

Opportunities and Challenges of Digital Transformation and the Gig Economy for Young Females in Pakistan: A Qualitative Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Due to the accelerated evolution in the digital world, digital transformation in the gig economy offers new opportunities to young females in Pakistan, but the number of challenges can limit their engagement in the process to a great extent. The aim of this study is to identify the obstacles and opportunities related to digital transformations in the gig economy for the young female freelancers in Pakistan. This study has adopted a qualitative research design using semi-structured interviews. Ten young female freelancers were selected using a convenience sampling method, whereas thematic analysis was performed to analyse data from Karachi. Five major themes were identified, such as opportunities, challenges, issues of socio-cultural norms, strategies for empowerment, and future prospects. The results indicate that females are allowed to have a balance between personal and professional lives as digital gig work is viewed as flexible, autonomous, and globally accessible. However, there are still certain obstacles, including fluctuating income, discrimination by gender, the absence of technological competence, and the binding socio-cultural norms. Respondents suggested that mentoring, digital training, and government support are crucial to make the digital environment less breakneck and more inclusive. Despite this, the gig economy is revolutionary to young females in Pakistan, which requires systematic changes to ensure that digital freelancing becomes a viable and fair source of career.

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, the number of people choosing to participate in freelance or contract-related activities has significantly risen, with the primary reasons being technological breakthroughs and a lack of traditional job opportunities (Masood & Naqvi, 2025). The gig economy has been growing over the last twenty years, particularly among white-collar workers, including translators, software developers, data entry experts, creative writers, multimedia specialists, and online sales and marketing professionals. These practitioners have been moving towards non-classic and varied work provisions enabled through digital systems (Ahmed et al., 2025; M, 2023). This is why the gig-based market model is expected to experience significant growth in the near future. This shift in employment trend, or the working briefs, task-based engagements with many clients in a short time, as opposed to maintaining a long-term commitment with an employer, is one of the main characteristics of the new labour environment that is currently being discussed and referred to as the gig economy (M, 2023,?; Ullah & Shah, 2025).

The gig economy has brought about new opportunities to earn a living; however, several concerns have been noted among workers, such as security of their jobs, income predictability, and entitlement to benefits (Duggan et al., 2021; Yasmin & Karamat, 2025). Over time, the digital revolution has brought women in developing countries increased employment prospects, economic security, and empowerment. Various platforms allow women to overcome cultural, social, and mobility restrictions. By utilising digital marketplaces, women gain greater flexibility and job satisfaction, enabling them to manage their personal and professional lives more effectively, including family duties (Churchill & Craig, 2019; Foong & Gerber, 2021; Martin et al., 2022; Sarker, 2021). Its benefit is enormous to the economy, and many female entrepreneurs can play a direct role in the economic growth of the country. Provided that the trend is sustained, more and more women will consider a career in digital work as an option. Digital transformation allows working remotely, and it is more specifically needed by women in rural communities and more conservative cultures in which women tend to have restricted mobility and formal job opportunities (Ahmad et al., 2024). Considering factors such as cultural and geographical constraints, the gig economy offers alternative paths for female economic participation (Anzak & Sultana, 2020; Yasmin & Karamat, 2025).

The percentage of women in Pakistan is approximately 48.5 percent of the total population (Economic Survey of Pakistan, [ESP], 2024-25). Among women who have attained higher secondary education and beyond, workforce participation remains at just 30 percent, compared to significantly higher levels of 83 percent among men with the same level of education (M, 2023). This huge gap brings

out the structural and socio-economic obstacles to female participation in formal employment. It may be regarded as one of the causes for the low level of female participation in the labour force, which is among the lowest in the world, and its percentage rate is significantly lower than the global average (Yasmin & Karamat, 2025).

