

Gender, Culture, and Gig Work: Experiences of Socioemotional Selectivity in a Non-Western Context

Abstract

Purpose: Drawing on Socio-emotional selectivity theory, this study investigates how gender shapes the work journey of gig workers in Egypt.

Design/methodology/approach: Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 32 gig workers. The Gioia methodology was employed to analyse interview transcripts, identifying first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions.

Findings: The analysis identified the following three factors shaping gig workers' engagement and experience with their work activities: the digital work environment (perceived digital distributive justice, experiences of digital verbal sexual harassment), job characteristics (cultural acceptance of gig work, gendered classification of tasks), and conditional inclusion (familial and socio-governmental support). Taken together, the findings demonstrate that gender substantially shapes how individuals engage with and interpret their experiences in gig work.

Originality/value: The study extends socio-emotional selectivity theory by showing that the socio-emotional goals workers pursue through gig work are socially conferred and regulated by gendered cultural and institutional structures rather than individually chosen. It also reconceptualizes perceived inclusion in gig work as conditional inclusion, whereby acceptance and legitimacy are granted to workers only insofar as their platform participation conforms to prevailing gender norms. The Egyptian setting serves as a revelatory context that renders these mechanisms visible.

Keywords: gender, gig work, socio-emotional selectivity theory, digital platforms

1. Introduction

Traditional employment arrangements have long been associated with gender-based inequalities. Women's recruitment opportunities have historically depended not only on their qualifications but also on employers' attitudes and biases (Becker, 1957). Even after securing employment, women frequently encounter lower wages, restricted promotion opportunities, and persistent workplace discrimination relative to men (Galperin, 2021; Mousa & Chaouali, 2022). Against this backdrop, the rise of gig work has attracted considerable scholarly attention as a potentially more inclusive form of employment. Gig work, commonly defined as a short-term and task-based employment arrangement facilitated through digital platforms (Kuek et al., 2015; Kurin, 2017; Ajaiyeoba, 2025), enables workers to provide services remotely and receive compensation upon task completion (Spreitzer et al., 2017; Caza et al., 2022; Mousa et al., 2022; Mousa, 2024). Gig workers range from highly skilled professionals, such as online educators, IT specialists, graphic designers, coaches, and proofreaders, to lower-skilled workers, including ride-share drivers and delivery couriers (Jabagi et al., 2019). The rapid growth of gig work is evident worldwide, increasing from relatively modest participation rates in the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union (European Commission, 2018) to approximately 12% of the global population by 2023 (World Bank, 2023). This expansion has encouraged scholars to reconsider traditional assumptions about employment relationships and organizational life (Mousa & Chaouali, 2022; Amari et al., 2022; Hamza-Orlinska et al., 2024; Maj et al., 2025).

Within this growing body of research, gig work has often been portrayed as particularly beneficial for women. Studies conducted primarily in Western contexts suggest that platform-based work allows women to work from home, achieve greater flexibility in balancing employment and caregiving responsibilities, and reduce dependence on traditional social networks that often shape career opportunities (Cullen et al., 2018; Horton et al., 2018; Galperin, 2021; Aloui et al., 2024). Furthermore, platform-mediated hiring and evaluation systems rely heavily on performance ratings and reputational metrics, potentially reducing the influence of nepotism and face-to-face biases in recruitment and promotion decisions (Galperin, 2021; Mousa et al., 2022, 2024). Consequently, gig work has frequently been characterized as a more meritocratic and inclusive labor market than traditional employment.

Despite these insights, our understanding of gender and gig work remains incomplete. First, existing research is overwhelmingly concentrated in Western contexts, while evidence from developing regions, particularly Africa and South America, remains limited (Mousa & Chaouali, 2022). As a result, current knowledge provides only a partial understanding of how cultural and institutional contexts shape gig work experiences. Second, studies examining gender in gig work have focused predominantly on economic outcomes, particularly gender-based differences in earnings (Cook et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2024; Han et al., 2024). While this work has generated important insights, it offers limited understanding of how gender influences workers' broader experiences in platform labor markets. Comparatively little is known about how men and women perceive fairness, support, occupational legitimacy, safety, social acceptance, and career opportunities within gig work (Centeno Maya et al., 2022; Mousa, 2024). Third, research on gig teaching has largely focused on self-branding strategies (Curran & Jenks, 2023) and workplace flexibility (Kwee, 2022), while paying limited attention to the role of gender in shaping the overall work journey of online educators.

Addressing these limitations is important because the global expansion of digital labor markets has led scholars and practitioners to view gig work as a viable alternative to traditional employment. Yet it remains unclear whether the benefits associated with platform work are experienced similarly by men and women, particularly in societies characterized by strong cultural norms and gendered expectations. Without understanding how gender shapes workers' experiences in such contexts, existing theories risk overstating the inclusiveness, neutrality, and meritocratic nature of gig work while overlooking the influence of local social structures on participation and outcomes. **Rather than treating gig work as a neutral employment arrangement, this study examines the mechanisms through which inclusion and exclusion are experienced and reproduced in platform work. Specifically, we show how platform processes, cultural norms, and institutional support structures interact to shape gendered experiences of opportunity, legitimacy, fairness, and belonging.**

To address this knowledge gap, this study investigates how gender shapes the work experiences of gig teachers in Egypt. Egypt provides a particularly relevant setting because women continue to experience workplace marginalization, limited access to leadership positions, discriminatory cultural expectations, and persistent male dominance in organizational life despite increasing educational attainment (Mousa, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Al-Mutairi et al., 2021). At the same time, gig work has expanded rapidly, with approximately 14 million Egyptians participating in gig employment by 2021 (Farouk, 2021). The focus on gig teachers is especially appropriate because teaching remains one of the most socially accepted occupations for Egyptian women due to its relatively flexible working conditions (Mousa, 2021b, 2021c), while online teaching platforms

provide access to global clients. Drawing on qualitative evidence from highly skilled Egyptian gig teachers serving international markets, this study addresses the following research question: **How does gender shape the work journey of gig teachers?**

