



WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT IN INDONESIA'S DIGITAL LABOR PLATFORMS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF LIVED EXPERIENCES

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Abstract

Digital labor platforms are expanding rapidly across the Global South, raising questions about whether they empower women or reproduce precarity under the guise of flexibility. Indonesia, one of Southeast Asia's largest platform economies, illustrates how digital work intersects with entrenched gender norms, regulatory gaps, and structural inequalities. This study applies Kabeer (1999) framework of resources, agency, and achievements, supported by Sen (1999) capability approach, Malhotra & Schuler (2002) indicators, and Cornwall & Rivas (2015) call to politicize empowerment. Semi-structured interviews with ten women in ride-hailing and reselling platforms were thematically analyzed to foreground lived experiences. Findings show that platform work generates real but fragile empowerment. Resources such as digital skills and income enable entry, while achievements like financial independence and confidence are genuine yet undermined by five constraints: physical safety, algorithmic precarity, taxation burdens, social stigma, and capability gaps. Agency emerges as negotiated autonomy; women exercise choice, but only within structural limits imposed by algorithms, household norms, and unsafe conditions. Empowerment in Indonesia's platform economy thus remains contingent, partial, and dependent on broader institutional transformation

Keywords: *Women's Empowerment; Digital Labor Platforms; Kabeer's Framework; Negotiated Autonomy; Algorithmic Governance; Platform Economy; Gender Equity; Structural Precarity*



By Authors

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1. Introduction

Digital labor platforms have transformed global labor markets, reshaping how people access work and income. For women in developing economies, they offer flexibility, new income streams, and market access, yet also reinforce inequalities in care work, job insecurity, and bargaining power. Asrori et al. (2025). The central debate remains: do platforms enable empowerment, or simply repackage precarity as flexibility?

Indonesia illustrates this tension vividly. Its digital economy reached US\$90 billion in 2024, the largest in Southeast Asia Google (2025). E-commerce contributed US\$65 billion, supported by 221.6 million internet users. APJII, (2024). Female labor force participation stagnates at 52.6%, nearly 30 points below men. Investing in Women (2025). Women spend 2.8 times more hours on unpaid care, and many exit paid work after marriage due to childcare shortages. Kompas (2024). Though women own 56% of digital MSMEs, they earn 22% less than men and struggle to sustain businesses. Women's World Banking (2023). In ride-hailing, women comprise just 2.4% of drivers, facing cancellations and harassment. IDinsight (2025).

Global scholarship often treats "platform work" as uniform, overlooking differences between service-oriented (ride-hailing, delivery) and commerce-oriented (e-commerce, reselling) platforms. While Kabeer's empowerment framework is widely applied to conventional work, its adaptation to digital labour remains limited. Recent studies have begun to bridge this gap: Ghosh et al. (2022) locate women workers within India's platform economy, arguing that digital labour reproduces existing gender hierarchies rather than transforming them; Yadav et al. (2026) map empowerment across platform and non-platform workers in two Indian cities, finding that spatial and sectoral context mediates women's access to resources and agency; and Dwityas et al. (2025) examine social media-based entrepreneurship in Indonesia, showing that digital self-employment offers pathways to economic participation but remains shaped by cultural expectations around care and domesticity.

However, further research is needed to understand how empowerment operates across different forms of Indonesian digital labour, where women's access to income, flexibility, and digital resources is closely intertwined with platform dependence, insecure earnings, unpaid care responsibilities, and social expectations. This study addresses that gap by foregrounding women's narratives across diverse platforms.

2. Literature Review

Women's empowerment has been theorized through multiple frameworks. Kabeer (1999) defines empowerment as the process by which those previously denied strategic life choices gain the ability to make them, emphasizing three inseparable dimensions: resources (material, human, and social), agency (the ability to define goals and act on them), and achievements (the outcomes of empowerment processes). Sen (1999) broadens the analytical focus from what women possess to what they can meaningfully do and be, highlighting that empowerment must be assessed by real opportunities, not

resources alone. Malhotra & Schuler (2002) provide measurable indicators including mobility, decision-making, and economic control. Cornwall & Rivas (2015) argue that empowerment must be politicized: situated within governance structures, labor law gaps, and global value chains.