The trend of women moving to the gig economy in Pakistan is emerging, and it is expected to continue in the coming decades (Ahmed et al., 2025; Nawaz et al., 2020). Moreover, women consider these platforms as a profitable and time-friendly way of earning an income, thus allowing them to organize their work and life, which makes them a good source (Masood & Naqvi, 2025; Saleem et al., 2025). The complex economic and labour environment in Pakistan creates another challenge to women and unemployed youths, trapping the prospects of the gig economy. The other opportunity that women can utilize to empower themselves in Pakistan is the gig economy, which provides women a means of independence to take care of their families (Ahmed et al., 2025). Digital changes have resulted in the rise of the gig economy, which allows women to work on their own conditions and take up jobs offered by freelancing sites, including Upwork, Fiverr, and Freelancer. This is particularly relevant in the case of Pakistan, where the women's employment rate is only 22 percent (International Labour Organization, 2022). Other steps to increase skills via online training involve the *digiSkills* programs by the Government of Pakistan that have played a central role in equipping women with the necessary skills to operate suitably in the gig economy (James, 2023; Pakistan Bureau of Statistics, 2022; Vadavi & Sharmiladevi, 2024). The special contribution to the research is the way platform-based work challenges and recreates gendered restrictions in a Global South setting. In contrast to the current literature that mostly records obstacles or empowerment stories separately, this paper reveals how women negotiate between socio-cultural limitations, digital skills disparities, and algorithmic sources of precarity and create their own micro-agency on the internet. In theory, it enhances the feminist and digital labour discussion by incorporating the socio-cultural norms and the platform governance processes, which provide a more situational insight into the female gig work in the Global South. The study will, therefore, seek to examine the great opportunities and challenges of the gig economy driven by digital transformation on young females in Pakistan and propose the potential strategies that may be used to increase the participation of women in the gig economy. This study makes a valuable contribution to the literature by enriching the existing understanding of the intersection of technology, labour, and gender within the socio-economic context of Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gig Economy and Digital Transformation

The gig economy refers to the increasing prevalence of individual participation in short-term, temporary, and flexible employment that is either project-based or contract-based (Gupta et al., 2022; Vallas & Schor, 2020). The digital economy is economic activity facilitated by digital platforms, data flows, and online infrastructures, and functions on the intermediation in platforms, algorithmic coordination, and value creation mediated by digital (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2016; Bukht & Heeks, 2017). These processes are not gender neutral: it has been demonstrated that the gaps in digital access, disproportionate digital capabilities, and the biases of algorithms tend to support the existing gender inequalities, especially in the context of the Global South. This knowledge can help offer a desirable background to the study of the ways in which young women in Karachi interact with the gig economy, since access points and restrictions are produced by the larger patterns of the digital economy that interventions such as visibility, access, and economic intervention. Concrete advancements are needed in the informal, disjointed, and adaptable task-oriented workforce, not only on a global level but also at the micro-level. Digital platform-based employment is a suitable description of the gig economy, which can be defined as work-related activities carried out with the assistance of digital platforms (M, 2023). The digitisation, incorporating technology in all processes, has dramatically changed the workplace. This has brought about drastic changes in the working environment, the skills required, and even job availability (M, 2023). For instance, with the evolution of e-commerce platforms, there has been a rise in the population of digital marketing professionals; alternatively, with the advancements in the use of automation, there has been a need to employ those with expertise in data analysis, especially with big data (M, 2023). The development of digital infrastructure, particularly in mobile technologies and internet accessibility, has had a profound impact on the growth of gig-based jobs. It has led to the argument about the future of the workforce and the necessity of creating policies and initiatives that will allow employees to move to different jobs and industries (M, 2023). Employment is also one of the most important spheres impacted by digital transformation and has seen the creation of new jobs, the introduction of new demands for digital competence, the facilitation of teleworking, and an increase in the fear of the consequences of automation displacement (M, 2023). Yasmin and Karamat (2025) emphasized job satisfaction in Pakistani women who switched to online employment, which involved a trade-off between the sustainability of the traditional jobs and the flexibility of online work. The younger women who are unmarried would opt to work online because it gives them independence and contentment, although they can get on-site jobs.

On the other hand, older women choose on-site employment as they are used to it and because of their means of living. It shows that preferences are influenced by education, stable income, and non-monetary benefits (Yasmin & Karamat, 2025).

Women's Empowerment through Digital Platforms

Digitisation of the gig economy has provided fresh opportunities to young women to get flexible and independent employment (Salamzadeh et al., 2025). This change is more applicable in the regions where the conservative labour markets are relatively inaccessible or highly patriarchal. Giving young women a chance to make money, acquire skills, and support their families financially, websites and applications as Upwork, Fiverr, Uber, and local equivalents provide them with an opportunity to earn money (Foong & Gerber, 2021). The gig economy has opened up more opportunities to young women who can find flexible and independent jobs through the online revolution of the economy. This change holds a greater significance in places where there are no formal places of work or locations that are dominated by males. In other countries, websites like Upwork and Fiverr, as well as Uber, allow young women to earn, learn, and serve their community by engaging in the labor market (Foong & Gerber, 2021). Some studies in the Asia-Pacific and sub-Saharan Africa have found that young women utilize online applications to work remotely, sell products and services online, and offer digital services, which in turn enables them to balance paid and unpaid household activities (Martin et al., 2022; Nahid & Amir, 2024). Enabling women in the informal sector to promote their work, digital platforms like "Zumi" and "Tress" are raising their visibility in industries that have not been well-known. Due to these platforms, young women can access jobs and career development opportunities, overcoming barriers from various areas and backgrounds.

