one-sided. If there is anything that the digital shift has proven, it is the manipulation of content by the higher ups in the society. Digital intimacy, therefore, does raise critical questions on agency, safety, and politics of visibility.

Digital migration of the Indian Sex workers has to be understood within the wider framework of labor precarity and financial exclusion. While there is opportunity, the ways one manages the opportunity is complex and frustrating. Here, similarities between gig workers, such as the food delivery partners and cultural performers, who are navigating the world of ‘likes’ and ‘subscriptions’, and Sex workers can be easily drawn because the distinction between what is legitimate and illegitimate is dictated by caste, class, ability, and respectability politics; and how use of terminologies such as ‘cringe’ and ‘creepy’ form a dominant part of how content produced in the margins is seen and experienced by the dominant social groups. This paper examines hustle and resistance in Sex Work, typically as it navigates the digital space in the present-day India.

Research Questions

1. What are the risks and negotiations of financial uncertainties in Digital Sex work?
2. How do the Sex workers resist and hustle through the digital shift?
3. What is the response of the Stakeholders’, especially the Government with regard to bans and censorship in content creation?

Objectives

1. To understand the digital shift in Sex work, and its impact on Sex workers.
2. To examine the ways platform economics is shaping Sex work in India.

Emphasising on the above questions, the paper aims to engage in the examination of the intersections of labor, identity, digital economy and financial autonomy. It explores the possibilities of mitigating digital dangers in Sex work while letting Sex workers make use of opportunities of income generation through safe and conscious means.

Research Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative approach, primarily based on the secondary sources and insights from the fieldwork done with Sex workers based out of various locations in India namely Delhi, Sangli, Kolkata, Chennai, Hyderabad, Pune, and Lucknow, during prior engagements with organisations, academic assignments, etc. The aim is to primarily understand how the digital shift has impacted Sex work, the risks and negotiations involved in the same, and the response of the stakeholders in this regard.

The study is interpretive in nature and situates sex work in a broader socio-political framework. It draws from the existing academic literature, organisational reports, and media articles to trace the evolution of Sex work and the digital shift, especially post-Covid. The secondary data sources include peer-reviewed journal articles on sex work, platform economics, labor precarity, and the digital hustle and resistance, reports and documentation from Sex-worker led organisations such as DMSC, CREA and SWASA, policy briefs and legal documentation such as the ITPA, media representations, and the conference proceedings, such as the Sex Workers' Summit 2024 held in Nepal, Kathmandu. Using these sources, the paper tries to identify the recurring patterns and contradictions in the Sex work discourse.

In addition to the secondary data, this paper also incorporates insights from the field drawn from the author's broader doctoral fieldwork. The observations and suggestions are derived from the informal discussions with the Sex workers in red light areas, hotspots in and around the cities of Delhi, Kolkata, and Sangli, and experiential learnings during participatory events such as community summits and archival presentations.

The paper follows discourse analysis, examining and exploring how narratives around Sex work are constructed, negotiated, and resisted across the legal, social, and political domains. Themes of visibility, financial exclusion, hustle, and resilience and traced across data points.

The research acknowledges the limitations of the secondary data used, included the lack of control of how data was originally collected. Therefore, the triangulation method is employed to compare and site perspectives across different sources, and cross referencing with the field observations.

Theoretically, the study draws on the Feminist Political Economy to broadly understand resistances and labor struggles in India and situate Sex work within the same. It also takes into consideration Platform Capitalism, in order to analyse the governance of digital economies across the globe and if, it has furthered exploitation of the marginalised. With these frameworks, the paper promises to contribute to the critical discussions around digital justice, and the evolving landscape of the socio-political realities of Sex work.

Digital Sex Work

Digital Migration of Sex Work and its Impact

The pandemic of Covid-19 changed ways how Sex work as labor was performed in India. Restrictions on mobility increased as the red-light districts were shut down. Amidst this, the Sex workers lost income and support to sustain their families. In response to the same, they shifted to online media, navigating through new possibilities to sustain their livelihood. This shift strengthened the digital sites to emerge as a certain site of economic survival.

Online media such as those that are subscription-based, such as OnlyFans and ManyVids offers the possibility of content monetization while maintaining a level of autonomy. These platforms enabled the workers to set their own prices and directly engage with the clients. However, this transition also suffers incessantly changing commission rates and risks related to account termination, indicating new vulnerabilities in Sex work.