No single framework is sufficient for the platform context. Kabeer's process model identifies the movement from resources to agency and achievements, Sen helps assess whether that movement produces substantive freedoms, Malhotra and Schuler provide practical indicators for examining empowerment, and Cornwall and Rivas connect individual experience to institutional power. The present study synthesizes these perspectives in two ways. First, it treats empowerment as simultaneously enabling and unstable: the same platform structures that create opportunity can also produce precarity. Second, it uses negotiated autonomy as a context-specific description of agency that is real but bounded, exercised through strategic choices within structural parameters that are not open to individual renegotiation.

2.1. Global Evidence

Global scholarship demonstrates that digital labor platforms expand women's access to income and flexible work, but empowerment outcomes remain contested. Research on women workers in India's platform economy shows how digital labor can reproduce existing gender hierarchies rather than transform them. Ghosh et al. (2022). In the United States, research on more than one million rideshare drivers documented a gender earnings gap. Cook et al. (2021). Research with UK platform workers has also shown how the absence of employer-provided childcare can intensify work-family conflict James (2024), while a review across Asia finds that women are disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid platform roles. Minh (2025).

A critical gap in global literature is the tendency to treat "platform work" as a single category. Service-oriented platforms (ride-hailing, delivery) expose women to physical safety risks, algorithmic discipline, and public visibility stigma. Commerce-oriented platforms (e-commerce, reselling) expose women to market saturation, platform fees, and capability gaps driven by platform evolution. This distinction has received limited attention in existing scholarship.

2.2. Indonesia's Digital Labor Landscape

Indonesia has experienced one of the fastest expansions of digital platforms in Southeast Asia. Ride-hailing services have transformed urban transport, creating new opportunities for women through flexible scheduling Ford & Honan (2019). However, safety concerns and algorithmic governance constrain autonomy. E-commerce and social media platforms have become central to women's entrepreneurship, lowering entry barriers, yet competition is intense and visibility depends on algorithmic ranking. Indonesia's regulatory environment for digital platforms remains fragmented, with gig economy workers typically excluded from social security programs because they are classified as "partners" rather than employees.

Drawing on Kabeer's framework, five intersecting domains of constraint emerge in the Indonesian context: physical safety risks, platform-induced precarity, structural burdens (taxation, delivery costs), social stigma, and infrastructural capability gaps. These domains operate as an interlocking system rather than isolated barriers.

3. Research Method

A qualitative research design was adopted to examine how women experience empowerment within Indonesia's digital labor platforms. Semi-structured interviews were selected because they combine a common set of analytical prompts with enough flexibility for participants to describe work, income, care responsibilities, safety, family relations, and wellbeing in their own terms. The design was explicitly comparative: it placed publicly visible, service-oriented work alongside home-based, commerce-oriented work rather than treating platform labor as a single category.

Participants were purposively selected to represent the two platform pathways central to the study: ride-hailing and delivery work on one side, and reselling or restaurant-related commerce on the other. The practical inclusion criteria were women aged 24-51 who were engaged in these forms of platform work in Indonesia and could describe how platform participation shaped their resources, agency, achievements, and constraints. The final sample contained ten participants, five primarily associated with ride-hailing and delivery and five with reselling or restaurant-related platform activity, across Gojek, Grab, Shopee, Instagram, TikTok, WhatsApp, Facebook, GoFood, and GrabFood.

Recruitment occurred in stages. The study initially aimed to reach 20-30 women and began with Instagram direct messages to twenty-five potential participants; three responded. The researcher then expanded recruitment through snowball sampling and personal networks, contacting approximately twenty additional women. Because some potential participants found the term interview intimidating, the invitation was framed as a conversation about their experiences. The online recruitment phase lasted three weeks and produced five interviews. A subsequent two-week period of face-to-face recruitment in workplaces, shops, restaurants, offices, and homes produced five additional interviews. This approach improved access and trust but also created a risk of selection bias toward women who were reachable through social networks and willing to discuss their experiences.

Table 1: Participant Summary

Participant	Age	Type	Platforms	Location
P1	51	Ride-hailing, Food Delivery	Gojek	Bogor, West Java
P2	40	Ride-hailing, Food Delivery	Gojek	Bogor, West Java



Participant	Age	Type	Platforms	Location
P3	32	Ride-hailing, Food Delivery	Gojek	Depok, West Java
P4	24	Ride-hailing, Food Delivery	Grab	DKI Jakarta
P5	32	Ride-hailing, Food Delivery	Grab	Tangerang, Banten
P6	28	Reseller (Fashion)	Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok	Kapuas, Central Kalimantan
P7	26	Reseller (Aquarium accessories)	Shopee, TikTok	Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan
P8	44	Reseller (Frozen Food)	Go Food, Grab Food, WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok	Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan
P9	35	Restaurant Owner	Go Food, Grab Food	Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan
P10	43	Reseller (Fashion)	WhatsApp, Instagram, TikTok, Facebook	Banjarmasin, South Kalimantan