Nevertheless, joining gig work can be made easier for young females; however, it is restricted by digital knowledge, not having a device, and internet access, in which males generally perform better (Qazi et al., 2022). The gap in digital literacy, where many females lack essential skills, is also a problem that denies females the opportunity to operate and utilise emerging digital technologies (Khan, 2025). Milani et al. (2025) highlighted an emerging phenomenon of the rearrangement of gendered labour relations, possibly due to digital and freelance employment. They revealed that although gig work can be a potential alternative to conventional labour among women, especially in settings where the female labour force participation rate is low, such an appearance does not come without a queue of difficulties. The structural barriers that women face include poor quality digital infrastructure,

the insufficient availability of the internet in the countryside, the lack of regulatory forces that guard against the exploitation of informal labourers, and social norms and pressures in the patriarchy. Shah and Malik (2022) argued that online digital platforms and other social networking websites are empowering females in terms of economic participation. It emphasizes how online spaces can empower women regarding access to information, resources, and opportunities, and that the extent of communicative presence in the spaces is a key element in empowering women (Luthfia et al., 2025). Chinenyenwa et al. (2025) further stressed that the effects of digital technology on the economic empowerment of women are very critical to the formulation of an evidence-based policy by policymakers, members of the private sector, or development stakeholders. Gender equality is also promoted when women are empowered as users and have access to digital platforms and tools. It acts as a catalyst towards breaking the structural economic differences, and inclusive and sustainable development takes over. The situation was different in Pakistan, where more women performed digital gigs. The lack of government policy, rising fees charged by platforms, and security issues have now caused many women to leave the job market (M, 2023; Toor et al., 2020).

Structural Disadvantages

Despite its flexibility, the gig economy continues to perpetuate several structural disadvantages that disproportionately affect young women. Unlike traditional employment, gig work lacks labour protections, stable income, and social benefits such as maternity leave or workplace safety regulations (Sarker, 2021). These issues are supplemented by the fact that platform work is informal and algorithm-based, so the work is often allocated depending on availability and performance indicators, which fail to take into consideration caregiving disruption or gendered expectations. Foong and Gerber (2021) revealed that women tend to underprice their services more often in competitive markets, which is most often due to confidence lapses and a fear of being outbid. This helps in the continuation of income inequality and restricts the ascending movement of women in the gig platforms. In addition, harassment and abuse are widespread and unreported, especially in place-specific gig economy models, like taxi-hailing and beauty services. The absence of formal grievance systems scares away many women from working on platforms, especially in conservative societies. Online platforms are under threat of recreating the offline disparities, and without conscious structural changes and policy interventions, they will be recreated in the digital dimension (Sarker, 2021). There are problems with the fact that platform jobs are usually temporary and are based on algorithms, so there is no need to consider family obligations or conventional gender roles

when assigning tasks. Furthermore, prejudice due to algorithms is also a serious concern for workers. Platforms may unfairly penalise women because they are less active or perform fewer gigs due to their domestic responsibilities. Foong and Gerber (2021) found that women are more likely to charge less than men on market websites due to their confidence and fear of being perceived as less competent. Due to this, gender-based differences in earnings are prevalent, and women have fewer opportunities to advance within gig platforms. Also, harassment and abuse often occur but are very rarely reported by those working in ride-hailing or beauty services. For this reason, gig platforms may end up reinforcing traditional gender and economic roles instead of helping women if they are not created with gender sensitivity in mind. The increased income loss and greater household responsibilities during COVID-19 highlight that women gig workers are more vulnerable in an unstable job market (Martin et al., 2022).

