

# The Potential of Gig Economy in the Area of Gender Equality

Chia-Ying Lin<sup>1</sup>, Ruiyun Fang<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Arts, Communication program in the Faculty of Communication, Art and Technology Simon Fraser University V5A 1S6,

<sup>2</sup>School of Communication, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA, 84112,

<sup>1</sup>Email: helenalin.cy@gmail.com ; <sup>2</sup>Email: u0845754@utah.edu

## ABSTRACT

Due to the hit of Covid-19, both females and males' lifestyle largely shifted compared to the previous day, including employment and work. To stay away from the crowd to prevent the risk of getting the Covid-19, more people now favour ordering food through food delivery and transiting by online car-hailing. Meanwhile, unemployment has swept through the global economy. People found the gig economy can be well used to make a living to compensate for what they have lost from their original jobs. Gig economy, as an uprising industry, may change the current social pattern. Women are in a lower position in the workplace overall; this article intends to discuss whether the gig economy, as a new career direction, will change this situation. The paper will use Uber as a case study of the gig economy to discuss the impact of the gig economy on gender inequality; it will value from the aspects of 1) gender wage gap, 2) safety issues, 3) race escalation to examine whether the phenomenon of oppression, exploitation, and discrimination to women is still preserved.

**Keywords:** Gig Economy, Gender Equality, Covid

## 1.INTRODUCTION

Under the circumstance of Covid-19, the prosperity has been brought to the gig (platform) economy, and its maximum capacity has not been reached yet. Due to the flexible and inclusive mechanism, it undoubtedly provided more job opportunities, especially when the underemployed rate drastically increased. Food delivery and online car-hailing as a part of the online gig economy are urgently needed because it gives people an opportunity to distract themselves from the public and crowded people. Meanwhile, both females and males encounter changes in their lives including employment, income, and lifestyles due to the hit of pandemic. Numbers of people recognize the potential financial sources and choose to join the online gig economy both males and females.

Gig economy workers are independent online platform part-time/full-time workers. There is no formal agreement and contract between the workers and platforms, workers provide service to the customers on their own behalf through the platform.

Feminism and gender equality have been widely discussed in both society and academia. It is also one of the theoretical approaches to analyze social issues. Females' condition should be closely monitored by scholars since we are still in a patriarchal society. The higher positions in a company with more power and income are saved for male employees, females have less chances to get promoted which leads to difficulties to meet their financial needs. The gender inequality in the workplace is a reflection to the society, it intertwined with each other that respect that females gain in the workplace would ultimately infiltrate into the larger communities. Since the blooming gig economy is one of the essential pillars of the global economy, where it stands for females is significant. If a negative impact tendency is found, then more research on regulating and controlling the industry is needed.

In this paper, we will review the previous literature to investigate whether the gig economy can assist females to achieve gender equality. The literature that will be referred to include the analysis about factors that could potentially contribute to the gender wage gap and safety concerns of females. Furthermore, we also review

some documentation of unfair treatment that non-whites may experience as drivers and passengers.

In the paper, we are going to use Uber as a case study to discuss whether the gig economy has an impact on gender inequality. We will analyze the three aspects: 1) gender wage gap, 2) safety issues, 3) race escalation. The manifestation of the gig economy in reinforcing feminist may be overestimated, instead, we will analyze Uber and how it illustrates the oppression, exploitation, and discrimination on women through the lens of the gig economy phenomenon.

## **2.GENDER WAGE GAP**

Income is a factor to value whether female and male drivers are treated discrepantly, if the income gap is maintained or enlarged, the gig economy, led by Uber, would not complete the expectation of assisting to reduce the gender inequality; however, the wage gap between male and female is not altered even with rising gig economy. The remaining wage gap could be delineated by three factors, which are 1) the location and time that different genders tend to be active at, 2) the driving strategy, and lastly 3) the driving habits, those factors collectively constitute the gender wage gap.

