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A Research on the Work-Life Balance Challenges of Chinese Female Food Delivery Workers

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Abstract. With the rapid growth of China's platform economy, food delivery has become a major employment channel for low-skilled migrant workers. However, the seemingly flexible working model conceals deep-rooted inequalities, especially for female delivery workers who remain largely invisible in mainstream discourse and public policy. This study explores the lived experiences of women in the food delivery sector through in-depth interviews with five participants from diverse backgrounds and over 30 hours of field observations in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou. The findings reveal that female workers face a dual burden: that is to say, gendered labor expectations at home and occupational marginalization in a male-dominated, algorithmically governed workplace. Many women adapt their behavior and identity to fit in, yet still encounter limited career mobility, mental strain, and reduced earning opportunities due to platform control and caregiving demands, which are significant factors. The study also highlights how women negotiate their social roles, safety concerns, and economic needs within an unequal system. However, limitations include restricted access to internal platform data, such as insurance policies or company hierarchies, and the reliance on qualitative methods, which may limit generalizability to put it simply. Future research should incorporate broader datasets and deepen the focus on gendered dynamics in gig work to inform more inclusive labor policies, aiming to address these complex issues.

Keywords: Female food delivery workers, gender roles, work-life balance, algorithms control, platform capitalism

1. Introduction

In recent years, with the rapid development of the digital platform economy, the food delivery industry has expanded rapidly in Chinese cities and has become an important employment channel for millions of workers, especially low-skilled migrant workers. However, behind this seemingly "flexible and free" working model, there are serious problems such as labor instability, safety risks and social exclusion. It is particularly noteworthy that as a minority group in the industry, the work experience and life pressure of female food delivery workers have long been ignored in mainstream research and public policies [1]. The gender role division of "men work outside and women work inside" in traditional society still profoundly affects the career choices and development paths of contemporary women. In the food delivery industry, which is physically demanding and dominated by men, female workers not only face physiological and institutional unequal treatment, but also have to bear heavy family care responsibilities at the same time [2]. This dual structure of "occupational marginalization" and "family burden" puts them under tremendous pressure in the process of pursuing

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economic independence and social dignity. For example, female food delivery workers are often forced to work overtime during peak traffic hours and in bad weather due to the high-pressure control of working hours by algorithms; and when they return home, they still have to fulfill the traditional obligations of "mother", "wife" or "daughter".

Although current studies on the platform economy and labour control focused on the general labour conditions, the aspects of discourse that should apply to gender are usually just theoretical, lacking any empirical and phenomenological considerations of the particular experience of women as food delivery workers. In an attempt to fill this gap, the current paper explores the real lives of such workers along the platform discipline-gender structures- and family-related issues. This study is based on a literature review, intensive interviews of five participants with various identity backgrounds, and observations in the field relating to understanding not only the gendered issues they experience in jobs with physical demands, but also how they experience social role identities, psychological pressures, and marginal survival in the system which frequently makes them invisible.

2. Literature review

In China's post-epidemic employment structure, the food delivery industry, as a typical representative of the platform economy, has experienced rapid expansion, attracting more and more women to enter this traditionally male-dominated labor field [3]. During the epidemic, flexible working hours and low-threshold employment conditions have become important reasons for women to join the industry, but with them come many new gender challenges and structural dilemmas. At the work level, the operating mechanism of the food delivery platform reflects the typical characteristics of "platform capitalism", that is, controlling the labor process through algorithms, compressing delivery time, and encouraging overwork, thereby maximizing corporate profits. Sun pointed out that the platform has set up a mechanism for grabbing orders and performance appraisals, which makes riders constantly rush around in urban space, facing traffic risks and time anxiety [4,5]. Li and Jiang further proposed the "time competition culture", pointing out that algorithmic control has strengthened the dual discipline of the body and consciousness of workers, forming a state of "pseudo-freedom". These mechanisms are more incompatible with female workers, including doubts about their physical abilities and the oppression of family responsibilities in addition to heavy labor.

Gender-wise, women delivery drivers may be viewed as the members of the marginal group in the industry and face the stereotypes and the unofficial discrimination. Indicatively, there is the phenomenon of de-labeling as advanced by Ma and his research of female truck drivers which is also applicable to female delivery drivers [2]. By going into the male dominated careers, these women are trying to break the social norms that instill social stereotypes showing them as less productive workers. Nevertheless, they continue to struggle with things like gender bias, promotion barriers and skepticism over their physical abilities. The minority theory developed by Kanter notes that once the number of members of a certain gender group is less than 15% of the overall organization, they tend to be the one who are symbolically represented, marginalized, or even excluded [2].