Indian Sex workers, on the other hand, relied on informal digital spaces such as the local dating apps (Tinder, Bumble, Grindr) to find and directly engage with clients. Unlike the subscription-based platforms, these spaces provided visibility without requiring any upfront investment. The risks, however is that the dating apps expose the workers to potential doxxing, harassment, and non-consensual content redistribution. Moreover, lack of a platform support does not provide the workers with safety feature usually built in for them otherwise. Deplatforming- removal of accounts is the most common method of control that has been employed to keep the workers in check, erasing their identity overnight.

On the other hand, platforms, however much stability they provide, also impose strict regulations that furthers the marginalisation of the Sex workers. This tussle shapes how Sex workers navigate the digital environment, balancing visibility, and security.

Financial Exclusion and Strategies for Survival

A significant shift in digital Sex work has been from cash based to digital payments. While this seems to have eased the process for the workers, it has introduced new layers of control, surveillance, and exclusion, especially those from the marginalised communities. Indian Sex workers have maintained that they face structural barriers in digital payments and so the access to various digital financial systems becomes complex and tedious. While the Indian workers have not experienced financial deplatforming in the urban/semi-urban areas, banking discrimination is rampant. The Indian Digital wallets often flag transactions related to Sex work, leading to account freezes or closures, thereby preventing the workers from managing their income.

Several other challenges have penetrated the lives of Sex workers with the witnessed digital rise, especially with platformed based Sex work. They include delay in payments without explanation, unpredictable bans, high commission fee in addition to heavy censorship by the State thereby reducing the actual pay of the Sex worker. Moreover, the traditional financial services such as loans or business debit accounts are completely inaccessible to the workers, given the societal stigma.

These financial barriers not only leave Sex workers with no choice to take whatever is offered but also poses questions around agency, choice and human integrity. In order to sustain themselves, the workers around the world devised strategies for survival that resonate with ideas of resilience and collective bargaining for a greater good. One, the workers began using modes of payment other than digital wallets such as gift cards or direct bank transfers to bypass traditional banking restrictions. Platforms such as Telegram and Signal are used to further secure communication and price negotiations. These served as better platforms given the nature of encrypted transactions.

Digital Sex work thus, provide an opportunity for financial independence but the systemic exclusion of the Sex workers from the mainstream financial instruments presents a stark reality of the stigma they still live and breathe in, opening ways to surveillance and control all the way more in the present day.

Stakeholders in Platform Control

Platform Governance: A Global Landscape

Today, social media is a global market where there are opportunities, greater returns on investments and higher stakes. It operates under algorithmic rules that heavily impact the marginalised, and particularly, the Sex workers. Scholars like Cowen & Colosi(2021) discuss how regulation aimed at preventing sex workers is likely to harm their welfare. The practice of shadow banning- limiting online visibility, is a deliberate attempt towards excluding the workers from thriving digital economies. Usage of hashtags, emojis, abusive language has furthered invisibility.

Algorithmic suppression has reduced discoverability, increased threats to de-platforming, and disrupted the client-base through sudden removal of identities from platforms overnight. Blunt & Wolf (2020) emphasize how the workers have adopted techniques to navigate through this situation, of which includes using coded

language across all social media and communication applications and maintaining decentralised networks like Telegram and Signal to mitigate the risks of losing digital presence altogether. However, all these solutions require constant effort and vigilance.

One of the most prominent reshaping of the legal landscape in Sex work has taken place in the United States of America, where Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act-Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act, also known as FOSTA-SESTA(2018) has impacted consensual sex work by pushing it further into unregulated yet highly surveilled spaces, while stating goals to reduce human trafficking by creating pressure on the internet platforms to censoring users as and when necessary. It has led to mass removal of the workers from platforms fearful of legal accountability, expansion of global regulations where applications such as Instagram and Facebook adopt US-centric policies that directly impact Sex workers worldwide, including those in India as platforms apply blanket rules that often erase consensual work in the process.