The problem of invisibility is especially acute among digital workers of the Global South due to the state of commodification, which is an additional factor increasing the structural inequalities that women are already facing in the gig economy (Cockayne, 2016). When that occurs, the socio-cultural contexts of workers are stripped off, and the gender-specific issues that determine how women approach the field of digital labour are not well represented by the platform systems (Schwartz, 2018; Stanford, 2017). Although digital platforms are positioned mainly as inclusive and flexible mediums, they replicate the practice of exclusion, which oppresses women and marginalised workers at a higher rate. Compared to previous studies, when market efficiency is prioritised over fair labour conditions, such platforms conceal existing social disparities, leading to increased risks of exploitation, labour fragility, and structural discrimination. Even females in the gig economy face significant obstacles in starting their businesses, including limited access to finance, a network mainly dominated by men, and cultural constraints (Aidis et al., 2008; Brush & Cooper, 2012; Kalafatoglu & Mendoza, 2017). Although there has been continuous improvement, structural challenges have continued to be experienced, such as low levels of digital literacy, low levels of digital infrastructure, and long-standing socio-cultural restrictions. Such problems are a clear indication that policy interventions are urgently needed, which should be specific to bring about equitable and inclusive digital empowerment (Ateş et al., 2025; Darji, 2025).

Gap in Research

Although the literature extensively discusses the effects of digital transformation and the gig economy on a global level, there is a substantial gap in the study on a local level, particularly within a gendered context, especially in developing countries such as Pakistan. Moreover, socio-cultural, infrastructural,

and gender-related obstacles in Pakistan, particularly in big cities like Karachi, are not adequately represented in studies. Despite international evidence on the empowering potential of gig work and online platforms for women, researchers lack a qualitative exploration of the opportunities that present themselves to young Pakistani women in the Pakistani setting, specifically in terms of how they perceive, access, and experience them. This research aims to fill this gap by providing a context-specific inquiry into the lives of young women in Karachi within the emerging digital economy, exploring their ambitions as well as the limitations they face.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design, which allows the researcher to obtain rich and contextual details that quantitative research often fails to attain (Mckim, 2017). To get data, this study employed a primary method of data collection through semi-structured interviews with ten young females who are currently involved in freelancing using various digital platforms in November 2024. Ten participants were chosen purposely to obtain thematic saturation on a strictly defined group due to the limitations of population access and the exploratory, in-depth study. The interview questions were open-ended in order to get the experiences, opinions, and perceptions of the participants. The sample group consisted of young women aged between 18 and 30 years who actively participated in the gig economy and were put into different digital freelancer platforms in Karachi. The fact that young females in Karachi city are chosen justifies the fact that they are positioned in a unique location since the gig economy in the largest urban centre in Pakistan is vibrant and growing rapidly. Karachi may be viewed as the center of all freelance and temporary employment; however, it attracts a number of young workers, also, first, because it is flexible and has a variety of income sources. The study used convenience sampling because of the nature of time and resources available, which made the sampled individuals conveniently available to the general inclusion criteria of the research aim (Emerson, 2015; Sedgwick, 2013). The semi-structured interviews that lasted about 30 to 45 minutes were conducted online using Zoom due to the convenience of the participants. A semi-structured interview guide was used so that consistency could be ensured throughout the sessions and yet be flexible enough to enable the participants to share their own experience and insights. Interview data were analysed through thematic analysis, as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was based on the six-step framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), which is inductive and data-driven so that the themes could be generated through the description of the participants. The researcher mainly carried out coding with a second reviewer, considering a sub-sample of

transcripts to increase the rigour of analysis; small divergences were discussed and the codebook refined. Candidate themes were then created by grouping codes and subjecting them to review with the dataset, and defining them by comparison and memoing. To enhance credibility, the research used reflexive notes during the collection and analysis of data, peer debriefing during theme development, and confirmation of facts by the participants where necessary. This methodological approach made the final themes logical, data-driven, and analytic. The participants were informed about the purpose of the research before their consent to participate was sought. All through the procedure, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, and participants were allowed to withdraw from participation at any point without prejudice. The positionality of the researcher (female researcher conversant with digital labour in Pakistan) is recognised and is reflexively addressed by the use of memoing, independent coders, and audit trails to ensure a minimum level of bias is applied in the data collection and analysis process.

Table 1.
Summary of Thematic Codes and Representative Quotes

Theme	Sub-themes / Focus
Opportunities of Digital Transformation	Flexibility & Autonomy Skill Development & Empowerment
Challenges Faced by Young Females	Income Instability Gender Discrimination Technological Limitations
Issue of Socio-cultural Norms	Domestic Responsibilities Perceptions of Respectability in Gig Work
Strategies for Enhancing Female Participation	Mentorship & Training Policy changes through platform reforms and government support
Future of the Gig Economy for Young Females	Conditional Optimism Need for Policy Support Economic Insecurity

(Source: Authors)

RESULTS

The presented section is intended to elaborate on the consequences of digital transformation on the gig economy among young women. The analysis of the semi-structured interviews can be explained with respect to five major themes.

