

Strategizing safety for women in the gig economy: a scoping review of policy research

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Executive Summary

This scoping review, authored by Bajpai Tewari and colleagues and published in *Frontiers in Organizational Psychology* (2026), examines safety concerns and policy responses affecting women in the gig economy. The authors argue that formal protective structures are largely absent, and that existing legal and policy frameworks inadequately address the harassment and safety risks faced by female platform workers. Employing PRISMA-ScR 2020 methodology across Scopus, Web of Science, and APA PsycINFO databases, the review identified 16 eligible studies from 482 retrieved records. Key findings document pervasive sexual harassment, physical assault, cyber violence, and income sacrifice as women trade earnings for personal safety. Safety strategies operate at individual, platform, and collective levels, with individual-level burdens falling disproportionately on women workers. Platform-level interventions such as panic buttons and GPS tracking are characterized as reactive and inadequate. The authors conclude that effective governance requires a hybrid multi-actor institutional model combining legally enforced platform accountability, worker union participation, and gender-sensitive urban infrastructure, with solutions contextualized to specific geographic and sectoral conditions.

Key Insights

1. Women in the gig economy face compounded safety vulnerabilities—including sexual harassment, physical assault, cyber violence, and customer anonymity risks—that are structurally enabled by worker misclassification as independent contractors, which limits platform liability.
2. Algorithmic rating systems create exploitable power imbalances, compelling women to tolerate harassment to avoid negative reviews and income loss, effectively normalizing abuse within platform governance structures.
3. Worker solidarity and informal collective networks (e.g., WhatsApp and WeChat groups) are identified as more practically effective safety mechanisms than platform-provided tools, yet lack formal institutional backing or recognition.
4. A significant gender-based earnings gap persists in gig platforms—7% among Uber drivers in the U.S. and 15% in Chinese platform services—driven by occupational stereotyping, caregiving responsibilities, and safety-motivated restrictions on nighttime work.
5. Global South workers face disproportionately greater safety vulnerability due to weaker labor protections, inadequate urban infrastructure, and limited redressal mechanisms compared to Global North counterparts.

Practical Takeaways

- The review documents that women gig workers adopt individual defensive strategies—avoiding nighttime operations, sharing locations, carrying protective tools, and adopting masculine appearances—as primary safety responses in the absence of adequate platform or state protections.
- Platform-level safety tools such as GPS tracking, panic buttons, audio-video surveillance, and gender-segregated service options (e.g., female-only ride options in India, China, and Indonesia) exist but are characterized in the literature as reactive and insufficient to address root causes of safety inequity.

Frameworks Mentioned

Intersectionality — A theoretical framework, foundational work attributed to Crenshaw, applied in the review to explain how overlapping social identities—including gender, race, and migration status—compound vulnerabilities experienced by female gig workers.

PRISMA-ScR — Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses extension for Scoping Reviews (2020 version), used as the methodological framework governing database searches, screening, and synthesis procedures in this review.

Critical Analysis

Strengths: The review follows a rigorous and transparent methodology (PRISMA-ScR 2020) with strong inter-reviewer reliability (Cohen's kappa of 0.82 and 0.78). The use of bibliometric analysis alongside narrative synthesis adds quantitative depth. The multidisciplinary, geographically diverse reference base strengthens the contextual scope. The theoretical pluralism—drawing on patriarchy theory, intersectionality, social role theory, and algorithmic management theory—provides a nuanced analytical lens. **Limitations:** The final sample of 16 studies is small, limiting statistical and generalizability claims. Ride-hailing is overrepresented relative to other gig sectors (delivery, domestic work, remote work). Gray literature exclusion likely underrepresents regulatory and policy developments, particularly from the Global South. No quality appraisal of included studies was conducted, meaning methodologically weak primary studies are treated equivalently to stronger ones. The review's conclusions about the need for a hybrid multi-actor model are logically consistent with the evidence but extend beyond what 16 studies can definitively support. **Potential bias:** The framing consistently foregrounds structural critique of platform capitalism, which may shape interpretive conclusions beyond what the evidence strictly demonstrates.

Organizational Practice

The review documents safety practices implemented by platform companies including GPS tracking, panic buttons, audio-video surveillance, gender-segregated service options (female-only ride-hailing fleets in India, China, and Indonesia), and flagging mechanisms for online workers (e.g., Upwork). Worker-led practices include informal WhatsApp and WeChat safety networks (e.g., Indonesia's Srikandi group, Berlin's Sindicat Helping), individual avoidance behaviors, location sharing, and the adoption of masculine appearances to reduce harassment exposure. Some workers have formed formal unions, though no structured platform mechanism specifically addresses sexual harassment grievances in gig work.

Strategic Implications

The review's findings point toward a widening governance gap in platform labor regulation, with no jurisdiction currently providing sexual harassment-specific legal protections for gig workers. The documented ineffectiveness of platform self-regulation and individual-level safety burdens suggests

growing pressure for legislative intervention, as evidenced by emerging policy instruments such as the EU Platform Work Directive and Ontario's Digital Platform Workers' Rights Act. The identification of worker solidarity networks as more effective than platform tools implies that collective worker organization may become an increasingly relevant factor in gig economy governance. The geographic disparity in safety outcomes between Global North and Global South contexts indicates that any emerging regulatory frameworks will face significant implementation challenges across jurisdictions with varying labor protection infrastructures. The intersection of algorithmic management, gender, and safety represents an understudied area within performance management systems research, particularly regarding how rating and evaluation mechanisms may structurally disadvantage women workers.

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