

***What's Cooking?* Women's Home-Based Gig Work, Social
Reproduction and Development in Egypt**

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the everyday lives and labour of informal home-based women gig workers in Egypt's emerging food tech economy. Drawing on six months of fieldwork with 25 women food vendors in Greater Cairo, it centers the lived experiences, socially reproductive knowledges, and relational strategies that shape how women navigate, sustain, and (re)imagine work under conditions of digitalization, economic precarity, and neoliberal development agendas. In Egypt, as in broader global policy circuits, women's "empowerment" is increasingly framed through market-based solutions: formalization, entrepreneurship, upskilling and digital/financial inclusion.

The dissertation asks: How is home-based labour integrated into the gig economy, and what does this reveal about binaries of paid/unpaid and production/reproduction in the digital domain? How do women experience and navigate precarity in informal, home-based gig work? In what ways does home-based gig work shape women's economic participation and agency? In response, I propose 'stretching' social reproduction as a feminist analytical approach grounded in the specific context of Egypt and the SWANA region. This approach reorients labour analysis towards everyday life and household economies as critical yet invisibilized sites of participation, innovation, and feminist world-making.

The dissertation develops three empirical interventions. First, it shows how women integrate into gig work through intergenerational skill transmission, experiential learning, reciprocal knowledge-sharing networks, and relational market-making organized through trust and obligation. Second, it conceptualizes precarity as a lived, household-embedded condition shaped by inflation, price volatility, irregular demand, and exclusion from formal supports, and analyzes women's household hustling strategies, including spiritual grounding through *rizq*, informal financial practices (including *gam'eyas*), low-capital operations, and logistical planning that stabilizes volatility. Third, it argues that home-based gig work expands participation by transforming the household into a workspace while making it conditional on gendered moral expectations that can invisibilize and devalue women's labour. Against narrow entrepreneurial metrics, women articulate value through *nafas*, *kayan*, and *istiqlal*, and sustain participation through relational agency. The dissertation contributes to feminist political economy, digital labour studies, and gender and development by offering a grounded rethinking of labour and economic justice from the Global South.

Dedication

To my grandmother, Effat Sokar (Fifi), the woman who inspires me and many others to learn,
laugh and live.

To my family and friends who grounded, supported and believed in me.

To the women who trusted me with their stories and experiences.

To Milo, the cutest and loudest poodle, who is almost as old as this PhD journey.

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Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Dedication</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Chapter One - Introduction</i>	<i>1</i>
1.1 Research Questions and Objectives	6
1.2 Research Context: Informal Gig Work and the Food Tech Economy in Egypt.....	6
1.3 Literature Overview and Conceptual Framework	11
1.4 Fieldwork and Methodology	16
1.5 Contributions and limitations	18
1.6 Outline of Chapters.....	21
<i>Chapter Two - Literature Review and Conceptual Framework</i>	<i>24</i>
2.1 Neoliberal Development and Market Feminism	24
2.2 Critical Platform Studies and Feminist Critiques of Digital Labour.....	29
2.3 Social Reproduction	34
2.4 Feminist Postcolonial and Intersectional Frameworks	38
2.5 Conceptual Framework: ‘Stretching’ Social Reproduction.....	42
<i>Chapter Three - Methodological Framework and Methods</i>	<i>45</i>
3.1 Methodological framework	45
3.2 Methods.....	48
<i>Chapter Four - Integrating Home-Based Work in the Gig Economy</i>	<i>59</i>
4.1 Transferring Intergenerational Knowledge and Household Skills.....	61
4.2 Adapting and Transforming Cooking Knowledge and Skills	67
4.2.1 Courses and Professionalization.....	68
4.2.2 Experiential Learning	71
4.3 Reciprocal Knowledge Sharing, Community Building and Professional Development	76
4.4 Relational Integration: Extending Socially Reproductive Relationalities into Market Exchange.....	80
4.4.1 Relational Entry Points to Customers	81
4.4.2 Digital Extensions of Interpersonal Networks	85
4.4.3 Household Routines as a Customer Strategy	88
4.5 Concluding Analysis: Stretching Social Reproduction in the Digital Domain	92