Table 2.
Participant Characteristics

Participant Code	Age	Marital Status	Education Level	Type of Gig / Freelance Work	Years of Freelancing
P1	18	Single	Intermediate / College-going	Content writing, social media tasks	0.5-1 year
P2	19	Single	Undergraduate student	Graphic design (Canva), basic editing	1 year
P3	20	Single	Undergraduate (Business)	Virtual assistance, online tutoring	1-2 years
P4	21	Single	Undergraduate (IT/CS)	Web design support, small coding tasks	1 year
P5	22	Single	Bachelor's completed	E-commerce support (Daraz/Shopify)	2 years
P6	23	Married	Bachelor's ongoing	Content creation & social media management	1-3 years
P7	24	Single	Master's student	Academic editing, transcription	2-3 years
P8	26	Married	Bachelor's completed	Digital marketing, client outreach	3 years
P9	28	Married	Master's completed	Freelance consultancy (admin/operations)	4+ years
P10	30	Married	Master's completed	Professional writing & project coordination	5+ years

(Source: Authors)

Theme 1: Opportunities of Digital Transformation

Among the identified opportunities, flexibility and autonomy are the main and important opportunities highlighted by respondents while working through freelancing platforms, which can be viewed as one of the main triggers of the economic freedom of the young female Pakistanis.

Respondent 1 was reflective of the creativity in that she highlighted the flexibility provided by digital platforms.

“Among the major benefits, there is the flexibility of work and the construction of new and improved skills since work can be based on personal objectives and objectives of professional growth.”

This highlights the liberation and freedom that online platforms bring, as young females can establish their career paths. Respondent 2 also emphasized that

the personal and professional development opportunities are a major benefit of working at home.

“The most positive influence has been on flexibility in the place of work, especially the need to work at home and the ability to control my working time, as it offers additional self and professional growth.”

Respondent 4 stated that.

“Digital platforms provide a variety of sources of income and the possibility to regulate one’s own income. The principal opportunities are a chance to work on my own, work without stress, work and have a good income, and receive exposure to different jobs in all fields.”

It confirms the position taken by many individuals arguing that the gig economy is not only a source of livelihood but also a source of empowerment.

Respondent 8 described how the gig economy enables freelancers to reach international clients, which is also very important to women in Pakistan who would be constrained by mobility in any other way.

“It’s online services that have allowed me to reach a market of customers representing every sector of the world and to be capable of competing with other service providers.”

These responses show that women are able to expand their businesses online and work with economic freedom, along with flexibility of timing and mobility constraints. The results provide an engaging account of empowerment, flexibility, and financial autonomy through digital transformation in the gig economy amongst young women in Pakistan. The results point to the fact that not only are digital platforms redefining traditional employment practices, but they are also establishing new opportunities for development in both personal and professional life, especially under the conditions of cultural oppression, among young women. The topics of self-responsible work, self-development, and international relationships were consistently stressed by the subjects, which shows that gig jobs offer people financial opportunities along with the realisation of self-actualisation and self-systematization. However, since the mentioned benefits are inclusive, there is also an implication of positivity in terms of accessibility and preparedness.

Theme 2: Challenges Faced by Young Females

On the other hand, respondents also elaborated various crucial threats that, although not unique to the gig economy, make gig work unpredictable and precarious in nature. Most of the time, income instability was one of the

significant concerns raised by respondents.

For instance, Respondent 4 noted:

“Coordinating unpredictable income and searching for steady opportunities are never easy, particularly when one has to evolve in a saturated market continuously.”

This would go a long way in understanding why there were no long-term commitments or financial risks that were typically associated with the gig economy.

Respondent 2 also faced financial struggles:

“Sustaining finances and unequal incomes have been tough, especially when in the early stages of ideas.”

Defining an independent working status also indicates that freelancers, especially during the initial years of their careers, are most vulnerable financially and require considerable endurance to survive such cyclical income situations. Another key focus was discrimination and prejudice based on gender.