Source: Data Processed (2026)

The sample was designed for analytical depth and platform-type comparison, not statistical representation. The study did not apply a formal saturation stop rule; recruitment was concluded with ten participants because access constraints limited further recruitment and the final sample provided detailed accounts from both comparison groups. Accordingly, the article makes no claim that ten participants represent Indonesian women in general. The value of the sample lies in the depth of the narratives and in the contrast between different platform arrangements, life stages, locations, and forms of work.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were conducted online and face-to-face in mutually agreed settings, lasted 30-45 minutes, and were audio-recorded with permission. They were manually transcribed in Indonesian and double-checked by an Indonesian academic expert for translation fidelity. The analysis followed Braun & Clarke (2006) six-phase thematic approach and was supported by NVivo. A hybrid deductive-inductive strategy was used: Kabeer's resources, agency, and achievements served as sensitizing concepts, while codes were also generated from unexpected experiences and participants' own language. The final coding structure contained 100 initial codes, which were refined into seven thematic clusters and mapped onto the study's analytical framework.

Trustworthiness was addressed through four related strategies. Credibility was supported by a pilot interview, participant-centered semi-structured interviewing, repeated engagement with the transcripts, translation double-checking, direct use of participant quotations, and comparison across platform types. Transferability was supported through contextual detail about participants' ages, occupations, platforms, locations, and working arrangements, although the study does not claim statistical generalizability. Dependability was strengthened by documenting coding decisions, category development, thematic mapping, and the progression from raw accounts to analytical themes in an audit trail. Confirmability was supported by reflexive notes on the researcher's positionality and by keeping interpretations linked to participants' words. The study did not use formal member checking or independent intercoder coding; these omissions are acknowledged as limitations rather than presented as completed procedures. Ethical approval was granted by Yalova University before data collection began, and the study was conducted in accordance with the institution's ethical standards for research involving human participants.

The analytic procedure followed Braun & Clarke (2006) six phases. Each phase is described below to make the coding process transparent.

Phase 1: Familiarization. All transcripts were read repeatedly and checked against the audio recordings. Because transcription was done manually, the researcher became closely familiar with the tone, pauses, and emotional content of each account before coding began.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes. Transcripts were imported into NVivo and coded at the level of meaning units. Codes were generated inductively from participants' own words and experiences, such as family support, unsafe conditions, taxation, algorithmic targets, and capability gaps, while Kabeer's resources, agency, and achievements served as sensitizing concepts. This produced 100 initial codes. (Appendix 3)

Phase 3: Searching for themes. Related codes were grouped into candidate clusters by comparing similarities and differences across participants. For example, codes about delivery costs, taxation, market competition, connectivity, and weather were grouped into an external and systematic constraints cluster, while codes about decision-making, family support, and work-family balance formed an agency and family dynamics cluster.

This table demonstrates systematic progression from raw participants narratives to coded categories and thematic interpretation.

Table 2: Illustration of Thematic Analysis Process

Interview excerpt	Initial code	Category	Theme
"After my husband's accident, I had to replace him as breadwinner." (P2)	Crisis-driven entry into platform work	Conditional resources access	Foundations of Participation: uneven pathways
"At that time Gojek prioritized female partner, economic demands and friend recommendation" (P1)	Institutional recruitment and peer networks		



Interview excerpt	Initial code	Category	Theme
"Online motorcycle taxi, food delivery and package delivery." (P1)	Operational diversification across stream		
"I adjust my schedule to my children's school hours and daily earnings targets." (P1)	Adaptive scheduling to balance care and income		
"By managing time carefully, sharing domestic task with my husband" (P2)	Renegotiating domestic labor boundaries	Negotiated Autonomy	Agency: Contested and Relational Process
"My mother does not support me, fearing it would damage family's reputation. But my friends support me" (P5)	Persistence despite social stigmas via peer support		
"Through platform work I can pay rent, pay for college, and live independently." (P4)	Financial independence and educational mobility	Multidimensional Gains	Achievements: Real but Structurally Fragile
"After five years I achieved extraordinary result, having enough savings to buy assets." (P6)	Long-term asset accumulation		
"I had traffic accident that caused a miscarriage. I did not report this incident." (P2)	Physical risk and unreported workplace injury	Systematic Fragility	
"The challenge is in taxation; taxation challenges keep reducing my profit." (P9)	Regulatory and structural financial burdens	Constitutive Constraints	The Double-Edge Sword of Platform Work
"Some underestimate me, especially fellow women," (P4)	Peer-based gender stigma		
Trending live selling we have not followed yet, because it requires speaking directly in front of camera." (P10)	Capability gaps and platform evolution		