Chapter Five - Navigating Precarity through Household Hustling Strategies	96
5.1 Precarity as Lived: Structural and Material Constraints on Home-based Gig Work	98
5.1.1 Price Volatility and Inflation	98
5.1.2 Unstable and Non-fixed Income	99
5.1.3 Cash-flow and Operational Pressures	100
5.1.4 Systemic and Structural Barriers	102
5.1.5 Health and Physical Exhaustion.....	104
5.2 Sustenance through Spiritual Grounding (<i>Rizq</i>).....	106
5.3 Informal and Community-Based Financial Solutions	108
5.4 Household-based Resources and Time Management	111
5.4.1 Low-capital Household Operations	111
5.4.2 Strategic Informality and Selective Compliance	113
5.4.3 Provisioning under Price Volatility: <i>Balady</i> Sourcing and Relational Supply Networks	114
5.5 Logistical Coordination and Advance Planning	117
5.6 Concluding Analysis: Household Hustling Strategies to Navigate Precarity	119
Chapter Six – Negotiating Terms of Participation: (Re)defining Value and Relational Agency	124
6.1 The Terms of Participation: The Home as a Family and Work Space.....	128
6.1.1 Conditions of Participation: Entanglement of Work and Household Routines	129
6.1.2 The Social Acceptability of Participation: Moral Self-regulation and Marital Harmony	132
6.1.3 Flexibility and the Balance between “rest” and “idleness”	135
6.2 (Re)defining the ‘Value’ of Participation: Legitimacy and Meaning of Home-based Work.....	138
6.2.1 Embodied talent and legitimacy: <i>Nafas</i>	139
6.2.2 Pursuing Purpose and Negotiated Independence: <i>Kayan</i> and <i>Istiqlal</i>	142
6.3 Relational Agency: Family Networks, Collaboration, and Recognition	147
6.3.1 Family Support and Redistribution of Labour to Sustain Participation	147
6.3.2 Emotional Support and Recognition	152
6.4 Concluding Analysis: Social Reproduction as a Site of Participation, Value and Agency	156
Chapter Seven - Conclusion	161
Bibliography.....	168
Appendix A: List of Interviews	179

List of Illustrations

Image 1: Photo taken by the author in an interview location in the Greater Cairo area.....	P.59
Image 2: Photo taken by the author outside a home-based kitchen in downtown Cairo.....	P.96
Image 3: Photo taken by the author in a research participant's home in Greater Cairo during ethnographic work.....	P.124
Image 4: Photo taken by the author in a research participant's home in Greater Cairo during ethnographic work.....	P.125
Image 5: Photo taken by the author in a research participant's home in Greater Cairo during ethnographic work.....	P.125
Image 6: Photo of the author at a research participant's home in Greater Cairo during ethnographic work	P.126
Image 7: Photo taken by the author in a research participant's home in Greater Cairo during ethnographic work.....	P.126
Image 8: Screenshot of a research participant's Facebook post on the ethnographic experience.....	P.127

Chapter One - Introduction

In an old neighbourhood in Cairo, a middle-aged woman begins her morning by getting her kids ready for school, sending them off, then cleaning her kitchen and checking her WhatsApp group messages. She starts preparing food orders for her online customers, setting aside an extra batch for her family's dinner. Her neighbour visits and joins her in the kitchen, and the two cook together while confiding in each other about their marital troubles. She pulls a frozen meal from the freezer and insists, "Dinner is on me tonight." Later, while her children do their homework, she writes a grocery list and calculates the weekly budget. She reassures her husband that Friday will be a free day to visit the grandparents, but asks him to help deliver a last-minute order on Saturday. On television, news reports discuss inflation and rising food costs, reminding her to call a cousin back in her rural hometown who secures poultry and meat at wholesale prices. Before going to bed, she adds some cash to the envelope beside her, thinking she is one step closer to renovating the family room and buying the new hand blender she saw in a cooking TikTok video she recently watched.

This story is not one woman's story; it is a composite that reflects the daily lives of many women. It illustrates how cooking, caring, earning, and surviving merge in ways rarely captured in mainstream accounts of digital labour or economic development. This dissertation aims to centre the lived experiences and knowledges of women workers who are often invisibilized in dominant neoliberal development discourses and policy agendas. Through six months of fieldwork with 25 informal home-based women food vendors in Cairo, I examine how they negotiate the boundaries between 'work' and 'daily life', navigate precarity, and redefine economic participation and agency in the gig economy.

The story takes place in an ever-expanding global digital economy, narrowly defined as online platforms and activities but broadly encompassing all activities that use digitized data (IMF 2018). The digitization of the economy and workforce became even more prevalent during the recent COVID-19 global pandemic, when virtual space emerged as an alternative workspace to mitigate health and social risks. Within this constantly changing economy, where the nature of work is transforming societies, the 'gig' economy has emerged to connect workers and consumers

through mobile devices and digital platforms. The term ‘gig’ in the gig economy refers to precarious, short-term, and piecemeal work that lacks stability, career progression, or long-term security (Woodcock and Graham 2020). Rather than full-time jobs, gig work often involves unpredictable tasks, unpaid time searching for work, and a heavy reliance on performance and reputation to access more opportunities. It encompasses ‘on-demand’ work contracted through digital platforms and delivered in a specific locality, as well as ‘crowdsourced’ work that can be done remotely regardless of physical location (Hunt and Samman 2019; Hunt et al. 2017; Wood et al. 2019). As a non-standard form of employment, gig work often blurs the divide between formal and informal labour, particularly in the Global South, making it more challenging to measure and collect data. It is estimated that the number of global online gig workers ranges from 154 to 435 million, accounting for 4.4 to 12.5% of the global labour force (Datta et al. 2023).