Respondent 9 shared her experience of being judged based on gender identity in the male-dominated tech industry:

“Sometimes I felt a lack of confidence because people did not consider me to be a ‘programmer’ because I am a girl.”

Similarly, Respondent 2 recalled her challenges with gender bias:

“There have been some concerns that have arisen from gender bias, for instance, being paid less or not being given the same respect as male colleagues.”

Respondent 10 faced this issue in her event planning work:

“At times, I have met prejudices that I could be less professional or less competent because of my youth and being a woman, which is rather challenging to dissolve.”

Moreover, the technological problems have also turned out to be major roadblocks to the innovation process.

Respondent 1 thought about the way in which the absence of technological skills can complicate the process of remaining competitive.

“I have experience of having to call a meeting only to realize that I was technologically disadvantaged by having to use the most up-to-date software or devices so that I was on par with my peers in a meeting”.

These responses pointed out the requirement of sufficient digital competencies for keeping up with the emerging technologies. The gig economy is a life-changing opportunity for young women, but the outcomes indicate the presence of several weaknesses and challenges faced by young women. These types of evaluation disclose that the question of income instability is urgent and is deep-rooted, which highlights the precarious nature of freelance work, which is not financially stable. The testimonies of the participants further illuminate the fact that this economic uncertainty is further aggravated by some form of gender discrimination, either direct or subtle, against women, and this is always a challenge to professional development amongst women in the male-dominated digital circles. Despite the promise of autonomy, the respondents complain that they continue to face systemic bias that is against the principle of equal treatment and the equal pay rule of the labour market. Furthermore, the skill gap related to digitization is also a major barrier that hits females, which requires upskilling and assistance.

Theme 3: Issues of Socio-Cultural Norms

Social and cultural norms of Pakistan are other critical factors that impacted females' contribution towards the gig economy. These norms often impose additional responsibilities on women, thereby limiting the time they can spend working and completing their tasks.

Respondent 3 observed:

"Several cultural values/social beliefs impose additional demands on women regarding household chores, thus reducing the number of gig employment hours."

It shows how patriarchal society continues to manifest in the job market by still segmenting the responsibility of work along the division of labour, where women are expected to consider domestic responsibilities over paid work. For some, such norms also determine their career path. Respondent 2 mentioned how societal expectations discourage women from pursuing certain types of work:

"There are cultural norms that can dissuade people from pursuing high-paying careers, and even demeaning gig employment contradicts formal employment."

This is because gig work is considered a form of informal and non-standard work, especially for women, due to the perception of non-suitability of non-conventional jobs.

Respondent 9 expressed frustration over gendered perceptions in the tech field:

“The peculiarities of socio-cultural adjustments may play a role in perceiving women in technology, but such tendencies also encourage me to contribute to and debunk these myths.”

Respondents addressed crucial points that require attention to raise questions regarding the existence of long-standing social and cultural norms that can be an obstacle for young females. Findings also show that the conventional gendered role and demands of patriarchy continue to dictate the time, movement, and work of a woman in the recent past, which reinforces a domestic-first ideology that ignores unconventional types of labour. The respondents shared their experiences of the way in which such norms are not only limiting their time and employment decisions, but also determine social attitude, defining what is considered respectable or legitimate in their careers. However, the fact that such cultural demands are still present implies the existence of a sort of structural obstacle that cannot be removed merely by using digital transformation; it would have to involve the process of social change and the awareness campaigns that would reduce the stigma of professional sphere gender diversification to a minimum.

Theme 4: Strategies for Enhancing Female Participation

Several practical interventions and recommendations were suggested by respondents to overcome the challenges that females face in the gig economy. Mentoring and training plans are now an indispensable component of the digital world. Respondent 1 emphasised the need to develop a systematic strategy:

“Training programs and mentorship would be of great assistance in the above barrier”.

Respondent 7 also shared this view and demanded low-cost business courses and mentorship programs.

“More programs that would be useful are: the business courses at a reduced cost, and the presence of business mentorship programs”.

Other factors expressed by the respondents were the core of government support. Respondent 10 advocated for grants and subsidies:

“The government should help in the availing of grants, especially to those small businesspeople, and assist in the offering of scholarships where professional courses targeting women are offered.”

Similarly, Respondent 6 suggested that healthcare and retirement benefits could help female freelancers feel more secure in their work:

“Measures including providing freelancers with easy access to cheap childcare and healthcare would go a long way towards improving freelancers’ lot.”