This study makes three theoretical contributions. First, it extends socio-emotional selectivity theory (Carstensen et al., 1999) by demonstrating that the socio-emotional goals workers pursue through gig work are socially conferred rather than solely individually chosen. Whereas the theory explains goal selection through individual perceptions of time horizons and emotional priorities, our findings show that gendered cultural norms, familial expectations, and institutional practices regulate which socio-emotional goals are available, legitimate, and attainable for women and men in platform work. In this respect, the study relocates socio-emotional selectivity from an individual psychological process to a relational and multilevel one, in which macro-national structures, meso-level platform and family dynamics, and micro-individual choices interact to shape gig work experiences (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009). Second, it reconceptualizes perceived inclusion in gig work as conditional inclusion. Rather than treating familial and institutional support as straightforward evidence of inclusiveness, the findings show that acceptance is granted contingently: women's participation is legitimized when it conforms to norms of domesticity and dependence, while men's participation is delegitimized when it departs from breadwinner expectations. Conditional inclusion captures how support structures can simultaneously enable participation and reproduce dependence and constrained legitimacy. Third, it contributes to platform and algorithmic management research by challenging assumptions regarding the neutrality of client evaluation systems and showing how gendered preferences and stereotypes can influence reputational outcomes on digital platforms, suggesting that online labor markets may reproduce offline social inequalities through seemingly objective rating mechanisms. Throughout, the Egyptian setting functions as a revelatory context in which these theoretical mechanisms become observable in sharp relief, rather than serving as the contribution in itself (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012). The remainder of this paper proceeds as follows. The next section reviews the relevant literature, followed by a description of the research methodology and a presentation of the findings and discussion.

2. Literature review

2.1 Gig work, gender and socio-emotional selectivity theory

The literature portrays gig work as a complex and often contradictory form of employment. Scholars have shown that workers enter gig work for diverse reasons, ranging from economic necessity to the pursuit of autonomy and flexibility (Manyika et al., 2016; Al Moosa et al., 2022; Chaouali et al., 2022; Mousa & Chaouali, 2022; Mousa et al., 2022). Participation is further shaped by broader labor market conditions, including unemployment rates and the availability of economic opportunities within specific national contexts (Huang et al., 2020; Mousa et al., 2024a, b). Consequently, gig work has been portrayed simultaneously as a source of empowerment and a source of precarity. On the one hand, it offers workers flexibility, autonomy, and greater control over how and when work is performed. On the other hand, it is frequently associated with income instability, weak social protection, limited career progression, and exclusion from traditional employment benefits (Goods et al., 2019; Low et al., 2024). Although some countries have introduced partial protections for gig workers, debates concerning their employment status and socio-economic rights remain unresolved (Malos et al., 2018; Mousa & Chaouali, 2022). These competing perspectives suggest that gig work cannot be understood solely through its objective

structural characteristics. Rather, workers may interpret the same employment arrangement differently depending on their goals, expectations, and social circumstances.

Socio-emotional selectivity theory (SST) (Carstensen et al., 1999) provides a useful framework for understanding these divergent interpretations. The theory argues that individuals make work and life decisions based on two interrelated motivations: novelty seeking, which involves pursuing new knowledge, opportunities, and social relationships, and emotional regulation, which emphasizes psychological well-being, meaningful goals, and the avoidance of undesirable experiences (Carstensen et al., 2003; Mather et al., 2004). Viewed through this lens, participation in gig work may reflect more than a response to economic incentives or labor market constraints. Instead, workers may evaluate gig work according to the extent to which it satisfies their socio-emotional needs. For some individuals, gig work may be attractive because it offers opportunities to develop skills, expand professional networks, and access employment opportunities unavailable through conventional organizations. For others, its appeal may stem from the ability to avoid workplace experiences perceived as emotionally costly, such as rigid hierarchies, discrimination, harassment, or work-family conflict. This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding gendered experiences of gig work. Women who encounter barriers in traditional employment settings, including glass-ceiling effects, workplace harassment, and wage inequality, may view platform work as a mechanism for pursuing professional advancement while simultaneously aligning employment with personal, familial, and cultural expectations. Socio-emotional selectivity theory therefore suggests that workers' evaluations of gig work are shaped not only by economic outcomes but also by their pursuit of meaningful opportunities and emotionally rewarding work arrangements. Such an argument helps explain why the same gig-work environment may be experienced differently by men and women and highlights the importance of examining gendered interpretations of platform labor. The following table summarizes all previous studies on gender and gig work identified through our extensive search of multiple academic databases.

Table 1 (authors' own work) . Selected studies on gender, gig work, and gig teaching

Reference	Context	Main Findings
Cook et al. (2021)	United States (rideshare drivers)	Identified a 7% gender earnings gap, explained by differences in experience, location and safety constraints, and driving behavior rather than direct discrimination.
Dong et al. (2024)	China (gig economy workers)	Women earned approximately 85% of men's income, with most of the earnings gap occurring within occupations, suggesting structural and behavioral inequalities.
Han et al. (2024)	China (digital labor market)	Digitalization widened gender wage disparities, with women, particularly married and older women, experiencing slower wage growth than men.
Sarker et al. (2024)	Bangladesh (digital gig workers)	Women were more attracted to flexibility, whereas men were more income-oriented; men reported higher overall job satisfaction.
Curran & Jenks (2023)	Global online teaching platforms	Gig teachers relied on self-branding strategies, such as highlighting credentials and personal characteristics,

		to attract students in highly competitive online markets.
Curran (2023)	International online English teaching platforms	Black online English teachers experienced raciolinguistic bias, discriminatory ratings, and reduced demand, highlighting inequalities within gig teaching platforms.
Kwee (2022)	International online teaching context	Teachers valued flexibility and online teaching opportunities but expressed concerns regarding teaching quality, fairness of assessment, and digital inequalities.

The studies summarized in Table 1 reveal two important patterns. First, research on gender and gig work has focused predominantly on economic outcomes, including earnings disparities, job satisfaction, and labor-market participation (Cook et al., 2021; Han et al., 2024; Dong et al., 2024; Sarker et al., 2024). While these studies demonstrate that gender shapes access to economic opportunities within the gig economy, they provide limited insight into how men and women experience, interpret, and navigate platform work in their daily professional lives. Second, the emerging literature on gig teaching has concentrated on issues such as self-branding (Curran & Jenks, 2023), workplace flexibility (Kwee, 2022), and racial discrimination (Curran, 2023). However, the role of gender in shaping the overall work journey of gig teachers remains largely unexplored.