In this dissertation, I use the term gig economy to refer to a broader field of non-standard, short-term, task-based, or irregular income-generating work that is increasingly coordinated through digital technologies and platform infrastructures. Existing scholarship often associates the gig economy with app-based or platform-mediated labour such as ride-hailing, food delivery, or online freelancing. However, I use the term more expansively to capture informal, digitally mediated, and home-based forms of labour that do not always fit dominant Global North models of platform work. In this sense, the gig economy refers not only to labour organized through a single platform, but also to forms of work coordinated through a shifting ecology of digital tools, interfaces, and market relations. I also distinguish carefully between work and employment. Following the ILO’s statistical framework, employment refers more narrowly to work performed for pay or profit, whereas work is a broader category that includes activities that produce goods or services, whether or not they are remunerated (International Labour Organization n.d.a). This distinction is important to my analysis because many activities central to women’s everyday lives, including unpaid care, domestic labour, and household-based forms of coordination, are forms of work but are not fully recognized as employment in conventional labour statistics.

Measuring and collecting data on gig work is challenging because of the non-traditional, often informal relationships between contractors and workers. Unlike the more direct, formal relationships between employers and employees, these arrangements make it difficult to provide accurate figures. Limited access to data means most current research on gig economies focuses on developed countries (the Global North), leaving many economic trends and social issues in so-

called developing countries (the Global South) that (re)emerge with the digitization of the economy unexplored. These include changes that impact local work practices, employment trends, education and training policies, existing gender and class hierarchies and development agendas. The global divide in data collection, research, and analysis on the digitalization of economies and labour affects how knowledge and research are produced, the stakeholders involved, and the extent to which the policies designed and implemented are inclusive and comprehensive (Mourad 2024). For instance, there is no precise data on the size of the gig economy in regions such as South West Asia and North Africa (SWANA), a region often referred to as the ‘Middle East’ or ‘MENA’.¹ Labour market trends and existing research indicate that much of the gig economy in SWANA operates within the informal economy (Lopez-Acevedo et al. 2023). The informal economy involves work performed without an employment contract and without social protections; informal enterprises are not registered and do not pay taxes (Chen and Harvey 2017). The informal economy continues to grow and is estimated to constitute more than 50% of total employment in the SWANA region, and almost 40% of female employment (International Labor Office 2024).

In this dissertation, I distinguish between formal and informal work using ILO definitions where possible. The ILO defines the informal economy as all economic activities by workers and economic units that are, in law or in practice, not covered or insufficiently covered by formal arrangements, while informal employment refers to remunerative work that lacks the protections, regulation, and recognition associated with formal employment frameworks. In contrast, formal work refers to employment or income-generating activity that is registered, regulated, and more fully protected through legal, administrative, and social protection arrangements (International Labour Organization n.d.b). These distinctions are especially important in the Egyptian context, where many women’s income-generating activities take place through informal, home-based, and digitally supported arrangements that remain difficult to capture through conventional categories of labour market participation.

¹ These terms are rooted in Eurocentric and colonial imaginaries that, as Edward Said (1979) argues, construct the region as the subordinate and exotic ‘Other’ in relation to the West. In this dissertation, I use the term SWANA not to essentialize or isolate the region from global political economy analysis, but to name a region shaped by shared colonial histories and postcolonial economic transformations. I recognize that all regional designations are political, and SWANA itself is not immune from critique. However, I adopt SWANA over “MENA” or “Middle East” because it has emerged through activist, decolonial, and transnational feminist communities seeking to challenge Eurocentric mappings of the region. In doing so, I aim to displace Orientalist framings and instead foreground the material and epistemic solidarities that link struggles across South West Asia and North Africa.

Informal work is often categorized as precarious due to the “inaccessibility of social security and health care services, usually low pay, inability to provide proof of employment to financial or other relevant institutions, inability to prove years of (informal) work experience, and unhealthy power dynamics between employers and employees” (Lopez-Acevedo et al. 2023, 222). Global development institutions often champion neoliberal prescriptions of progress, success, and growth, calling for the formalization of gig work, market integration, and entrepreneurship as pathways to reduce precarity (Lopez-Acevedo et al. 2023; World Bank 2019). Women, in particular, are targeted through gender empowerment initiatives embedded in gender mainstreaming strategies, which promote inclusion in formal labour markets, microfinancing, and capacity-building as metrics of empowerment. This is evident in policy reports by McKinsey & Company and the United Nations ESCWA (Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia), which discuss the potential of technology, digitization of work, and entrepreneurship to enhance women’s empowerment and economic participation in the SWANA region (Assi and Marcati 2020; Olmsted 2021). ESCWA highlights corporate, state, and international initiatives to integrate women into the digital economy by investing in entrepreneurial training and encouraging formal employment. By framing empowerment in terms of formalization and entrepreneurial success, these development frameworks ultimately ignore and undermine the gendered dimensions of global capitalism, which systematically devalues women’s labour both in the informal economy and within the household.