The fare of travelling is determined not only by distance, but also the driving location and time. Compared to women, men are willing to drive in the area that has more opportunities to earn higher taxi fare, such as higher crime and more drinking incidents. Meanwhile, the fare rate is higher at night than the daytime, and more males than females tend to work during nighttime, which results in more income from higher hourly wage [1]. Biologically, women are more easily influenced by their acuity in glare than men [2], thus, women have more restriction driving at night because there are more beam lights, road lamps, and reflective stripes to assist driving. However, this could be an obstacle for females to maintain a good vision to keep them and passengers safe, it could lead to a higher rate of car accidents. Moreover, there are more drunk passengers at night than daytime. Sometimes they need drivers' assistance to get on and off the car, and sometimes, they could be aggressive and offensive, also, women could be physically not strong enough to move a drunk adult male and it is not convenient for a female to get in touch with strange males. Evidence shows that female's driving area would be controlled by where they live, and females that have families tend to live in the area that have lower crime rate [1]. Females seem to avoid places that are less secure, no matter if it is about crime or drunk passengers/drivers. The consequences ultimately affect their ability to make use of Uber, because the higher crime rate places and more alcohol license places would have small incentives. These all contribute to the fact that they cause a lower female

average gig income by taking fewer orders and less risk.

Another factor that causes wage gap would be the driving experience of a driver [3]. Statistics show that a driver who completed more than 2500 trips earns 14% more than a driver who has not completed [1], the more driving experience that a driver gains, a better understanding of how to accept and reject certain trips. Males tend to have more driving experience; thus, they have more chances to eliminate the trip that makes them earn less. According to the Uber record (p. 22), male drivers have more experience than female drivers on average, meanwhile, they would accumulate more trips than women per week, because women provide less service hours than men in a week.

The last leading factor could be the different driving habits between females and males. Men drive higher average speeds than women in general which suggests that males would make more hourly income than females because it indicates that males are more productive and efficient which is a valuable ability to make more money during a specific period of time. Drivers' income is indicated by both per-minute and per-mile rate on each trip, thus, the faster that they drive, the more income they would receive. Men usually have higher acceleration levels and drive at faster speeds than females [4], this enlarges the income gap between females and males because male can drive further or more trips. Moreover, men are easier to take risk on driving faster than females [3], again, this may lead to higher income for men because they are willing to choose the routes that allow faster speed or shortcuts that are more difficult to drive. This is the gap created by the preference difference between females and males instead of Uber's incentive system.

The reasons that lead to the earnings gap between females and males are from physical differences, Uber's system, and preference differences. Thus, the gender wage gap is not avoidable and it is profound until the system alters its billing method.

### **Safety:**

According to Uber's safety report, the company received 5,981 allegations of serious sexual assaults in the U.S. during 2017 and 2018. These assaults include touching of a non-sexual body part to non-consensual sexual penetration. Nearly 93 percent of victims were riders and 90 percent were women [5]. When it comes to the end of 2020, Uber refused to share victims' detailed data to the California Public Utilities Commission (CPUC). At first, the company claimed that Uber wanted to protect victims' privacy. And it ended by giving Uber a penalty of \$150,000 and a fund of \$9 million to help the victims [6]. Uber has announced \$2.6 million to support organizations in the U.S. to prevent gender inequality since April of 2021 [7]. After all, both women drivers and passengers are

still having a hard time taking a safe ride. The problem is caused by the 1) non-criterion of working performance of the gig economy, 2) the Uber operation and security system.

Even the Uber company is putting effort and money to prevent gender discrimination, it's not neutralizing the negative brand image. According to Arli and Trittenbach's research, sexual harassment will harm the brand of Uber among customers [8]. It is also breaking the trust between drivers and passengers. The characteristics of the sharing economy intensify gender inequality. Instead of signing up as full-time employees, Uber uses a controversial employment model which classifies drivers as independent contractors. The relationship among employees, customers and organization has been blurred under the gig economy. It is causing an unprecedented problem to occur [8]. This "evaluation" won't be working if any crime happened during the ride. John Roman, a senior fellow at National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago claims that if drivers treat this job as an occasional gig, they are less likely to regulate their performance at the position with the lack of fear of losing the job [9]. Uber has developed a driver-rating model to allow consumers to evaluate their drivers from five different perspectives [10].

Unlike taxi drivers, Uber drivers use their own vehicles to run the business. Uber's vehicles normally don't have plexiglass between driver and passenger. Research in the 1990s showed that putting shields decreased 90 percent of the assaults [11]. Uber cannot request its drivers to do so since they are all independent contractors but they can provide more functions on the app to reduce sexual assaults. Right after the release of Uber's safety report in 2019, the company has been putting more effort into improving driver and rider's safety. Uber has added an in-app emergency button to call 911 since 2019. This feature is now available in over 250 cities in the United States [12]. The 911 button does make some drivers and riders feel safer but the Uber system could provide more functions to prevent sexual assaults. From a low base of 27% female drivers, they suffer a female turnover rate of 76% [13]. Women drivers are a minority of the Uber drivers' community; this is not good for women drivers, and it hasn't proven particularly good for women riders. In the United Kingdom, Transport for London (TfL) has urged ride-sharing companies like Uber to offer women-only cars [14]. In the United States, Companies like SafeHer, SheRides and See Jane Go have been offering women-only services since 2014. Even the "female-only" policy could make these companies get gender discrimination lawsuits, they are created from the hopes of reducing assaults [15]. Uber should realize the urgency of the function and adding the function would provide a positive impact to its brand.