The present study addresses this gap by examining how gender influences the experiences of both men and women gig teachers, including their perceptions of fairness, support, occupational legitimacy, social acceptance, client interactions, and platform evaluations. In doing so, it moves beyond the dominant emphasis on economic outcomes and extends the gig-teaching literature beyond branding, flexibility, and racial discrimination. Furthermore, by focusing on highly skilled gig teachers in Egypt, a non-Western and under-researched context, this study provides insights into how gendered experiences of platform work are shaped by local cultural norms and social expectations, thereby contributing a contextualized perspective that is largely absent from existing scholarship. Context here serves theory development rather than substituting for it: the Egyptian setting makes visible how socio-emotional goals are socially regulated, an insight that existing, largely individual-level applications of SST have not captured. **In the context of gig work, SST suggests that workers evaluate platform-based employment according to its ability to satisfy socio-emotional goals, such as social acceptance, psychological safety, familial approval, and the avoidance of emotionally costly experiences. This perspective is particularly relevant in gendered and culturally constrained contexts, where men and women may attach different meanings to flexibility, legitimacy, support, and workplace interactions. Accordingly, SST provides a useful lens for explaining variation in how gig workers interpret similar platform conditions. At the same time, SST has been developed and applied largely as an individual-level, lifespan-oriented theory, in which goal selection reflects personal perceptions of time horizons and emotional priorities (Carstensen et al., 1999, 2003). What remains undertheorized is how the socio-emotional goals available to workers are themselves structured by gender regimes, cultural norms, and institutional arrangements. Relational accounts of work and diversity argue that individual choices cannot be**

adequately explained without attending to the macro-national and meso-organizational structures in which they are embedded (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009; Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011). Bringing this relational insight to SST, we propose that in strongly gendered contexts the pursuit of socio-emotional goals through gig work is socially regulated: some goals are conferred on workers as legitimate, while others are withheld or penalized depending on gender. The present study develops this extension empirically.

2.2 Gig work in the Egyptian context: economic crisis and cultural norms

The Egyptian labor market is characterized by a persistent intersection of demographic pressure, gendered labor segmentation, and structural inequality. Although Egypt has a large population of 103 million, with around 60% over the age of 30 (The Arab Weekly, 2022), women remain significantly underrepresented in formal employment, constituting only 18% of the workforce (World Bank, 2019). This gap reflects not only economic underutilization but also deeply embedded cultural norms that constrain women's mobility and participation across sectors, often channeling them into domestic roles or socially sanctioned occupations (Mousa, 2022). These dynamics are reinforced by Egypt's low global ranking in gender equality (136th of 145 countries) (USAID, 2021) and persistent workplace discrimination against women (Almutairi et al., 2021), suggesting that women's labor market participation is structurally and culturally conditioned rather than purely individually determined. Within this context, women's preference for teaching roles should be understood as an adaptive response to institutional and cultural constraints, particularly those related to working hours and social acceptability (Mousa, 2021b, 2021c), rather than a neutral occupational choice.

Against this backdrop, the rapid expansion of gig work in Egypt reflects broader economic instability and institutional restructuring rather than purely technological adoption. By 2021, approximately 14 million Egyptians were engaged in gig work (Farouk, 2021), driven by rising living costs (Itida, 2024), limited formal employment opportunities, and macroeconomic instability linked to political transitions, IMF-supervised reforms, currency devaluation from 8 to 48 per US dollar, factory closures, and declining GDP (Agarwal & Mazarei, 2024). While digital infrastructure and government initiatives in technology and language skills have facilitated participation (Itida, 2024; Hassan, 2023), gig work also reflects constrained labor market alternatives rather than purely entrepreneurial opportunity. Even supportive measures such as pandemic-related health insurance have been interpreted by workers as instruments of formalization and taxation rather than protection (Farouk, 2021). In this sense, gig work in Egypt emerges as a structurally embedded response to economic precarity and limited mobility, where traditional employment pathways and even migration opportunities are increasingly constrained (AFP, 2024), making platform-based work a pragmatic, though often unstable, alternative.

3. Research methodology

3.1 Sampling and procedures

This study adopts a qualitative research design, which is particularly suited for examining complex and underexplored social phenomena in contexts where existing theory is limited (Maxwell, 1996). In line with this epistemological orientation, semi-structured interviews were used to capture how gig teachers interpret and experience platform-based work in their everyday lives. This approach is appropriate because it allows respondents to articulate meanings, perceptions, and lived

experiences that may not be captured through structured survey instruments, particularly in emerging labor contexts such as gig work.

The study is based on 32 semi-structured interviews with Egyptian gig teachers working through a digital platform that connects private instructors with clients across various disciplines (e.g., languages, sciences, psychology). The sample was accessed through a multi-stage, network-based recruitment process. Initially, the first co-author identified the platform and contacted four eligible teachers who met the study criteria. These initial participants subsequently facilitated the recruitment of 28 additional gig teachers within their professional networks. This recruitment strategy reflects the dispersed and informal nature of gig work communities, where workers are often connected through platform networks and peer-to-peer referrals rather than formal organizational structures.

All interviews were conducted by the first co-author between September and October 2024. The exclusive involvement of one researcher in data collection ensured consistency in interview delivery, probing, and interactional style, which is particularly important in qualitative research where meaning is co-constructed between interviewer and participant. Respondents demonstrated strong willingness to participate, reflecting the relevance of the topic to their lived experiences. Many participants also emphasized broader concerns regarding the socio-cultural and institutional conditions of gig work in Egypt, highlighting the contextual embeddedness of their experiences. While these issues fall beyond the scope of the present paper, they indicate the broader significance of gig work as a contested form of employment in the Egyptian context. The final sample consisted of 16 women and 16 men gig workers, enabling gender-balanced comparison.

Table 2 (authors' own work): an overview of respondent characteristics and interview details.