In Egypt, there is an emerging trend of women cooking and preparing food at home and informally selling/promoting it through social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram and messaging applications such as WhatsApp. In this dissertation, I focus on the platform interfaces and features that women use to launch and coordinate gig work from within the household. These include learning-based features such as online recipes and cooking videos (on YouTube and Instagram), messaging features (WhatsApp group and individual chats, broadcast messages, voice notes, location pins, Facebook Messenger, Instagram Direct Messages), and public posting features (posts on Facebook pages and Instagram stories/reels). While there are assumptions about who these ‘tech-savvy’ ‘entrepreneurial’ women are, namely young, affluent, Western-educated and liberal subjects, my vantage point in this project was not this assumed subject. There is a large segment of lower-income, working-class, economically and socially marginalized women who use platforms in their daily work and life activities. While the term ‘gig

work’ is often reserved for app-based or platform-mediated work in Global North contexts, I expand it to include digitally supported home-based work, which is income-generating labour organized from within, or in close relation to, the household and enabled, coordinated, or expanded through digital technologies. This includes the use of smartphones, social media platforms, messaging applications, and online content for activities such as advertising food, communicating with customers, learning recipes and techniques, coordinating orders, and maintaining client relations. I use the term “digitally supported” rather than “platform-based” because the women in this study are not uniformly employed through a single formal platform. Rather, their work is sustained through multiple digital platforms embedded in household routines, social networks, and everyday forms of coordination.

Research on women’s gig work in Egypt can be situated within broader feminist debates on social reproduction and the role of women’s labour in economic development under neoliberal capitalism. Social reproduction is commonly defined as the daily and intergenerational activities that sustain life at both individual and societal levels (Valiavicharska 2020; Winders and Smith 2019). Feminist scholars have long shown that this labour, including childrearing, domestic work, and emotional care, has been historically relegated to the private sphere and feminized as “non-work,” even though it is foundational to the reproduction of labour power and thus capitalism itself. Critical Marxist and socialist feminists in the 1970s challenged the rigid division between the household and the workplace, showing how patriarchal relations within the domestic sphere are structurally linked to capitalist modes of production (Valiavicharska 2020). This division not only renders reproductive labour invisible but also sustains gendered hierarchies between the formal market economy and what is deemed outside it, such as domestic or care work.

This dissertation argues that the everyday lives of informal, home-based women food vendors in Cairo are not a backdrop to “real” economic activity; they are where economic life is made. Drawing on six months of fieldwork with 25 women, I show that understanding women’s informal, home-based gig work requires shifting the focus of digital economy research away from platform labour, formal entrepreneurship, and measurable market outcomes, and toward women’s everyday lives as the very conditions that produce work, value, and participation. I propose ‘stretching’ social reproduction as a critical feminist political economy approach to capture this shift. This approach centres socially reproductive knowledges and relationalities in analyses of labour and value, reframes social reproduction and production as fluid and interdependent, and

reclaims social reproduction not only as a structural condition sustaining capital but also as a lived, agentive site of creativity, resistance, and reimagining. From this perspective, women's integration into the gig economy does depend on leaving the household; instead, they extend household-based labour into digitally mediated spaces, navigating precarity and negotiating the terms of their participation in ways that dominant development and digital labour narratives render invisible.

1.1 Research Questions and Objectives

The following questions guide my research:

1. How is home-based labour integrated into the gig economy, and what does this reveal about binaries of paid and unpaid work in the digital domain?
2. How do women experience and navigate precarity in informal home-based gig work?
3. In what ways does home-based gig work shape women's agency and economic participation?

Building from these questions, the dissertation pursues three key objectives:

1. To conceptualize a critical feminist approach for researching informal home-based gig work in the Global South, using Egypt's home-based food economy as an empirical anchor.
2. To examine how digital platforms mediate women's work and how this reshapes the boundaries between household economies, social reproduction, and development scripts.
3. To explore whether and how informal home-based gig work can be a site for redefining dominant meanings of work, value, agency, and economic participation under precarity, beyond market-based and neoliberal individual empowerment frameworks.

1.2 Research Context: Informal Gig Work and the Food Tech Economy in Egypt

The rise of women's informal home-based gig work in Egypt over the past decade should be understood within the longer trajectory of neoliberal structural reforms that have reshaped labour markets across the Global South. In Egypt, neoliberal policies date back to the 1980s and included privatization, land redistribution, and austerity measures that reduced public sector employment, eroded welfare services, and widened socioeconomic inequalities, particularly for female-headed households and working-class women (Barsoum 2019; Bayat 2013; Hassan 2023; Ismail 2006; Krafft and Assaad 2022; Salem 2020). For instance, since the late 1990s, formal employment opportunities have steadily declined, with the public sector's share of total employment shrinking from 39% in 1998 to 26% in 2018, while formal private wage employment

grew only modestly, from 8% to 12% (Krafft et al. 2024). As a result of high levels of unemployment and poverty, more people began resorting to informal work across various sectors (Bayat 2012). Informality has been a persistent and growing feature of Egypt's labour market, with recent data indicating that it accounts for 71.3% of employment (Alazzawi and Hlsany 2025).