Uber advertises itself as a company that offers "the safest ride" with a three-step criminal background check to review the drivers [15]. A rating system of passengers has also come up to give drivers the right to record the behavior of passengers. With all the efforts that Uber has put into reducing sexual assaults, can we believe that these regulations and functions would protect either the driver or the rider? Nevertheless or not, safety issues in Uber epitomizes the gender inequality of the society and the company should be responsible for that.

### **3.INTERSECTIONALITY**

While we discuss gender issues in the topic of the gig economy, we should dig deeper in coining the term of intersectionality. Intersectionality is a theoretical approach that recognized the dynamics, relationships, and connection between different categories of identity such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability as significant to lived experience and the navigation of socio-cultural spaces; these are interconnected and cannot be examined separately from one another [16]. Like any other marginal groups, racial women who are American African, American Asian encounter difficulties and challenges created by intersectionality constituted by sexism, racism, xenophobia, and so on, it demonstrates the gap between them and white male privilege and also how they are mistreated. It explains the question between gender inequality and the gig economy with a more complex analysis and explanation which demonstrates the social hierarchy of females clearer. In this sense, different racial female drivers should also be discussed and compared with white female drivers. The mistreatment of different racial drivers can largely constitute the gap between females and males in the gender inequality.

Drivers from the Middle East have encountered gender discrimination besides physical assault after 911 [17]. This similar discrimination is not rare; racial and gender related complain make the drivers hard to find a peaceful and fair environment to work and live. The power distribution between non-white and white people are unequal; whether as a passenger or a driver, they are targeted and harmed quite often [18]. Not only people from the Middle East, African Americans take 35% of time longer to be picked up and their orders are two times more frequent to be canceled [19]. Moreover, with the crisis of Covid-19, Asian hate crimes have emerged all around the world especially in North America. In 2021 North Carolina, a white woman was caught on Camera and racist insult an Asian Uber Driver "go f\*\*\* yourself. Go back to Asia" [20]. Similar racist discrimination against non-white drivers and passengers has not come to an finale yet and kept going spiral, thus, when non-white females are associated with the online car-hailing industry, they are the subordinate group in the society.

Since March 19, 2020, STOP AAPI HATE reporting center has received around 1,500 reports of Covid-19 discrimination against Asian Americans in the U.S. [21]. The incidents include refusing to provide service in business and transportation, which made up 10 percent of all cases; meanwhile, the incidents of harassment towards AAPI women is 2.3 times more than AAPI men. Furthermore, according to STOP AAPI HATE NATIONAL REPORT [22], women's report takes up 63.3% of all incidents reported during March 2020 to June 2021 nationwide. It illustrates women are more victimized than male in general, however, their safety concerns intensified when it comes to the fact that they are racial women. AAPI encounter discrimination in public like Uber and other transportation frequently and females are more vulnerable; intersectionality helps to better indicate racial women are more easily to be targeted among all people comparing to white/racial male, and white female. It is important to recognize that the disadvantaged situation marginal group of racial females are in. Even though we are aware that female drivers and passengers are mistreated by the public and the platform of Uber, racial women are positioned at the bottom of the hierarchy.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Gender issues are widely discussed in most of the social problems including the emerging industry of the gig economy. In the case study of Uber platform, we examine the fact that it potentially increased gender inequality because the gender wage gap is maintained due to female drivers' personal choice and the system mechanism; and safety issues still concern female drivers and passengers, thus, females need to take on more mental burden when they drive or ride with Uber. Lastly, through intersectionality, racial issues only reinforce the discrimination and unequal treatment to racial women in the society. The superior group of white male dominates most of the industry in the world and now including the gig economy. The pattern should be recognized by more researchers since the prosperous development of the gig economy might create more gap between gender inequality.

According to Uber's official site, the company is putting effort into solving wage gap, gender discrimination and sexual assaults. Uber has also recognized that these problems won't be solved in a short period of time. So, the company is more focused on putting money into training the drivers and riders. The Uber app could also provide more functions for both drivers and passengers, for example like choosing the drivers' gender.