N	Gender	Age	Educational credential	Gig work experience (years)	Marital status
1	Man	29	Pre-master	2	Single
2	Woman	37	Bachelor	5	Married
3	Woman	29	Bachelor	2	Single
4	Man	33	Master	3	Married
5	Woman	37	Bachelor	3	Married
6	Woman	35	Bachelor	3	Married
7	Man	30	Pre-master	3	Single
8	Woman	34	Pre-master	4	Married
9	Woman	33	Master	3	Divorced
10	Man	31	Bachelor	3	Married
11	Man	30	Bachelor	3	Single
12	Woman	29	Bachelor	2	Married
13	Woman	30	Bachelor	2	Married
14	Woman	30	Bachelor	3	Single
15	Man	32	Bachelor	3	Married

16	Man	31	Bachelor	3	Married
17	Woman	30	Bachelor	2	Single
18	Woman	32	Bachelor	2	Married
19	Woman	30	Bachelor	2	Married
20	Woman	28	Bachelor	2	Single
21	Man	31	Bachelor	4	Married
22	Woman	29	Master	2	Married
23	Man	35	Master	4	Married
24	Woman	32	Bachelor	3	Married
25	Woman	34	Bachelor	3	Married
26	Man	29	Bachelor	2	Single
27	Man	29	Bachelor	2	Single
28	Man	29	Pre-master	3	Single
29	Man	31	Bachelor	4	Married
30	Man	29	Bachelor	2	Single
31	Man	30	Bachelor	4	Single
32	Man	31	Bachelor	3	Married

Data collection was guided by insights from existing literature on gender and gig work, which informed the development of the interview protocol. No new first-order concepts emerged after the 26th interview, indicating that informational redundancy had been reached; additional interviews were nonetheless conducted to confirm the stability of emerging themes. Importantly, this study forms part of a broader research agenda on gig work in Egypt, which includes three interconnected studies: (1) the present paper examining gendered experiences of gig work, (2) a study on passion decay among gig workers, and (3) a systematic literature review of gig work in non-Western contexts. The following table includes the interview questions.

Table 3 (authors' own work): The semi-structured interview guide used in this study.

#	Interview Question	Source
1	What prompted you to begin working as a gig teacher or online freelancer?	Fiers (2024)
2	How do you perceive your opportunities for advancement or career growth in gig teaching/freelancing?	Cook et al. (2021)
3	Have you experienced any disadvantages or barriers in your gig work related to your gender? Please explain.	Dong et al. (2024)
4	How do you balance your gig work with family, household, or caregiving responsibilities?	Fiers (2024)
5	Do platform mechanisms (e.g., rating systems, algorithms, job allocation) affect you differently because of your gender?	Stringhi (2022)
6	Do you think your gender affects the type of gigs you are offered or choose (e.g., subject, pay, task type)?	Dong et al. (2024)
7	How does gig teaching compare with traditional employment in terms of autonomy, security, and satisfaction?	Fiers (2024)
8	Do you see gig teaching as a long-term career or temporary/supplementary work? Why?	Cook et al. (2021)

Interviews lasted between 30 and 55 minutes and were conducted in both Arabic and English, reflecting the bilingual proficiency of participants and interviewer. Each interview was conducted in the language the participant preferred; most participants chose Arabic, with some moving between Arabic and English during the conversation. Arabic interviews were transcribed and analyzed in Arabic to preserve participants' original meanings, and only the quotations presented in this paper were translated into English by the bilingual first co-author. Translations were checked against the original transcripts to ensure semantic equivalence, and culturally specific expressions were rendered with attention to their contextual meaning rather than to literal wording. All respondents were informed of the study's objectives prior to participation. Ethical considerations were strictly observed, including voluntary participation, anonymity, and the right to skip any question perceived as sensitive or uncomfortable. These measures were particularly important given the personal nature of discussions related to work experiences, gender, and platform-based employment conditions.

3.2 Data analysis

To address the research question, this study adopts the Gioia methodology (Gioia et al., 2013) as its single analytic framework. Although the Gioia methodology is informed by grounded theory traditions (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998; Williams and Shepherd, 2016), it constitutes a distinct and systematic approach to inductive concept development, organized around first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions. We therefore position the analysis within the Gioia methodology, rather than within classic grounded theory, and use its vocabulary consistently below. The analytical process was iterative rather than linear, with data collection and analysis occurring in a cyclical manner that enabled continuous comparison between emerging insights and newly collected material. Although recursive in nature, the analysis unfolded through three progressively abstract stages. In terms of analytic roles, all coding was conducted by the first co-author, who also conducted the interviews and is a native Arabic speaker fluent in English. The other co-authors acted as critical reviewers of the emerging coding structure, interrogating the fit between first-order concepts, second-order themes, and the underlying interview data. Analytical disagreements and alternative interpretations were discussed in successive meetings and resolved by returning to the original transcripts until consensus was reached; where interpretations remained contested, the more conservative reading was retained.

The first stage involved the generation of informant-driven, descriptive categories referred to as first-order concepts. Staying close to informant terms and meanings (Gioia et al., 2013), the analysis concentrated on participants' narratives concerning how gender shapes the trajectory of gig teaching in Egypt. The coding process was informed by interview prompts such as perceptions of opportunities for advancement or career progression in gig teaching and freelancing (Cook et al., 2021), experiences of gender-related barriers or disadvantages in gig work (Dong et al., 2024), strategies for balancing gig work with household and caregiving responsibilities (Fiers, 2024), perceptions of how platform mechanisms such as rating systems, algorithms, and job allocation processes are influenced by gender (Stringhi, 2022), and views on whether gender affects the type of gigs received or selected, including subject matter, pay, and task characteristics (Dong et al., 2024). Each transcript was examined in detail, and meaningful segments of text were systematically coded, compared, and grouped into conceptually similar clusters. Through

systematic comparison across transcripts, recurring ideas were identified while preserving variation across individual accounts. This stage produced a broad set of empirically grounded first-order codes capturing both enabling and constraining aspects of gig work, while also revealing emerging patterns related to gendered experiences and occupational dynamics.