This dissertation focuses on the period following the January 25 Revolution of 2011, a political, economic, and social turning point in Egypt. Over the subsequent decade, the country experienced profound changes, including the rise and fall of social movements and political groups and the consolidation of power under a new president in 2013. These political developments unfolded amid intensifying economic pressures. Repeated currency devaluations and high inflation eroded household purchasing power, with headline inflation reaching 28% in 2023 and food prices rising by more than 50% (Hussein et al. 2024). Official unemployment hovered around 7%, but female unemployment remained much higher, at 15.2% compared to 5.8% for men in 2020/21 (Alazzawi 2021; The World Bank 2025). Between 2016 and 2023, Egypt's external debt more than tripled, reaching 40% of GDP and locking the country into successive International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan agreements conditioned on subsidy cuts and VAT hikes (Hussein et al. 2024). These measures further eroded purchasing power and deepened precarity: poverty rates rose from 27% in 2015 to 32.5% in 2018, alongside worsening food insecurity (Hussein et al. 2024). Women have been disproportionately affected by food insecurity, poverty, and weak social protection systems. Inadequate childcare coverage (only 8% for children under four and 31% for preschool-aged children), together with persistent gender-based violence and unsafe public spaces, continues to limit women's economic participation, even in the context of new legal protections and awareness campaigns (The World Bank 2025).

Reflecting these constraints, recent World Bank data show that female labour force participation in Egypt is about 18%, compared to 73% for men (The World Bank 2025). However, this data must be read critically. The seeming underrepresentation of women may be less a reflection of actual labour force participation and more a result of methodological and institutional blind spots, particularly the exclusion of home-based, unpaid, or socially reproductive labour from conventional measures of economic activity (Langsten and Salem 2008). Such invisibilization reinforces neoliberal, gendered development boundaries between what is recognized as "work" and what remains hidden within the household. It also shapes how women appear in labour statistics: although measured labour force participation is low, many working women are

concentrated in informal and home-based forms of work that surveys capture unevenly. These data gaps have significant implications for how “participation” is defined and governed in policy.

The share of informal employment among women has remained relatively consistent from 2008 to 2023 at 54% (Assaad 2025). It is important to note that informal labour is not a single category: it includes informal private employees, informal own-account workers, and contributing family workers. Recent labour market data indicate that 13% of women’s employment is informal own-account work, which is a subcategory of self-employment (as defined by the World Bank) (Assaad 2025). Informal work can also be differentiated by income stability and location, including informal private wage work (private-sector workers who are paid wages or salaries without a legal contract or social insurance) and non-wage work (employers, self-employed individuals, and unpaid family workers). These also differ by workplace: some are in fixed establishments (stores, offices, factories), while others operate outside fixed establishments, including private homes, fields or moving vehicles (Alazzawi and Hlsany 2025). Throughout this dissertation, I treat informal home-based food vending as a form of income-generating work situated within the informal economy, even when parts of that work are digitally mediated through online platforms and messaging applications.

I focus on informal, non-wage work conducted outside fixed establishments (primarily home-based self-employment), which recent data reveals is the second-largest employment sector for women, accounting for 28% of their paid work (after formal public sector employment at 37%) (Alazzawi and Hlsany 2025). According to the 2018 Egyptian Labour Market Panel Survey, 14% of households operated an enterprise, but only 6% of female-headed households did so, compared with 16% of male-headed households. Among women-owned enterprises, the most common location was the home (44%), followed by shops (24%), while mobile or transport-based work was least common (6%) (Rizk and Rashed 2019). Within this landscape of home-based and informal enterprises, digital platforms (such as social media, messaging applications, and online marketplaces) are becoming an increasingly important channel for marketing, sales, and coordination, yet their role remains under-documented. Digital adoption in Egypt has surged since the 2011 revolution, creating new possibilities for such platform-mediated work, although the extent and forms of technology integration in home-based enterprises remain unclear. In 2023, the World Bank estimated that 73% of the population actively used the internet. In 2022, official statistics reported that computer use among men and women was 59.3% and 54.1%, respectively,

while internet access stood at 79.3% for men and 65.2% for women (Rizk 2023). These figures suggest significant, though gendered, potential for women's engagement in digital and platform-based work.

In light of the expansion of online economic activity in Egypt and the unification of tax law in 2020, the Tax Authority established a dedicated e-commerce unit to bring digital economic activity into the formal taxation system (Rizk 2023). In 2021, Executive Regulations No. 89/202 obliged individuals involved in small-scale social commerce to register with this unit, open a tax file, pay income tax, and comply with any other conditions set by the Authority. This requirement covers any page or group that sells products through social media platforms and generates income from such activity. Taxation is governed by Income Tax Law No. 91/2005, Value Added Tax (VAT) Law No. 67/2016, and the Unified Tax Procedures Law No. 206/2020. Individuals earning less than 606.77 USD annually are exempt from paying income tax but must still register. Those with annual income exceeding 20,225.69 USD are also required to register for and pay VAT. The final tax due is determined after the Tax Authority reviews the taxpayer's income level (Rizk 2023).