Source: Data Processed (2026)

Phase 4: Reviewing and refining themes. The candidate clusters were checked against the full dataset. Overlapping or weakly supported codes were merged or reallocated, and contradictions between participants' accounts were examined rather than smoothed over. This step ensured that the final themes captured the real but fragile character of empowerment.

Table 3 demonstrates how clusters were refined into themes and linked to empowerment processes.

Table 3: Cluster → Themes → Linking to Empowerment

Clusters	Themes	Linking to Empowerment Process
Structural & External Barriers	External and systemic constraints affecting platform workers	Resources → Agency Constraints
Individual Challenges & Skills	Personal capacity, discipline, and skill-based challenges	Resources
Motivation for Entry	Drivers and motivations for entering digital platforms	Resources → Agency
Agency, Family & Dynamics	Agency, family support, and balancing domestic responsibilities	Agency
Achievements & Outcomes	Empowerment outcomes and achievements through platform work	Achievements
Risks & Negative Experiences	Risks, vulnerabilities, and negative experiences in platform work	Agency Constraints → Achievement Limitations
Platform & Market Dynamics	Platform design, fairness, and market positioning	Resources → Agency

Source: Data Processed (2026)

Table 3 serves as a bridge between raw coding and interpretive synthesis, making transparent how codes were integrated into coherent themes that reveal the dynamic interplay of resources, agency, and achievements.

Phase 5: The final themes were defined to capture the essence of the empowerment process as observed in the Indonesian platform economy:

Theme 1: Negotiating Domestic Responsibilities (Agency). This theme reflects how women balance family involvement, domestic labor, and breadwinner substitution, highlighting the “negotiation autonomy” within the household. Ten files and forty-one references captured decision-making, family support, shared domestic labor, work-family balance, and personal ambition, showing how agency is defined through household bargaining and relational support’s structure.

Theme 2: Recognition and Wellbeing (Achievements). This theme encompasses outcomes such as financial independence, confidence growth, and social recognition, while acknowledging their domain-specific and fragile nature. Ten files and fifty-one references documented achievements including digital literacy, education support, peer solidarity, skill development, social recognition, and health improvement, illustrating empowerment outcomes that are real but contingent and vulnerable to systematic pressures.

Theme 3: External and Systematic Constraints (Resources). This theme Captures barriers such as weather conditions, taxation issues, platform costs, and market competition, emphasizing constraints as constitutive of the empowerment pathway. Eight files and seventeen references highlighted delivery costs, taxation burdens, market

competition, connectivity problems, seasonal fluctuations, and weather conditions, situating these constraints as structural burdens that reproduce precarity within platform work.

Theme 4: Platform Design and Market Positioning (Resources/Agency). This theme highlights issues of algorithm fairness, feature restrictions, and buyer cycles, showing how platform governance and market dynamics shape both opportunities and precarity. Ten files and twenty-nine references revealed algorithmic fairness concerns, company responses, competition, customer convenience, trend adaptation, and word-of-mouth expansion, underscoring how platform design itself constitutes domain of empowerment and constraint.

Theme 5: Individual Challenges and Skills (Resources). This theme represents personal capacities and skill-based challenges, including digital literacy, and capability gaps tied to platform evolution like live selling. Ten files and twenty-one references emphasized time management, stress management, self-discipline, workload management, product presentation, and consistency, showing how infrastructural and personal capacity gaps particularly affect resellers adapting to evolving platform demands.

Theme 6: Motivation for Entry (Resources → Agency). This theme captures drivers such as economic necessity, educational aspiration, and personal ambition, illustrating how resources open pathway to participation. Ten file sixty-four references documented motivations including breadwinner substitution, flexibility, wider customer reach, and transition from office work, showing how entry into platform work is driven by necessity and aspiration but remains conditioned by structural constraints.

Theme 7: Risks and Negative Experiences (Agency Constraints → Achievement Limitations). This theme reveals vulnerabilities such as safety risks, insecurity, social stigma, undermine transformative gains. Six files and twenty-nine references highlighted safety risks, unreported accidents, gender underestimation, customer errors, and damage goods, demonstrating how physical insecurity and social stigma disproportionately affect women, particularly in ride-hailing, thereby timing the sustainability of empowerment outcomes.