The second stage involved transforming these descriptive codes into more abstract conceptual categories. First-order concepts were progressively synthesized into second-order themes through iterative refinement, in line with the Gioia methodology (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991; Corley and Gioia, 2011; Gioia et al., 2013). This phase required continuous oscillation between empirical data and emerging theoretical interpretations to ensure that developing categories remained firmly grounded in participants' lived experiences while progressively capturing broader conceptual meanings. Through iterative comparison and refinement, first-order codes were consolidated into six second-order themes.

In the final stage, second-order themes were further abstracted into aggregate theoretical dimensions that represent the underlying structures shaping participants' experiences. Throughout the analysis, emerging interpretations were continuously compared against the raw data to assess their consistency and explanatory power. Alternative interpretations were discussed and revisited through repeated examination of interview transcripts, ensuring that higher-order themes reflected underlying patterns across participants' accounts rather than merely reproducing interview questions or frequently occurring terms. The final aggregate dimensions were retained because they captured recurring relational dynamics that explained how gender shaped participants' experiences of platform work.

Through sustained engagement with the data and systematic comparison, the study identified recurring patterns, relational dynamics, and contextual conditions that structure gendered experiences in gig teaching. This analytical process resulted in three overarching theoretical dimensions that explain how gender shapes the gig teaching journey: the digital work environment (perceived digital distributive justice, experiences of digital verbal sexual harassment), job characteristics (cultural acceptance of gig work, gendered classification of tasks), and conditional inclusion (familial and socio-governmental support). The following figure presents the data analysis and coding framework.

Figure 1 (authors' own work): Data analysis and coding framework.

4. Findings

The aim of the present study is to find a detailed answer to the question: How does gender shape work journey of gig teachers? To answer this research question, the authors have identified three categories of factors through which women and men gig teachers can assess their journey with gig activities (gig teaching in this case). The sub-sections that follow will unpack these three categories and their sub-categories in detail based on the results of the interviews.

4.1 Environmental factors of digital work

4.1.1 Feeling of digital distributive justice

Respondents 1 and 4 highlighted that they are doing the best they can in their gig teaching, but client assessments and ratings always seem disproportionate to their efforts.

I feel I deserve higher ratings than what I always get. Sometimes, clients assess me based on the shape, style or dialect. R1

Respondent 7 considers his ratings by clients as subject to many factors including his effort, fun and the time spent in conversations with teenage clients.

I know a friend who is a gig teacher and constantly gets very high ratings, although he consumes half of his online sessions kidding with his teenage clients. It seems this is the ideal way to deal with non-adults. R10

Moreover, respondent 11 indicated that in the Egyptian context, only women gig teachers maintain

very high ratings because the clients of Egyptians and Arabs are often more emotional with women.

Because I am Egyptian and I know how people in my society think, I assert that women gig workers get very high ratings, particularly if they are young and attractive. People in my country sympathise a lot with women. R11

Most of the women respondents asserted that the main advantage of their gig teaching is the ongoing justice they experience, although this view was not shared uniformly across the sample. Respondents 2 and 6 voiced that the fair individual assessment, speed with which they receive their fees and the lack of any need to please managers and colleagues to guarantee high ratings are only possible in the gig work environment.

When I was working as a teacher in a public primary school, I had to exercise hypocrisy through saying nice words to every colleague, supervisor and manager in order to get a good assessment by the end of every year. I was lying to them through pretending that I appreciated them and they were lying to me through showing that they believe me. This is not the case in gig work, as I work hard and then find good ratings. R2

In gig work, the client rates my effort. No manager, no supervisors and no need to develop good connections with families of supervisors to guarantee good ratings or assessments. R8

These findings complicate dominant assumptions in the gig-work literature that platform rating systems operate as neutral and purely performance-based mechanisms (Galperin, 2021; Mousa et al., 2022). Instead, the data suggest that “distributive justice” in gig work is socially constructed and filtered through cultural perceptions, emotional biases, and gendered expectations. This aligns with arguments that gig evaluation systems are not fully meritocratic but are embedded in informal social logics that shape perceived fairness differently across workers.

4.1.2 Digital verbal sexual harassment

The men respondents reported that they had not been subjected to verbal sexual harassment when working online as gig teachers, whether they work with Egyptian clients or from other countries.

I teach the Quran, the holy book of Muslims. I will never allow others to express any sexual words to me. We are in a conservative society. R7

The cultural norms of Egypt and other Arab countries force girls and women to be shy and boys and men to be polite. Gig work is a commercial transaction in which I exert effort in return for money. So, my clients and I are in a form of work relationship. R4

However, this was not the case for a number of the women respondents, who said that they are sometimes exposed to virtual verbal sexual harassment when performing their teaching tasks. Respondents 3 and 9 confirmed that they encounter such harassments from both Egyptian and Arabic adult and teenage clients.

Clients, particularly teenagers, keep asking about my age, marital status and

many other personal questions. Sometimes, I have had to end the session because of the indecency I experienced in those sessions. R3

At least two of the clients who are younger than 21 proposed to marry me. Those who are in their 20s or less consider online verbal harassment as a funny issue, particularly with unveiled women. R9

This pattern extends prior research on gendered labor experiences in gig work by showing that platform environments do not eliminate harassment but instead relocate it into digital interactions shaped by anonymity and client-worker asymmetries (Curran, 2023; Mousa, 2024). The absence of harassment reported by men alongside the presence of harassment targeting women indicates that digital gig spaces reproduce offline gender hierarchies rather than neutralizing them, reinforcing the idea that platform-mediated work remains deeply embedded in broader socio-cultural power relations. Importantly, participants described these experiences not as isolated incidents but as recurring interactions that shaped their sense of safety, comfort, and professional legitimacy on digital platforms. This suggests that digital verbal sexual harassment may function as a mechanism of exclusion by increasing the emotional burden associated with platform work for women.

4.2 Job-related factors

4.2.1 Cultural acceptance of gig work

Most of the men respondents described a lack of acceptance and social doubts surrounding men engaging in gig work, although the intensity of these accounts varied with marital status and career stage. More specifically, the majority of people in Egypt, given the poor quality of education, do not fully understand this new work arrangement that allows its holder to work remotely from home or even a café.