Also, female delivery workers engage in a dual-level load in platform work and in taking care of their families. Though there is a specific level of flexibilities in platform work and it might be very convenient in family care [1], such flexibility is usually accompanied by unpredictable income and insecurity. They do not enjoy the conventional system of social welfare and are not entitled to basic security wherein they are not insured against medical conditions and work related injury, hence it aggravates the insecurity of life. Popan in his work on the gig economy termed these employees as workers of the precariat, being outside the formal labor systems, not having protection of the union, and without access to the system of the public support [1].

The deeper gender structure also continues to affect women's career paths and identity. In traditional culture, women are still expected to take on the main role of family care, and the social

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division of labor concept of "men are responsible for the outside and women are responsible for the inside" is deeply rooted [6]. Booth and Van Ours pointed out that the balance between family and work is obviously asymmetric at the gender level. When facing work pressure, women often have to face dual evaluations and expectations from society and family [7]. This structural inequality not only affects their career choices, but also exacerbates psychological pressure and social exclusion [2].

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a phenomenological qualitative approach to explore how Chinese female food delivery workers experience gendered labor, platform control, and work-life imbalance. Phenomenological research emphasizes the subjective interpretation of participants, which enables a more nuanced understanding of their lived realities [8].

3.2. Participants and data collection

This paper used a purposive sample size, and five participants who represent the settings and identities of the platform food delivery sector were used. These were two female riders: Huang (female) and Ji (female), a team leader Liu (male), a policy manager Tong (female) and a relative of a female rider Guo (male). The study involved all participants migrant workers that lived on the mainland in China and therefore their career decisions were affected by debt, childcare and career mobility.

The data collection was performed based on the semi-structured interviews (between 90 and 120 minutes) in Beijing, Shanghai, and Hangzhou where the concentration of platform labor is high. The discussion during interviews covered the subjects of motherhood, career barriers, platform policies, gender discrimination, and the division of labor in a family. Moreover, this research has conducted over 30 hours of fieldwork at delivery stations and on the streets and has monitored the patterns of movements and places of work, the potential of experiencing workplace injuries, socializing, and interacting with workers. This assisted in triangulation of the interview data and contextualization of the responses given by the participants.

3.3. Data analysis

This research will take a hybrid approach of interview and field study, which has brought both objectivity and subjectivity of the analysis. The data analysis process was carried out in accordance with systematic coding to define and systematize the themes that are frequent and the concerns and areas of interest of participants expressed. Three coding techniques were used including those referred to as open coding, axial coding and selective coding. Open coding includes the process of decomposing large amounts of qualitative data to small manageable units. The interpretation and determination of relationships between these segments are performed through the method of axial coding and selective coding combines and unites the categories in forming more comprehensive thematic accounts. To adequately answer the research questions, interview taping were first transcribed into textual data, which were then categorized and labeled in view of the important topics.

3.4. Ethical considerations

In this research, informed consent was obtained prior to interviews, which fully allows them to completely understand research objectives and data usage. Also, pseudonyms were applied to avoid the exposure of their real name and protect participants' privacy. Moreover, sensitive topics such as unrevealed information of companies and their specific profits were not included in this research to prevent the violation of personal and institutional information.

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4. Results

Through data collected through interviews and field observations, this study found some recurring patterns in the life experiences of female food delivery riders. The first is the strict algorithmic control that affects their lives. Most participants said that their work schedules are determined by the order flow generated by the platform, which compresses labor into short hours and extends working hours during peak demand. Some participants mentioned that they only go home once a year, indicating that they are separated from their families for a long time due to work requirements.

The second theme that repeats itself is the issue of gender. Most of the female riders are paid less than their male counterparts on average and in most cases, their physical fitness is also questioned. Urban areas like Guomao and Sanlitun in Beijing, there have been reports of some of them being denied access to shopping malls or verbally abused by other security guards. Other individuals had taken up certain measures including failure to wear uniform or carry regular bags so as to hide pictures of them as food delivery drivers.

Moreover, spatial inequality was also manifested in a variation in income. The respondents claimed to have increased incomes in the central business districts, whereby there were better infrastructure like elevators and it was in these central business districts that the deliveries became easier. On the contrary, residential neighborhoods generated less orders particularly during weekends. Some respondents noted the issue of equipment such as the inability to transportation more boxes because of the limitations of the usual container size. Protection at the workplace was reported to be sub par. When there was a road accident involving traffic, the riders would tend to be blamed entirely whereas the third-party injury was not covered by the current existing insurances.

Moreover, the issue is complicated by the usual gender expectations. Other participants, particularly single mothers, discussed that balancing childcare and family duties in addition to irregular and high-intensity work was challenging. The biggest reasons to join the food delivery business were family pressure, and finances such as debt or education costs of children.