The respondents also mentioned what digital platforms could do to enhance the prospects of female freelancers. Respondent 6 mentioned that platforms could protect women from client predation:

“Some platforms could be more careful to protect freelance workers from the predation of their clients and explain to those clients more fully what is acceptable and what is not.”

Respondent 9 called for platforms to create more female-oriented tech development spaces:

“Even more female-oriented popular tech development helpers and open environments that reduce bias might help.”

The responses can be described as constructive and prospective, with the focus on possible solutions to increase female presence in the gig economy. In its critical form, the recommendations extend beyond personal resilience and refer to systematic methods of solutions, including mentorship, training availability, funding, and social protections. Moreover, the respondents’ requests for government-provided grants, healthcare, childcare, and retirement benefits reflect their desire for gig work to be normalised as a valid and sustainable career opportunity in the working field of a regular female worker, and to be recognised by institutions that should assist. Notably, platform responsibility also became one of the primary issues, as women wanted to be sheltered against exploitative client attitudes and gender discrimination. These observations provide evidence that the gig economy can become a positive influence on the economy.

Theme 5: The Future of the Gig Economy for Young Females

Respondents were generally hopeful about the prospects of the gig economy, although they had some concerns about future opportunities and challenges. Respondent 9 believes that the gig economy offers opportunities, but notes that gender issues need to be addressed:

“It is an area with developing opportunities; as technology advances, more women are drawn to it. However, it is still essential to work on these gender issues and requirements.”

Respondent 4 also expressed optimism but warned that without addressing income stability, the gig economy might not be sustainable:

“It will cease to grow if it does not get more opportunities. Nevertheless, solving the problems of income stability and equality of treatment is mandatory to make

it a long-term perspective.”

Respondents have a more nuanced and optimistic perspective on the future of the gig economy. Although a significant number of respondents consider the industry a potentially source of financial independence and work-life balance, particularly in an era of digital transition following COVID-19, they are characterised by sour thoughts regarding the endemic nature of systemic inequities. As revealed through analysis, there are chronic issues such as income unreliability, gender bias, and lack of institutional support that are threatening the future viability of gig work as a professional vocation among women. The outcomes of the analysis make it clear that, unless specific actions are put into place that will enable the elimination of these factors, the gig economy will serve to reproduce the same issues in the labor market, instead of resolving them.

DISCUSSION

The two most common benefits of the gig economy, according to most of the respondents, were flexibility and autonomy, which allow them to reconcile their professional-related duties with those of their family. This is more so in the socio-cultural setup of most societies, where females tend to be the burden of having to carry out the chores and responsibilities in the household. Stanford (2017) has identified that due to digital work platforms, workers can have time and space regulation, which is proven by respondents who stated how the occupations they choose allow them to reconcile family needs and career aspirations. The gig economy is seen as a viable means of employment, with which women are able to balance their work and family lives and accomplish economic participation that would be challenged under the formal economy. Stefano (2015) and Shahzad and Ahmed et al. (2025) have emphasized that this flexibility gives working women an avenue to strike a work-life balance, particularly in societies where women are supposed to work and do house chores (Mehta et al., 2021; Shah & Malik, 2022). Nevertheless, the issue of fluctuating financial stability, which is part of the gig work, emerged as a problem. The other concern voiced by the interviewees is that the gig economy is not a long-term career since it is not a secure option. Roy and Shrivastava (2020) also mentioned this unpredictability of income, saying that gig work is full of uncertainty and does not imply stability in planning finances. This is harder for women as they are forced to attend to household needs and generate a consistent income. The theme of gender discrimination against females in the gig economy was also high (Ateş et al., 2025). A crucial aspect of dissatisfaction is gender disparity, which creates barriers for young females to explore more opportunities. Such problems, particularly the gender based barriers, have continued to increase, posing