Phase 6: Producing the report. The seven themes were organized into a narrative tracing how resources enabled participation, how agency appeared as negotiated autonomy, and how achievements remained vulnerable to constitutive constraints. Theme definitions and representative quotations were retained so that every analytical claim could be traced back to participant accounts.

Trustworthiness and Bias Reduction

- 1) **Reflexivity:** The researcher consistently reflected on personal positionality, maintaining reflexive notes throughout data collection and analysis to ensure that participants' voices remained central.

- 2) **Diverse Sampling:** Including women from different age groups (24-51), socio-economic backgrounds, geographic regions and platform types, reduced the risk of overrepresenting a single perspective.
- 3) **Methodological Transparency:** Coding decisions, category development, and thematic mapping were documented in detail, creating an audit trail that enhances accountability.
- 4) **Participant-Centered Approach:** Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to guide the conversation, ensuring that data reflected their lived realities rather than researcher-imposed categories.

Despite these measures, certain limitations remain. The small sample size (n=10) restricts generalizability beyond the specific contexts studied. Some participants withdrew due to discomfort or scheduling challenges. Reliance on self-reported experiences also means that findings reflect participants' perceptions, which may not always align with platform policies or external data. Qualitative design emphasizes depth over breadth and cannot provide statistical generalizations. These findings should be interpreted as a context-specific contribution that complement larger-scale quantitative analysis.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles guided every stage of this research. The study adhered to the standards of qualitative inquiry and complied with institutional ethical approval requirements.

- 1) **Informed Consent and Voluntary participation.** All participants were provided with clear information about the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Consent was obtained prior to each interview, Participation was entirely voluntary, and women were free to withdraw at any stage without consequence.
- 2) **Confidentiality and Anonymity:** Personal identifiers were removed from transcripts, and pseudonyms were used in reporting. Audio recordings and transcripts were securely stored, accessible only to the researcher.
- 3) **Respect and Sensitivity:** Interviews were conducted in safe and mutually agreed environments, whether online or face-to-face, with attention to participants' comfort and emotional wellbeing. Sensitive topics harassment (P1) and workplace accidents leading to miscarriage (P2), were approached with care, and participants-maintained control over the depth of disclosure.
- 4) **Data Integrity:** manual transcription preserves tone, pauses, and emotional inflections that automated tools would have erased. Reinforced both ethical responsibility and methodological rigor.

By embedding these ethical safeguards, the study not only protected participants but also strengthened the credibility of its findings. Ethical practice was treated as integral to the empowerment framework itself.

4. Results and Discussion

This article presents the findings and discussion of a qualitative study of ten Indonesian women working across ride-hailing and reselling platforms. The analysis foregrounds participants' voices to show how empowerment unfolds across these diverse platform contexts, situating lived experiences within Naila Kabeer's tripartite framework of resources, agency, and achievements, complemented by Sen's capability approach, Malhotra and Schuler's operational indicators, and Cornwall and Rivas's structural critique. The core argument is that empowerment in Indonesia's digital labor platforms is simultaneously enabling and unstable: women mobilize resources, exercise bounded agency, and achieve real gains, but these are continually reshaped by systemic constraints.

Resources: Foundation of Participation

Following Kabeer (1999), resources encompassed material access (platform entry, income), human resources (digital literacy, riding skills), and social resources (family support, peer networks, institutional programs). As Kabeer cautions, access to resources signals potential rather than actualized choice, and across the ten participants this potential was unevenly distributed from the outset.

Ride-hailing participants accessed platform work through at least four resource pathways. The most common was crisis-driven entry. P2, a 40-year-old Gojek driver, turned to the platform only after a household catastrophe left her the sole provider: "After my husband's accident, I had to replace him as breadwinner." P5, a 32-year-old Grab driver and university student, entered during a period of financial vulnerability when her only material asset was "a motorcycle." A second pathway was institutional recruitment: P1, driving since 2015, entered through Gojek's deliberate prioritization of female drivers, and P3, a married mother, found that Gojek's inclusive registration accommodated the caregiving responsibilities that formal employment had failed to fit. A fourth pathway was gender-targeted programming: P4 joined through Grab's "Lady Grab" initiative, a gender-specific institutional resource, though resigning from prior employment meant her pathway involved calculated risk.