Overall, the data suggest that female food delivery workers are in a labor system with high mobility, low protection, large spatial and gender differences, and limited institutional support.

5. Discussion

Based on the interview results, the study found that Chinese female food delivery workers are facing a complex situation that combines institutional, gender and occupational difficulties. Their struggles are related in three interconnected aspects, which are insecure labor conditions, high safety risk and dual gender burdens.

5.1. Algorithmic control, labor insecurity, and social protection deficits

The lack of social protection combined with algorithmic instability creates a serious sense of job insecurity. Female delivery workers often bear a disproportionate amount of unpaid family responsibilities, making them particularly vulnerable to income losses in the absence of adequate social benefits. Algorithmic management further deepens their insecurity by automatically allocating fewer jobs during peak hours, reflecting the perception that women work less or are less capable during busy times. In addition, women bear a disproportionate amount of medical and work-related injury costs without receiving employer-funded compensation, threatening their financial stability and ability to care for their loved ones in the event of an accident [1].

The "race against the clock culture" in the delivery industry also forces workers to pursue speed at the expense of safety. Algorithmic pressure sets unrealistic deadlines and punishes procrastinators with pay cuts and future orders. To earn bonuses and avoid penalties, workers are forced to risk their safety to get paid. Traffic violation rates for delivery drivers, including speeding and running red

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lights, soared to 81% [8]. For women, social perceptions of "physically weak" further limit the support they receive and exacerbate risks [2].

There are also difficulties connected to gendered performance and institutional neglect. Women riders constitute only 7 percent of the workforce and are discriminated in a male dominated industry [9]. Many women prefer to appear masculine, act masculine and work ethic in order to gain recognition and promote themselves [10]. As an illustration, Tong, the delivery station manager in the current study, her career progression was traced back to the accommodating the male workplace culture such as changing her physical appearance and behavior to suit the workplace culture. The subject matter of her experience is how women in the platform economy are stretching their bodies, as well as forging their identities, not only to equal pay, but also a greater feeling of recognition and ownership. Nevertheless, there is still an institutionalized neglect and gender discrimination. Platform algorithms do not take into account the gender difference and assign fewer shifts to females, despite the fact that they do 2.3 times as much house work as males. Such prejudices restrain the performance of women and increase the gaps in payment and discrimination in the platform economy.

5.2. Gendered work-life conflict and the impact of traditional norms

Balancing work and family continues to be a difficult situation for female food delivery workers, especially considering the nature of gig economy work which offers flexibility but also insecurity. This situation reflects the idea that women entering the workforce more hasn't really been matched by men taking on more at home, what some researchers call a kind of stalled change. The way platforms operate treats worker time as something to be used, without really accounting for the time needed for caregiving duties at home. Consequently, women often end up with fewer chances to work and earn less money overall.

Traditional expectations about gender roles add further limitations for these women. In society, norms still often say men should focus on outside jobs while women handle family care, which is to say childcare and household tasks. Experts point out that society sees childcare as naturally belonging to women, with men maybe just helping out sometimes, which keeps the double burden on women very strong. This responsibility makes it harder for them to be available for work and causes significant mental stress too. Research shows that a large majority of female riders, something like 72%, do housework after their shifts compared to only about 19% of men. Interviews reveal the extreme pressures faced by single mothers who are also delivery workers, describing experiences of feeling very down after childbirth and ongoing mental health difficulties. Their experience clearly shows how trying to manage both work and home responsibilities can lead to pushing oneself too hard and facing serious psychological challenges.

6. Conclusion

The COVID-19 Pandemic accelerated China's food delivery industry, amplifying systematic inequalities under platform capitalism's algorithmic control. Female workers, entering in male-dominated industry, face dual pressure: unstable financial status, societal gender norms, restricted career advancement and etc. Moreover, algorithmic control exacerbate safety risks, mental strain and job uncertainty, while the lack of social protection worsen their living status. Through this research, it reveals how women were restricted to traditional gender roles that limited their job performances. It also addresses how they find balance between work and life and reduce gender bias in gig economy. On the other hand, there are also several limitations to the study. First of all, since some data were hidden from public by the food delivery company, such as worker's company, specific structure of social insurance and protection and etc, researcher cannot reach and investigate based on those data but only research based on the phenomena related to those data. Also, since the research mainly

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focuses on qualitative research, it may diminish the objectivity and ubiquity of the results since it was not based on large data-based survey or census. In the future, studies should focuses on more gender factors in gig industries and more cases should be taken into consideration to find possible solutions for the issues addressed above.

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