I tried to get engaged and then married to a girl. However, her family refused and said that online non-contract jobs are temporary and will not continue so long. R28

My father always advises me to save money as much as possible from my gig teachings and then start my own restaurant. Gig work is valid as an additional source of income but not the primary one, as he always repeats. R31

Most women respondents affirmed the social acceptance of their engagement in gig work, although, as we elaborate below, this acceptance was frequently described in conditional terms. The idea of a woman staying mostly at home and avoiding public and private transportation and the accompanied verbal harassment appeals to the majority of families in that conservative community. In other words, allowing women to work remotely (mostly from home) is in line with the cultural norms dominating the minds of the people.

My family and relatives feel proud of me as a gig teacher or trainer of child psychology. They feel happy because I work from home and avoid the harassment in the streets of Cairo. R20

Any work from home will suit women in Egypt because it goes in line with

our traditions and conservative family values. R25

These contrasting perceptions highlight that cultural acceptance of gig work is not neutral but is strongly gender-conditioned, reinforcing the idea that labor market participation is socially regulated rather than individually determined (Mousa, 2022). While men's gig work is constructed as economically uncertain and socially transitional, women's participation is normalized when it aligns with expectations of domesticity and spatial immobility. This reflects how gig work does not uniformly disrupt traditional norms but may instead reproduce them by offering "acceptable flexibility" for women while failing to legitimize non-traditional career paths for men.

4.2.2 Classification of jobs as feminine and masculine

The men respondents largely agreed that clients prefer to depend on men gig workers to remotely teach mathematics, and technology-related subjects, as they usually hear in their online sessions. The women respondents broadly concurred with the men, asserting that clients (Egyptian and Arab families) recruit women gig teachers to only teach languages. Three women respondents voiced that women gig teachers mostly avoid exerting any intellectual effort. Hence, they keep themselves apart from mathematics and technology-related courses.

Clients mostly think that only men gig teachers are qualified to teach mathematics, statistics and other courses that need an intensive use of intellectual abilities. R16

The majority of clients and I believe that women gig teachers can teach English, French and Spanish better than men. Teaching foreign languages requires flexibility, patience and gentleness that are available mostly in women. R19

These findings illustrate how occupational segmentation in gig teaching is shaped less by actual skill differences and more by deeply embedded gender stereotypes reproduced through client expectations. Rather than functioning as an open merit-based market, the platform environment appears to reinforce pre-existing cultural narratives that associate men with analytical and technical competence and women with communicative and relational skills. This aligns with broader evidence in gig work literature that digital labor platforms often replicate rather than dismantle traditional gendered divisions of labor (Cook et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2024), thereby challenging assumptions of gender-neutral task allocation.

4.3 Conditional inclusion

We label this dimension conditional inclusion because participants' accounts indicate that acceptance and support were granted contingently rather than unconditionally: legitimacy was conferred when gig work conformed to prevailing gender norms and was withheld when it did not. The two themes below, familial support and socio-governmental support, illustrate this conditionality from complementary directions.

4.3.1 Familial support

Twelve of the men respondents highlighted that gig work is not perceived by families in Egypt as a permanent and stable source of income. Families mostly believe in work that drowns its owner in sweat and nervous stress. Therefore, the addressed men do not receive full familial support when

exercising gig work. In addition, respondents 23 and 30 highlighted that because of their sex, they are the ones who provide familial support without expecting to perceive it.

In the Egyptian context, only men provide care and support to their families, regardless of their employment status or arrangement. R21

The majority of families in our culture consider any job without sweat and black skin as welfare. My wife, and sometimes my mother as well, keep asking me why students pay me money if I just teach them online. They consider online teaching a voluntary effort. R29

I teach online in order to not only make money but also find a girlfriend who can help me travel and live far from here. So, I am the one who should provide care and support. R30

In contrast, most of the women respondents elaborated that gig work secures additional financial support for their husbands and families, even if it is temporary. This helps them guarantee ongoing care and appreciation.

I find major support from my husband and parents. Moreover, they appreciate that I financially help them with a part of the living expenses. R5

Without the support and sometimes assistance of my husband, I would not continue to work as a gig teacher. Personally, I dislike working, even if it is remote and online. However, the rising cost of life has forced me to get permission from my husband and then start teaching online. R24

These contrasting accounts suggest that familial support in gig work is not merely emotional or financial but is deeply embedded in gendered expectations of breadwinning and dependency. Rather than gig work being evaluated on its economic contribution alone, its legitimacy is filtered through culturally constructed notions of masculine provider roles and feminine supplemental income roles. This reinforces earlier literature on gendered labor norms in non-Western contexts (Mousa, 2022), indicating that gig work does not necessarily disrupt traditional family hierarchies but may instead reconfigure them in ways that still preserve gender asymmetry in perceived economic value. In this sense, the familial support women receive is best understood as conditional inclusion: it enables participation, yet it is premised on spousal permission, domestic compatibility, and the framing of women's earnings as supplementary, thereby reproducing dependence within apparent acceptance.

4.3.2 Socio-governmental support

Due to the lack of understanding of gig work and the digital transformation, people in Egypt provide minimal support to men gig workers as voiced by 10 of our respondents. Respondents 15 and 32 even indicated that they find difficulty including their gig work as their main profession in their national ID cards. Instead, the authorities in Egypt are satisfied with adding "holder of bachelor's degree" in the field of profession appearing in their national ID cards. This also occurs when applying for passports, and hence they find it difficult to apply for visas and travel abroad, as they simply have no jobs in their national ID and passport.