Reselling participants relied on a different configuration of resources. P6, a fashion reseller, drew on digital literacy accumulated over years of social media use, which translated over five years into savings and asset purchases. P7 and P8 leveraged their physical homes as operational bases, eliminating rental costs and gaining "wide reach of buyers, even outside the city." P9 entered through peer recommendation, and P10 joined to adapt to changing market conditions: "people now prefer shopping online." Whereas ride-hailing required a motorcycle, a smartphone, and institutional registration, resellers leveraged social capital, domestic space, and accumulated digital literacy.

Family support emerged as a critical social resource across both platform types, functioning as a multiplier. P1's family support enabled her to sustain five years of ride-hailing while funding her children's education; P7's relatives directly participated in preparing and packaging goods; P10 noted that "family supports because this business

adds income.” Yet its absence was a significant constraint: P5’s mother actively opposed her work, “fearing it would damage the family’s reputation.”

Resources alone did not guarantee sustainable empowerment. P9 cited taxation reducing profit, P7 identified high administrative fees, P1 saw orders decline when competitors launched big promotions, and P2’s outdated phone slowed app performance. The translation from resources to empowerment was conditional on platform governance, market conditions, regulatory frameworks, age, life stage, geography, and platform type.

Participants described resources as the entry point into platform work, encompassing material access, human resources, and social resources. However, these resources were unevenly distributed, shaped by divergent biographical circumstances and institutional pathways.

Agency: Negotiated Autonomy

Agency emerged not as a fixed capacity but as a relational, contested process exercised daily within intersecting constraints, across scheduling autonomy, domestic renegotiation, and risk-based decision-making.

Every participant affirmed control over when and how to work. For resellers this approached near-total discretion: P6 stated, “If I want to take a break or holiday, I just turn off the application,” and P8 echoed, “I can open and close anytime.” For ride-hailing workers, flexibility was bounded by algorithmic parameters: P2 noted, “There are targets from the company according to levels,” and P5 articulated, “The system is: the more hours we work, the more income we get.” Choice existed but carried material consequences. P3 explicitly contrasted platform work with formal employment: “when working in office we are bound by fixed hours. But platform work is very flexible, so I can balance working time with household duties”. For ride-hailing workers, flexibility meant arranging hours around children’s schooling, care work, or university attendance; for resellers, it meant near-complete boundary control over work itself.

Agency extended into the household. P2 described “sharing domestic task with my husband” as a deliberate temporal strategy, a quiet renegotiation of gendered expectations. P7 mobilized family labor as a productive resource, P9 cooperated with her husband to divide household and restaurant tasks, and P10 drew sharper boundaries: “During operational hours I focus more on work/selling. But once at home, I focus only on household matters.”

Risk negotiation was most evident in strategic adaptation. P3 shifted from passenger transport to food and package delivery to reduce harassment risk, accepting lower earnings for safety: “Over time, I felt more comfortable focusing only on food and package delivery.” P5 built confidence incrementally, starting with packages before carrying passengers. P1 diversified across multiple service streams to spread risk. For resellers, risk negotiation centered on market adaptation and long-horizon asset building; P10 identified a capability gap in live selling, which “requires speaking directly in front of camera and explaining product detail one by one.”

Agency was also exercised through persistence in the face of stigma. P5 described being sustained by peer networks where kinship withheld support: “My mother does not support me... But my friends and colleagues really support me and are proud of me.” P4 encountered judgment from an unexpected source: “some underestimate me, especially fellow women,” revealing how patriarchal norms are reproduced through peer relations. Peer networks also functioned as infrastructure of collective agency, as when drivers shared locations when something felt suspicious.

Agency in this study is neither freely exercised nor entirely suppressed. It takes the form of negotiated autonomy: genuine decision-making power exercised within structural parameters that are not open to renegotiation.

Achievements: Real but Fragile

Financial independence was the most frequently cited achievement, often expressed in concrete terms. P4 stated, “Through platform work I can pay rent, pay for college, and live independently.” P5 became financially independent within six months and later paid her own tuition. P3 quantified her independence as “about 80%,” suggesting meaningful but incomplete autonomy. P1 directed her earnings toward intergenerational mobility, funding her children’s education. Resellers reported different forms of financial achievement centered on growth and asset building: P6 described “having enough savings and being able to buy assets,” and P8 stated simply, “Very financially independent.”