These regulatory efforts to formalize digital and small-scale economic activity are part of a broader state response to the growing informal economy. The state has also focused on supporting and encouraging formal micro and small firms, which account for 22% of employment (Krafft et al. 2024). The latest Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprise (MSME) Law No. 152 of 2020, enacted in 2022, offers reduced taxes, streamlined registration, MSME service units, and favourable land allocation (Krafft et al. 2024). Despite these efforts, only 31% of these firms are formal, with location being a strong determining factor; for instance, 59% of shop-based firms are formal, compared to just 10% of firms operating from homes, streets, kiosks, or vehicles (Krafft et al. 2024, 1298). This demonstrates a pattern in which home-based firms are far less likely to formalize their operations.

To enhance women's economic participation and development, the Egyptian state identifies digitization as a key labour-market shift and advocates investment in women's digital training to mitigate the decline in medium- and low-skilled jobs (Gamal Al-Din 2021). These priorities have been integrated into broader policy frameworks, including the National Agenda for Sustainable Development: Egypt's Vision 2030 and the National Strategy for the Empowerment of Egyptian Women 2030, which identifies women's economic empowerment as one of its four core pillars (The National Council for Women 2017). These strategies focus on facilitating women's access to

job opportunities by enhancing mechanisms for home-based work and flexible working hours. They also aim to develop the care economy by creating new job opportunities and allowing a balance between women's productive and social roles.² The strategies include providing funding on lenient terms and guarantees to help women establish small- and medium-sized enterprises, alongside technical support and business incubators for small and micro enterprises. They also promote financial literacy through financial inclusion programs for women in rural and remote areas and expand training programs to develop women's skills in in-demand sectors, including technological and digital fields (Ministry of Planning and Economic Development 2023, 80).

Across these documents, "economic participation" is presented as a development solution, expected to raise productivity, household income, and national growth, and to reduce poverty and unemployment through women's labour market participation and entrepreneurship. Yet these strategies are largely state-led and top-down, assuming that the main problem is women's limited access to skills, finance, and flexible opportunities. Much less visible is whether these frameworks reflect what many women themselves want from work (purpose, security, dignity, and manageable life rhythms), or how informal livelihoods and unequal household burdens shape the terms of participation. In other words, national strategies focus on "enabling" participation while overlooking how it is shaped by household dynamics, moral expectations, and everyday constraints that policy scripts typically treat as background.

These neoliberal development solutions are reflected in the Digital Transformation Strategy, which is backed by local ministries and global development institutions such as the World Bank and frames investments in information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure, broadband expansion, mobile connectivity, and e-payment systems as key pillars of development (Hassan 2023). These priorities are especially evident in the food-tech economy, where food delivery platforms, online grocery services, and cloud kitchens are rapidly expanding (Kene-Okafor 2022). Cloud kitchens are professional food preparation facilities without storefronts or dine-in areas that serve customers exclusively through delivery and takeout via platform-based mobile applications; in Egypt, FoodLab and Kitchenco are key examples. Formal food-tech ventures, including delivery platforms, venture-backed start-ups, and cloud kitchens, are

² The national strategy documents do not specifically define what is meant by care economy but across the text there were references to childcare and health care services for mothers and children. In terms of productive vs. social roles the text refers to this elsewhere as balancing between caregiving responsibilities and work (pg.32).

frequently celebrated as engines of innovation and efficiency. For instance, Egypt's Ministry of Planning, Economic Development and International Cooperation has invited tech start-ups to design policy solutions for climate adaptation and food security (World Food Programme 2024). This initiative aligns with recent food security policy frameworks that address both economic and social dimensions, including high inflation and cost of living, gender equity, and labour force participation (Al-Shami 2022; Hussein et al. 2024). In my dissertation, I examine this emerging food-tech space. Rather than focusing on private tech companies, formal market entrepreneurs, and million-dollar investment funds, I center informal food economies, which remain largely invisible in mainstream development discourse.

I choose to examine food production since cooking and preparing food are activities and practices that have been domesticated throughout time and have historically been women's responsibility (Cook 2021). The gendered marginalization of women in food and labour markets cannot be separated from the broader discursive frameworks that shape global development agendas. Recent International Labour Office (ILO) findings highlight how food economies in Egypt are deeply embedded in informality, especially among micro and small enterprises that operate with minimal regulation and oversight (International Labor Office 2025). These enterprises often remain informal not only because of structural challenges, such as high formalization costs and complex regulations, but also because of the perceived flexibility and economic survival they offer in an increasingly precarious macroeconomic context. Informal food producers navigate these constraints through parallel systems of production and distribution that defy conventional economic categories (International Labor Office 2025). Far from residual, informal food economies are key sites of everyday economic practice, innovation, and resistance. Yet they are rarely included in policymakers' visions for "digitalization" and women's economic participation. My dissertation examines the experiences of home-based women food vendors as they navigate this contested terrain of informality, digital adoption, and food production.