#### REFERENCES

[1] Cook C., Diamond R., Hall J., List J.A., Oyer P., (2018) The Gender Earnings Gap in the Gig

Economy: Evidence from over a Million Rideshare Drivers. National Bureau of Economic Research, JEL No. J16,J31

- [2] Brabyn, J., Schneck, M., Lott, L. , Haegerstorm-Portnoy G. (2005) Night Driving Self-Restriction: Vision Function and Gender Differences. *Optometry and Vision Science*, 82 (8), 755-764.
- [3] Bertrand, M. (2011) New Perspectives on Gender. in Orley Ashenfelter and David Card, eds., *Handbook of Labor Economics*, Volume 4b.
- [4] Ericsson, E. (2000) Variability in urban driving patterns. *Transportation Research. Part D, Transport and Environment*, 5(5), 337-354
- [5] Uber. (2019) Safety and respect for all. <https://www.uber.com/newsroom/safety-and-respect-for-all/>
- [6] Bellon T. (2021) Uber reaches agreement in California sexual assault data request. <https://www.reuters.com/business/autos-transportation/uber-reaches-agreement-california-sexual-assault-data-request-2021-07-16/>
- [7] Uber. (2021) Driving Change – Committing \$2.6 Million to Combat the Global Crisis of Gender Based Violence. <https://www.uber.com/newsroom/driving-change-2021/>
- [8] Griffithitch, A., Esch, P., Trittenbach, M. (2018) Investigating the mediating effect of Uber's sexual harassment case on its brand: Does it matter? *Journal of Retailing and Consumer Services*, Volume 43: 111-118.
- [9] Marshall, A. (2019) A Criminologist Says Uber's Crime Report Is 'Highly Alarming'. <https://www.wired.com/story/criminologist-uber-crime-report-highly-alarming/>
- [10] Rosenblat, A., and L. Stark. (2016) Algorithmic Labor and Information Asymmetries: A Case Study of Uber's Drivers. *International Journal Of Communication*, 10-27.
- [11] Stone, J., Stevens, D. (2000) Effectiveness of Taxi Partitions: Baltimore, Maryland, Case Study. *Transportation Research Record: Journal of the Transportation Research Board*. Volume: 1731 issue: 1, 71-78.
- [12] Uber. (2019). Uber's Emergency Button. <https://www.uber.com/newsroom/emergencybutton/>
- [13] Castañares. A. (2018) Uber Only Survives on the Backs of Low Paid Drivers. <http://laprensa-sandiego.org/uber-only-survives-on-the-backs-of->

low-paid-drivers/

- [14] Transport for London. (2018) Policy statement: Private hire services in London. <http://content.tfl.gov.uk/private-hire-policy-statement.pdf>
- [15] Medina, C. (2017) Women-Only Ridesharing in America: Rising Sexual Assault Rates Demand an Exception to Anti-Discrimination Laws. *Loyola of Los Angeles Law Review*, Volume 50: 691-711.
- [16] Collins, P. (1998) Some Group Matters: Intersectionality, Situated Standpoints, and Black Feminist Thought. In *Fighting Words: Black Women and the Search for Justice*. 201-228
- [17] Hua, J., Ray, K. (2017) Beyond the precariat: race, gender, and labor in the taxi and Uber economy. *Social Identities*, 24:2, 271-289.
- [18] Ferreira, D., (2007). *Toward a global idea of race*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Fraser, N. (2013). *Fortunes of feminism: From state-managed capitalism to neoliberal crisis*. Brooklyn: Verso Press.
- [19] Ge, Y., Knittel, C., MacKenzie, D., Zoepf, S. (2016) Racial and Gender Discrimination in Transportation Network Companies. NBER Working Paper No. 22776
- [20] General, R. (2021) Woman Caught on Camera Spewing Racist Insults at Asian Uber Driver in North Carolina. <https://news.yahoo.com/woman-caught-camera-spewing-racist-201617505.html>
- [21] Choi, C., Kulkarni, P. (2020) In One Month, STOP AAPI HATE Receives almost 1500 Incident Reports of Verbal Harassment, Shunning and Physical Assaults. [https://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Press\\_Release\\_4\\_23\\_20.pdf](https://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Press_Release_4_23_20.pdf)
- [22] Yellow Horse, A., Jeung, R., Lim, R., Tang, B., Im, M., Higashiyama, L., Schweng, L., Chen, M., (2021) STOP AAPI HATE National Report. <https://stopaapihate.org/stop-aapi-hate-national-report-2/>