Labor Rights and Moral Policing

Sex workers, like most of the digital labor are forced to exercise arbitrary platform policies that more often than not lead to complete invisibility of the labor. This is regulated by the rooted social hierarchies in the system as the distinction between what is acceptable and what is not or criminalised is often dictated by those who have no direct involvement in the lives of these workers but dictate hierarchies of morality and respectability. Jones (2020) emphasizes that the mainstream influencers engaging in softcore sexual content through apps such as TikTok or OnlyFans promotional posts faced far less scrutiny than the explicit Sex workers, despite monetizing on similar lines of digital intimacy. Moreover, some forms of labor, especially the erotic labor, is often dismissed as 'cringe' or morally inappropriate in the upper caste, upper class digital spaces., thereby reinforcing class-based exclusions from the economy.

The feminisation of digital labor plays a significant role in the determination of what is considered as legitimate. Sex work is penalised because it has a direct engagement with sexuality whereas influencers, bloggers and models benefit from similar aesthetics without facing threats like that of deplatforming or bans.

Hustle, Resistance, and Politics of Respectability

Sex workers face a visibility paradox while maintaining an online presence to sustain everyday needs. While that is crucial, it also exposes them to public scrutiny, harassment and potential dangers. The control dynamics takes away the identity and autonomy of the workers and furthers invisibility in the digital realm.

Engaging in online sex work has tremendous physical, emotional and psychological impacts. Workers maintain to struggle with personal boundaries, societal stigma, and managing pressures of constant engagement online to sustain their livelihoods. The lack of formal labor policies in this regard leaves emotional and psychological health impacted severely. However the workers have employed strategies to negotiate boundaries and ensure safety, and these include using pseudonyms, exercising privacy measures, and enabling support networks via community organizations. These strategies are often not enough to fully eradicate the risks involved in Sex work, thereby indicating the need for more robust protections and systems.

Key Findings

- Rise in platform capitalism has created avenues for Sex workers to broaden its clientele, reach a larger audience, and achieve financial independence. However, this shift has also led to increase in financial instability due to factors such as inaccessible banking instruments such as loans or business accounts, lack of traditional employment benefits, and the overt platform-imposed bans and restrictions. Lack of regulation increases these vulnerabilities, leaving Sex workers without choice or recourse in cases of abuse or online exploitation.
- Social media platforms and messaging apps have become essential tools for sex workers to market, sell, and advertise their services. These are being increasingly used to communicate with clients. While

these platforms offer flexibility, they also perpetuate labor precarity given the lack of formal contract mechanisms and protections, leaving the workers in a legal gray area, often without access to social security.

- Ensuring online presence in order to sustain livelihoods exposes the Sex workers to risks such as digital surveillance, harassment, and legal consequences. This is further amplified by the societal stigma thereby, leading to social boycott and discrimination. The need for safety and privacy in the digital realm while maintaining visibility thus, remains a significant challenge.

Conclusion

Globally, a number of initiatives have been implemented to enhance the rights and protections of sex workers. While Belgium enacted a landmark law granting sex workers formal employment contracts and comprehensive labor rights, including health insurance, paid leave, and maternity support., Mexico's lower house approved a labor reform to regulate the working conditions of app-based workers, ensuring access to social security and other benefits. Countries like Chile and Spain are proactively seeking regulation of digital platform work ensuring minimum wage and social security for workers.

Similar digital policies in India could significantly improve the financial inclusion and labor rights of sex workers. Recognizing sex work as legitimate labor and extending social security benefits, health insurance, and legal protections would mitigate financial precarity and enhance the well-being of sex workers, especially in times of the evident digital shift in Sex work. Implementation of worker-led governance models in India would empower sex workers to have greater control over their working conditions and earnings. Taking the case of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), cooperatives or unions could provide collective bargaining power, ensuring that platforms operate transparently and fairly.

The challenges faced by sex workers in the digital economy reflect broader issues affecting various forms of digital labor. Workers across sectors (for instance, Gig workers) experience similar issues, including financial instability, lack of security benefits, and exposure to platform unpredictability. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive labor reforms that extend protections to all digital workers, ensuring fair wages, social security benefits, and mechanisms to address vulnerabilities. As we contemplate the future of digital labor in India, particularly in the context of Sex workers, the following questions arise:

- How can society shift perceptions to reduce the stigma associated with sex work and other forms of digital labor?
- What mechanisms can be implemented to ensure that the voices of digital workers are central in policy discussions affecting their livelihoods?

These questions require a collaborative approach involving policymakers, platform operators, workers, and the civil society. By ensuring inclusive dialogues and equitable policies across sectors, India can pave the way for a digitally just economy that safeguards the rights of all workers, particularly those in the margins.

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