Social recognition was deeply dependent on context. Among resellers, recognition was consistently positive, since home-based work did not trigger the social judgments that public-facing work attracted. For ride-hailing participants, recognition was fractured along community lines. P5 described a stark split: “In my village community, I am less recognized and judged negatively. But in university environment and among fellow communities, it is the opposite, positive.” P4 articulated a similar duality: “Among fellow partners, there is mutual support, but in society, people still often look down on us.”

Wellbeing varied by platform type. Resellers consistently reported positive wellbeing linked to the private, home-based nature of their work: P8 stated, “Because cooking is my hobby, I never feel stressed.” Ride-hailing workers experienced more ambivalent wellbeing, with P5 describing social anxiety: “sometimes I feel inferior when I meet certain people, like old school friends.”

The most significant finding is that achievements remained structurally fragile. P2’s income was nearly undone by a workplace injury: “I had a traffic accident that caused a miscarriage,” which she did not report to the company. P5 survived three accidents, with vehicle damage covered personally. P1 experienced sexual harassment, and although the company blocked the customer’s account, the response was reactive rather than preventive. Participants could be financially independent yet socially stigmatized; gains in one dimension did not automatically transfer to others.

Constitutive Constraints

Constraints were constitutive of the empowerment pathway, defining the conditions under which work was possible across five interlocking domains.

Physical safety risks were the most severe. P1 and P3 experienced sexual harassment; P3's harasser used a female account to circumvent platform safeguards, exposing the limits of reactive safety mechanisms. P2 suffered a traffic accident that caused a miscarriage, and P5 had three accidents with only partial coverage. P2 described how facial recognition failed in the rain, penalizing workers for protecting themselves from the elements.

Platform-induced precarity was built into platform design. P1 framed declining orders as a structural consequence of market dynamics: "Orders have decreased, especially when competitors launch big promotions." P5 noted the withdrawal of bonuses without warning: "Now, there are no bonuses anymore," exemplifying the unilateral power platforms exercise. P4's agency was bounded by a tiered target system she could influence only through compliance. For resellers, precarity took the form of administrative fees and market saturation, a paradox in which low entry barriers both enable participation and undermine profitability.

Structural burdens included taxation and spatial inequality. P9 explained, "taxation challenges keep reducing my profit," as the regulatory framework treated her as an individual actor rather than a small business. P8's distance from the city center made delivery costs expensive and buyers objected.

Social stigma operated differently across platform types, revealing a spatial logic to gendered constraint. For ride-hailing participants, stigma attached to visible work in public space: P5's mother feared "it would damage the family's reputation." P4 was underestimated by fellow women. For resellers, stigma was notably absent, because home-based digital commerce occurs within the private domestic sphere rather than the public streets.

Infrastructural and capability gaps compounded these pressures. P9 described how internet disruptions affected time efficiency from order processing to delivery. P2's outdated phone meant slower app performance, failed verifications, and missed orders. P10 identified a performative capability gap in live selling that the platform did not provide training to develop.

These five domains operated as an interlocking system. Safety risks made income precarious, platform precarity intensified pressure to accept unsafe work, and stigma foreclosed social recognition that might offset economic vulnerability. Ride-hailing workers faced more severe and numerous constraints than resellers, whose home-based work shielded them from safety risk and public stigma but exposed them to platform fees, market saturation, and capability demands.

Discussion

Resources as Conditional Pathways

The findings reveal that resources formed the foundation of participation, yet their distribution and transformative potential were profoundly uneven. The ride-hailing resource pathways map onto patterns documented by Astuti et al. (2026), who found that entry into platform work among women ride-hailing workers in Surabaya was driven by economic necessity and life-course transitions rather than aspirational entrepreneurship. The present study extends this by showing that gender-targeted institutional recruitment, such as Gojek's prioritization of female drivers and Grab's "Lady Grab" program, constituted a distinct resource pathway. The reselling pathways, which relied predominantly on social capital, domestic space, and accumulated digital literacy, reveal a structural distinction between platform types consistent with Dewan & Sanyal (2023) and Rodriguez-Modrono et al. (2022): reselling leveraged domestic space and social networks traditionally coded as feminine, while ride-hailing required physical mobility in public space, creating different risk-reward profiles. Family support, or its absence, resonated with Cornwall & Rivas (2015) argument that empowerment must be understood through relational dynamics, and with the call to study the reproductive and household resources that subsidize platform work. Van Doorn & Shapiro (2023). Resources are necessary but not sufficient for empowerment; access creates possibilities that remain conditional on structural factors beyond individual control.