1.3 Literature Overview and Conceptual Framework

This dissertation is grounded in feminist political economy, particularly critical scholarship on development, digital labour, and social reproduction. I begin with critiques of neoliberal development and market feminism discourses, which are grounded in modernization theory and liberal feminist frameworks (Pateman 1988; Rostow 1956; Wilson 2015). These frameworks champion Eurocentric notions of progress and empowerment, positioning formal market

integration and digital inclusion as the primary pathways for women's advancement. The Women in Development (WID) approach, for instance, promoted women's access to education, credit, and technology as solutions to gender inequality, yet did so through a depoliticized and technocratic lens that failed to address colonial legacies or structural violence (Bannerji et al. 2010; Shiva and Mies 1993).

More recent gender mainstreaming strategies, adopted by institutions like the IMF and World Bank, are critiqued for promoting what Elaine Coburn (2019) calls “feminism with a neoliberal face,” a logic that produces the figure of the *femina economica*, a self-reliant, entrepreneurial woman who remains responsible for unpaid social reproductive labour, particularly within the household (Federici 2018b; Price 2019). While she is economically productive through formal or entrepreneurial work, she is simultaneously expected to perform unpaid labour, such as childcare, elder care, and housework. The *Femina Economica* thus embodies the ideal neoliberal subject being productive, flexible, and self-managing, while absorbing the structural costs of social reproduction. Her existence highlights the persistent devaluation and invisibilization of unpaid and feminized care work, even as she is celebrated in development discourse as a symbol of empowerment and growth (Coburn 2019). This literature critiques how gender is instrumentalized within neoliberal development agendas, often through financial inclusion initiatives, digital upskilling, and microloan programs that intensify women's precarious paid labour without redistributing structural burdens (Coburn 2019; Federici 2018; Price 2019).

In the context of the digital economy, women's labour is discussed in various ways, including neoliberal, participatory and digital inclusion narratives. Recent gig economy scholarship largely focuses on app-mediated, algorithmically managed work such as Uber, emphasizing precarity, power imbalances, and poor working conditions alongside some flexibility benefits (Graham and Anwar 2019; Graham et al. 2020; Shade 2018; Wood et al. 2019; Woodcock and Graham 2020). However, this focus on single, formal platforms overlooks how informal, home-based digital work is actually coordinated through a shifting mix of apps, interfaces, and services. To analyze how gender and platforms intersect under neoliberal capitalism, I engage with critical platform literature that presents a layered infrastructural approach that treats platforms as one component within broader socio-technical systems that datafy labour through devices, interfaces, back-end infrastructures, and services like mobile payments and delivery (Helmond et al. 2019; Pybus and Côté 2024; Pybus et al. 2025; Star and Ruhleder 1996).

While existing research clarifies how gig work deepens precarity and restructures hierarchies between workers and tech companies, it often lacks an intersectional lens. To address these gaps I further draw on feminist critiques of digital labour that highlight the gendered, racialized, and classed dimensions of the gig economy (Flanagan 2019; Lobenstine and Bailey 2015; van Doorn 2017;). Frances Flanagan (2019), for example, examines how home-based gig work is governed not through employment contracts but through platform metrics and behavioural ‘nudges’, which are indirect ways of influencing or controlling actions such as prompts or cues. Mira Wallis (2021), Natasha Webster and Qian Zhang (2020) highlight the “temporal autonomy” that gig work offers women, while also emphasizing its intensification of the double burden of paid and unpaid labour. ‘Temporal autonomy’ is a sense of self-determined time and flexibility to be involved in other activities at home while also working (Wallis, 2021). However, much of this literature remains focused on formal digital platforms and Global North contexts. To address this gap, I draw on literature that analyzes digital labour in the Global South, including women’s home-based digital practices and platform-based work in developing contexts (Anwar 2022; Majid and Mustafa 2022; Rani et al. 2022; Silva 2022;). Although this literature offers an intersectional analysis of gendered and material hierarchies in digital labour under capitalism, it remains focused on formal, platform-based work, marginalizing the informal practices and platform interactions that shape the everyday economic realities of many women in the Global South.

Given this marginalization of informal and everyday practices, I draw on social reproduction theories to analyze women’s household labour, as these theories show how global capitalism systematically exploits and devalues both productive and reproductive work. The foundations of social reproduction begin with Marxist feminist traditions that emphasized its centrality to capitalist accumulation and analyzed how capitalism relies on and naturalizes gendered divisions of labour to sustain unequal systems of exploitation (Valiavicharska 2020; Winders and Smith 2019). Building on this, Social Reproduction Feminism (SRF), as developed by Maria Mies (1986) and Silvia Federici (2004), theorized how women’s unpaid domestic labour, especially within the household, is central to capitalist accumulation yet systematically devalued. In response to SRF, Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) was advanced by scholars such as Tithi Bhattacharya (2017), Susan Ferguson (2016), Nancy Fraser and Cinzia Arruzza (2019), to move beyond structuralist accounts by foregrounding how reproductive labour is embedded in state institutions, infrastructures of care, and global value chains. While both SRF and SRT have

contributed to rethinking the centrality of reproductive labour, they have also been critiqued for their Global North-centric assumptions and for reproducing analytical binaries such as production/reproduction and public/private. To extend this literature, I engage with critical feminist political economy scholars who call for the pluralization of social reproduction approaches (Elias and Rai 2019; Mezzadri et al. 2025). These scholars reject a single universal framework, instead calling for historically and geographically grounded analyses that attend to the racialized, gendered, and colonial dynamics structuring everyday life. In this dissertation, I respond to their call to pluralize approaches to social reproduction and extend them beyond existing epistemological and methodological boundaries.