My profession in my national ID and passport is "holder of a bachelor's degree". This is because public employees do not feel fully aware of what gig

work is. The same happened with one of my friends who is a gig worker too. I got a visa refusal from a European consulate because I have no clear job listed in my passport. I am only a holder of a bachelor's degree, as the authorities in Egypt state. So, the support is completely absent. R15

No training is initiated by the government for those who are freelancers or remote workers. The government is just planning to force me as a gig worker to pay tax and I plan to travel and live abroad. R32

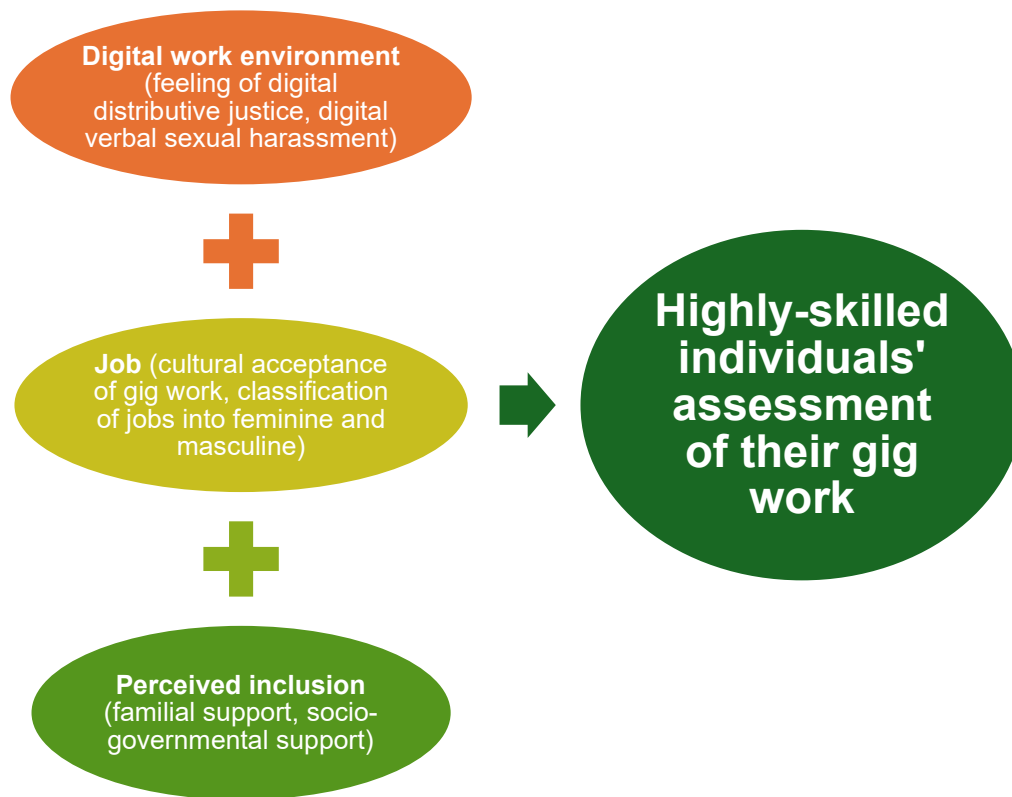
In complete contrast, the women respondents indicated that they find considerable socio-governmental support. The government in Egypt encourages women to work online and trains them to do so. Furthermore, the women perceive it as a point of pride to find their academic qualifications in their professional field included in their national ID cards and passports. This might occur because thousands of Egyptian families do not care about educating their daughters to bachelor level, out of a belief that women are born to stay at home and raise children, not for higher education and work.

Since the pandemic period, the government provides training to women microentrepreneurs and freelancers in collaboration with civil society organisations and the faculties of information technology. R13

I don't care about my profession on the national ID and passport because I do not have any intention to travel. Moreover, highlighting that I have a master's degree on my national ID makes me proud. R22

These findings highlight a critical mismatch between institutional recognition systems and the realities of digital labor, where gig work remains socially and administratively under-codified within formal state structures. The absence of clear occupational classification for men gig workers reflects institutional lag in adapting to platform-based employment, while the relative recognition of women suggests that inclusion is selectively granted when aligned with broader gendered policy agendas. This indicates that socio-governmental support in gig work is not evenly distributed but is shaped by gendered expectations and institutional narratives about appropriate forms of women's economic participation, reinforcing the idea that platform economies remain deeply embedded in state-level gender regimes rather than operating as neutral labor markets. For men, by contrast, the absence of occupational recognition amounts to constrained legitimacy, restricting mobility and institutional standing. Both patterns exemplify conditional inclusion rather than inclusion per se. The following figure summarizes the main factors that men and women gig teachers use to assess their journey within gig work.

Figure 2 (authors' own work). Factors for assessing the work journey of gig teachers (prepared by the authors)



5. Discussion

This study contributes to the expanding but still fragmented literature on gender and gig work, which remains relatively underexplored in non-Western contexts (Cook et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2024; Mousa, 2024). By focusing on Egyptian gig teachers operating in international digital markets, the study extends current understanding of how cultural environments shape participation in platform-based employment. The findings suggest that gig work is not merely a response to economic incentives but is also structured by socio-cultural expectations, particularly those governing women's mobility and acceptable forms of work. In this sense, women's engagement in gig work reflects an alignment between platform flexibility and prevailing cultural norms, supporting arguments that cultural constraints, alongside economic necessity, shape labor market participation (Huang et al., 2020). **The findings support SST by demonstrating that workers evaluate gig work not only through economic outcomes but also through socio-emotional considerations such as social legitimacy, safety, familial support, and emotional well-being. More importantly, the findings extend SST by showing that these socio-emotional considerations are not freely chosen by individuals but are conferred, regulated, and constrained by gendered cultural and institutional structures.**

Departing from prior research that predominantly emphasizes earnings disparities (Cook et al., 2021; Dong et al., 2024; Han et al., 2024), this study demonstrates that gender operates as a structuring principle of lived experience in gig work. The results indicate that men and women construct markedly different meanings around similar platform conditions: ratings are interpreted as unfair by men but acceptable by women; digital harassment emerges as a gendered exposure;

and freelancing legitimacy is socially constrained for men but normalized for women through domestic compatibility. Similarly, occupational segmentation and differential access to familial and institutional support further illustrate how gig work experiences are filtered through gendered expectations rather than purely individual performance. Collectively, these patterns show that gender shapes not only outcomes but also interpretations, evaluations, and emotional responses to platform labor. Taken together, these findings suggest that gender functions as a mechanism through which inclusion and exclusion are produced in platform work, shaping workers' access to legitimacy, support, safety, and favorable evaluations.

In contrast to existing studies on gig teaching that isolate specific dimensions such as self-branding, flexibility, or racial discrimination (Curran and Jenks, 2023; Kwee, 2022; Curran, 2023), this study shifts attention to the integrated experience of gig teachers. It demonstrates that perceptions of fairness, inclusion, and cultural legitimacy are co-constructed through both platform mechanisms and broader socio-cultural structures. This highlights the need to conceptualize gig teaching not as a uniform form of flexible work, but as a gendered and contextually embedded experience shaped by intersecting institutional and cultural forces. Below, we discuss the key theoretical contributions and practical implications of these findings.