the necessity of structural solutions that can enable more women to prosper in such undertakings. According to Churchill and Craig (2019), the problem of gender discrimination has been demonstrated in the gig economy, where women are earning less than men, especially in the technology field (Ahmad et al., 2024; Farrell et al., 2018). Socio-cultural restrictions also result in women being locked out of the gig economy or finding it very hard to break in. Socio-cultural issues also repeatedly determined the hours women could devote to gig work. Several respondents reported that commitments to their families and societal responsibilities limited their professional activities. This finding supports the studies conducted by Bagchi and Raju (2013), who posited that women, especially in rural areas, should prioritise domestic chores over paid employment. Salamzadeh et al. (2025) also pointed out that these norms determine the level of suitability for females; thus, gig work is mostly not considered respectable as 'proper' employment. Digital transformation is believed to bring increased flexibility, numerous possibilities for working from home, and opportunities for self-development, primarily because it enables greater productivity through digitisation. The results indicate that the socio-cultural and economic context of Karachi is one of the key factors that define the issues young female freelancers have to deal with, which supports numerous trends outlined in Global South gender and labour studies. Karachi, the largest city in Pakistan, has more opportunities to go digital, but the presence of patriarchal traditions is still limiting the freedom of movement and choice of women, as well as providing safe working conditions (Munoz et al., 2024). The reasons given by the participants included negotiating family surveillance, insecurity in the workplace, and domestic demands, which are aligned with the theories that highlight the importance of how gendered restrictions shape the labour-market involvement of women in South Asia (Shair et al., 2024). The conservatism of Karachi at the neighbourhood level and low urban safety levels only contribute to these pressures, thus forcing many women to turn to home-based gig work. The findings support the body of literature on gendered digital precarity (Graham et al., 2017) but complicate the idea of empowerment, as they indicated that women tend to opt for the notion of flexibility in gig employment as a means of survival to the socio-cultural demands and not unrestricted freedom. However, the growing digital economy in Karachi presents young women with opportunities that further develop the current platform labour theories. The opulent freelance economies supported by the city, comparatively high internet connection, and the emergence of online skills acquisition avenues enable women to enter international markets within a local scope (Ahmed et al., 2025). The experiences indicate what other academics call negotiated agency, in which women act within but are also able to reconfigure patriarchal demands by engaging in digital activities (Mohamed, 2025). A lot of the participants

reported becoming economically independent, confident, and professionally visible, indicating that there are hybrid successes of empowerment that make the existence of digital labour a homogenous diversion. Therefore, the Karachi mix of economic forces, opportunity structures of the digital, and the city is the source of adaptive forms of participation that not only complement existing theoretical conceptualizations of the agency of women in the gig economy but also extend them. Thus, the findings obtained in the qualitative analyses proved that digital transformation has brought more opportunities to young females in Pakistan, along with challenges such as unstable/low income, gendered oppression, and cultural barriers.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

It can also be found from findings that work-life balance is the main strength found, as the work flexibility and independence provided by the gig work allow these females to be more efficient in managing personal and professional issues, which is particularly beneficial in the traditional societal context. But one of the major weaknesses is the instability of income, and the participants had worries about financial insecurity and pay gaps. In general, the picture helps to describe the duality of gig work among young women, as it gives them freedom and opportunity, at the same time, risking and bringing unpredictability. The multi-pronged approaches have been suggested to solve these problems and encourage the participation of females in the gig economy.

- **Capacity Building:** The first thing that needs to be institutionalized is the capacity-building efforts, like digital literacy, low-cost business skills, and mentorship of women.
- **Policy-Level Intervention:** Second, policy-level interventions by the government, such as subsidies, grants, and welfare through childcare and access to healthcare, must be prioritised to make gig work viable.
- **Platform Accountability:** Third, platform accountability is essential; gig platforms should implement protective measures to prevent exploitation, develop a mixed digital space, and help reduce gender-based pay and opportunity inequality.
- **Awareness:** Community awareness and cultural reorientation are also crucial to changing perceptions about females in non-traditional employment.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations, including the fact that the findings cannot be generalised to the entire population due to the small sample size of ten participants and the experiences shared by young female gig workers in various parts of Pakistan. Furthermore, the study was restricted to Karachi, one of the major urban centres in Pakistan. Thus, it may not accurately represent the issues faced by females in rural or underdeveloped areas, where access to digital platforms and infrastructure may differ significantly. Similarly, the study relied solely on self-reported data, which may have introduced biases such as social desirability or recall bias. Third, although thematic analysis is rich in meaning, the study failed to include quantitative data to quantify the frequency of challenges such as economic instability or gender discrimination. Future studies can be more robust with a larger sample size and survey instruments, as it would allow quantifying the results of the qualitative pattern finding. The geographical scope can be extended to the rural and small cities in the future, and analyze the geographical differences in the experiences of gig work. Additional studies that consider other variables, such as education level, socio-economic status, and the support mechanisms (such as the family support) that women engaged in the gig economy might also have, would provide a clearer picture of the complexities of the barriers and enablers of women's success in the gig economy.

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