Agency as Negotiated Autonomy

Agency emerged as a practical and relational process rather than a simple expression of freedom. The structural constraints documented here are consistent with Asrori et al. (2025), who describe workers carving out "micro-spaces of autonomy" through everyday forms of resistance; the present study foregrounds the gendered dimensions of this negotiation, including algorithmic tactics, domestic boundary setting, and risk-spreading strategies. This pattern of bounded agency is best understood through Sen (1999) capability approach, which assesses empowerment by the real opportunities women have to live lives they value. Participants' choices expanded their functioning in some domains while leaving others constrained: P3 could choose food delivery over passenger transport, but she could not choose work free from harassment risk. Negotiated autonomy therefore describes a real but partial expansion of capability, genuine in income and flexibility but limited in safety, mobility, and protection. This interpretation is consistent with cross-national evidence that platform governance can amplify existing inequalities rather than dismantle them Banerjee & Bhat (2025); Digital Future Society, (2022), and with scholarship showing that algorithmic systems shift bargaining power away from workers through opaque ratings, task allocation, and information asymmetries. Rosenblat (2016); Wood et al., (2019).

Achievements: The Paradox of Fragile Gains

The achievements documented were real and valued, yet structurally fragile and domain specific. Kabeer (1999) argues that the three dimensions of empowerment are indivisible: an achievement measure is valid only when interpreted alongside evidence of whose agency produced it and whether it transformed underlying inequalities. P2's income generation was undercut by a traffic accident that caused a miscarriage, revealing that the same structural conditions that enabled participation could undo its benefits. Asrori et al. (2025) concept of the "precarity trap" and "forced flexibility" resonates: although platforms offer the appearance of autonomous earning, the conditions under which achievements are generated ensure that gains remain provisional. The present study extends this by documenting the gendered dimensions of fragility, since women's achievements were uniquely vulnerable to pregnancy-related health risks, harassment, and reputational stigma. Anwar (2022) identifies a comparable fragility in African platform economies, which he terms "platform-mediated precarity." Measured against Malhotra & Schuler (2002) indicators of mobility, decision-making, and economic control, empowerment was partial and domain specific: women gained decision-making power and economic control, but mobility remained restricted, with ride-hailing workers unable to work safely at night and resellers confined to domestic space. The platform-type specificity of achievements, with ride-hailing gains more immediate but more vulnerable to disruption and reselling gains slower but more stable through asset accumulation, is largely absent from existing literature.

Constraints as Constitutive

A key argument of this study is that constraints are not peripheral to empowerment but constitutive of it. The five domains operated as an interlocking system, directly supporting Cornwall & Rivas (2015) contention that empowerment must be read through institutional constraints rather than measured solely by individual gains. The systematic clustering of constraints mirrors Asrori et al. (2025) "precarity trap," extended here by foregrounding the gendered dimension: women's precarity was compounded by harassment risk, pregnancy-related health vulnerability, domestic care obligations, and reputational stigma. The stratification across platform types, with ride-hailing workers facing more severe constraints than resellers, extends Astuti et al. (2026) finding by showing that stigma operates differently across platform types, revealing a spatial logic to gendered constraint. Because interventions targeting only one constraint domain will be insufficient, durable empowerment requires regulatory reform, platform-level accountability, and gender-responsive protections, not individual resilience alone. Cornwall & Rivas (2015); Hunt & Samman, (2019); ILO, (2023).

4. Conclusion and Suggestions

Empowerment in Indonesia's digital labor platforms is neither linear nor guaranteed. It unfolds as a contingent negotiation between resources, agency,

achievements, and systemic constraints. Read through the study's complementary frameworks, this conclusion holds across each lens: through Sen (1999) capability approach, platform work expands some functioning while leaving the substantive freedoms that would make gains durable unrealized; measured against Malhotra & Schuler (2002) indicators, decision-making and economic control advance while mobility and security lag; and through Cornwall & Rivas (2015) structural critique, individual achievements do not substitute for institutional transformation. Negotiated autonomy is thus the empirical expression of an empowerment that is real but incomplete, sustained daily by women who navigate conditions they did not choose and cannot individually change.

The study's theoretical contribution is an empirically grounded account of negotiated autonomy as a context-specific form of bounded agency, together with the documentation of platform-type specificity: ride-hailing and reselling workers experienced different configurations of opportunity and constraint. Platform work should not be understood only as either empowerment or exploitation. Its potential as a route to women's empowerment can be realized more fully only when safety protections, governance reforms, and regulatory frameworks treat constraints, not just opportunities, as central to the pathway.

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