5.1 Theoretical contributions

The first theoretical contribution of this study is an extension of socio-emotional selectivity theory from an individual to a relational and multilevel explanation of platform work. SST explains work and life choices through individuals' pursuit of novelty and emotional regulation (Carstensen et al., 1999, 2003). Our findings show that, in a strongly gendered context, the socio-emotional goals that workers can legitimately pursue through gig work are socially conferred and regulated rather than individually selected. Women could pursue emotional regulation goals, such as safety from street harassment and alignment with familial expectations, because these goals were culturally sanctioned, while their pursuit of novelty goals was channeled into gender-typed tasks; men could pursue novelty and income goals but were denied the socio-emotional rewards of legitimacy, recognition, and familial approval. Socio-emotional selectivity, in other words, operates within gender regimes that distribute permissible goals unevenly. This relational reading of SST is consistent with multilevel approaches that explain individual work experiences through the interplay of macro-national structures, meso-level organizational and familial dynamics, and micro-individual agency (Syed and Özbilgin, 2009), and it identifies the concrete mechanisms through which this interplay unfolds in platform work: the digital work environment (perceived digital distributive justice and digital verbal sexual harassment), job characteristics (cultural acceptance of gig work and the gendered classification of tasks), and conditional inclusion (familial and socio-governmental support).

The second theoretical contribution is the concept of conditional inclusion. Existing accounts tend to treat familial and institutional support as evidence of the inclusiveness of gig work (Mousa et al., 2022). Our findings complicate this reading: the acceptance women received was contingent on spousal permission, domestic compatibility, and the framing of their earnings as supplementary, while the recognition granted by the state aligned with policy narratives about appropriate forms of women's economic participation. Men, conversely, experienced constrained legitimacy, as their gig work was denied familial endorsement and institutional codification. Inclusion in gig work is therefore conditional: it is granted insofar as participation conforms to prevailing gender norms, and it may deepen dependence even as it enables participation. This conceptualization responds to

critiques of individualized and voluntaristic treatments of equality and inclusion at work, which show that apparent gains can coexist with, and even mask, the reproduction of structural inequality (Özbilgin and Tatli, 2011). Conditional inclusion also refines SST's account of emotional regulation by showing that the emotionally rewarding features of gig work for women are inseparable from the constraints that produce them.

The third theoretical contribution challenges the assumption that gig work evaluation is primarily performance-driven, as suggested by Low et al. (2024). Instead, the findings indicate that client evaluations are socially embedded and can be shaped by non-performance-related factors, particularly gendered preferences and stereotypes. Evidence of teenage clients exhibiting a preference for women gig teachers further suggests that evaluation systems within digital platforms are not neutral but are influenced by aged and gendered social biases. This extends existing literature by showing that algorithmic or rating-based systems in gig work may reproduce offline inequalities rather than eliminate them, thereby complicating assumptions of meritocracy in platform-mediated labor markets. Finally, we clarify the role of context in these contributions. The Egyptian setting is not itself the contribution; rather, it is a revelatory context in which the social regulation of socio-emotional goals and the conditionality of inclusion become observable in sharp relief. Emic, context-sensitive theorizing of this kind does not confine insights to a single country; it generates concepts, such as conditional inclusion, that can travel to other settings where gender regimes shape platform work, including Western contexts where such regulation may operate more subtly (Tatli and Özbilgin, 2012).

5.2 Practical implications

Building on the findings, this study suggests that addressing gendered inequalities in gig work requires attention to how institutional, platform, and socio-cultural factors jointly shape unequal experiences of digital labour. First, greater institutional recognition of gig work is needed to reduce the current ambiguity in occupational classification within administrative systems, which affects workers' legitimacy and mobility. Second, access to training and support initiatives in digital work should be designed in ways that avoid reinforcing gendered assumptions about appropriate forms of employment and instead ensure inclusivity across workers.

Third, platform providers should improve transparency in rating and evaluation systems, as participants perceive these mechanisms as potentially shaped by non-performance-related factors, including gendered expectations. Fourth, stronger platform-level safeguards are needed to address gendered online harassment and protect workers' safety and professional dignity. Finally, efforts to improve public understanding of gig work should be grounded in local labour market realities and recognise how social norms shape the legitimacy of platform-based employment.

6. Conclusion, limitations and future research

We have addressed how both women and men gig workers assess their career journey through focusing on gig teachers who provide remote, online, flexible and short-term teaching sessions to clients (students) from a range of countries. This study has the following limitations. First, this study focuses exclusively on gig teachers; therefore, the findings are specific to this group, and it remains unclear whether they can be generalized to other categories of gig workers. Second, neglecting the opinions of the administrators of the digital platforms might limit the validity of the information obtained about how the addressed gig teachers are assessed, and this might negatively affect the accuracy of this paper's findings. Third, overlooking the perspective of the government

in Egypt and how it treats both men and women gig workers might also limit the authors' ability to constitute a detailed picture about the factors affecting gig workers in their journey with remote project-based activities. **Although the findings highlight broad gendered patterns, experiences were not uniform across participants, and future research could examine how factors such as age, marital status, teaching specialization, and career stage intersect with gender to shape experiences of gig work.** Accordingly, in future research, interested scholars might consider asking the same research question in Western and South American contexts. Moreover, future researchers might address how governments in African contexts promote or hinder gig work. Furthermore, exploring the opportunities for gig workers in non-Western countries to continue with their career might also represent a promising research idea. Additionally, scholars may consider quantitatively examining the impact of gender on gig teachers' selection of teaching activities and their continued engagement in gig work. Furthermore, future research may benefit from incorporating intersectional dimensions (e.g., age, class, rural/urban background), as these factors can potentially intensify or attenuate the gendered patterns observed in gig work. Lastly, future studies could explore the experiences of gig teachers in other Middle Eastern and North African countries to identify both similarities and differences in comparison to the Egyptian context.

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