To do so, I draw on postcolonial feminist frameworks which locate social reproduction within histories of colonial governance, capitalist restructuring, and epistemic violence (Agathangelou 2004; Olmsted 2005; Salem 2020; Taha and Salem 2019; Valiavicharska 2020). For example, Mai Taha and Sara Salem (2019) explore how social reproduction in Egypt was shaped by policies during British colonial rule, influencing women's subjectivities and practices. These colonial policies involved changes in property relations and economic reforms in land tenure, industrialization, capital investment, and urbanization (Taha and Salem 2019). More concretely, this governance operated through labour regulations that restricted women's night work; policy attention to population and birth control as tools of social management; and the institutional promotion of "modern motherhood" (home economics, hygiene, cooking, and "proper" childrearing) as a remedy for "backwardness." Together, these measures recast the nuclear family as the foundation of national progress and women's reproductive labour as a duty to the nation (Taha and Salem 2019). The shift in social reproductive roles under colonial capitalist patriarchy meant that colonized women's bodies came to represent land, reproduction and family. It relegated them to the domestic sphere, where they are exploited (Taha and Salem 2019). Taha and Salem (2019) highlight the tensions within these colonial policies and the state feminist projects that followed, since working-class women were never confined to the domestic sphere; instead, their labour was central to Egypt's political economy and national development agendas.

The impact of these colonial policies persists, shaping the structure of informal economies and the undervaluation of women's labour within and beyond the household. Taha and Salem's work highlights the need for a research agenda that conceptualizes social reproduction in the postcolonial context through an intersectional framework that focuses on colonialism, capitalism,

gender, and the nation-state. Intersectionality is a framework originally developed by Black feminists in the USA to critique single-axis analyses of power and oppression, and to highlight how structures such as racism, patriarchy, and capitalism interlock to shape the lives of Black women (Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 2000). Rather than focusing solely on lived experiences, Black feminist scholars argue that intersectionality offers both a theoretical and a methodological lens for examining how systems of oppression are mutually constitutive and historically situated. In the context of Egypt, intersectionality challenges the homogenization of women by attending to how colonial legacies, class, religion, and gender structure everyday realities. As Sara Salem (2019) outlines, intersectionality can serve as a tool to unpack categorical thinking, historicize inequalities, and build solidarities across different struggles. In doing so, it provides a more grounded and politically committed methodology for analyzing oppression relationally and for informing more just and context-sensitive policy frameworks.

Drawing on postcolonial feminist and intersectional critiques and existing feminist political economy scholarship, I propose ‘stretching’ social reproduction as a critical feminist political economy approach for studying gender, labour, and development. ‘Stretching’ social reproduction entails centering socially reproductive knowledges (the intergenerational teachings, experiential learnings, and reciprocal practices embedded in social reproductive activities and gained, transferred, and nurtured in the everyday) and relationalities (intergenerational bonds, dynamic connections and communal networks formed through social reproductive activities and gained, transferred, and nurtured in the everyday) in the analysis of labour, value, and productivity. In doing so, ‘stretching’ reframes social reproduction and production as fluid and interdependent rather than analytically separate realms, and reclaims social reproduction not just as a structural condition sustaining capital, but also as a lived and agentive site of creativity, resistance, and reimagining. This proposition is a means to address the limitations of existing social reproduction theories, which remain embedded within liberal frameworks and constructs. While SRT has addressed how capitalism exploits unpaid domestic labour, it often reinforces public/private binaries and centers production as the locus of value. By contrast, SRF expands the analysis to highlight the role of patriarchal systems in maintaining these divisions. However, it risks homogenizing women’s experiences by applying frameworks developed primarily in the Global North. I expand on this later in the literature overview (Chapter Two).

The concept of ‘stretching’ social reproduction draws on Sara Salem’s work on ‘stretching Marxism’ to think through issues of capitalism, economic development, solidarities, and resistance in the Egyptian context (2019b). Salem builds on the ideas of Frantz Fanon, who stretched Marxism to deploy a material analysis of global capitalism that centers the colony and introduces room to think about decolonization (Fanon 1963; Salem 2019b). Rather than applying Marxism as a Western framework onto the Global South, ‘stretching’ it became a means for contextualizing it within broader discussions of colonialism (Fanon 1963; Salem 2019b). By ‘stretching Marxism’, Salem (2019b) unravels the connections between colonialism and capitalism in the contemporary moment, demonstrating how they shape and influence economic and political issues in SWANA and beyond. Similarly, ‘stretching’ social reproduction allows for an analysis that reflects the specific historical, structural, material, and relational contexts of Egyptian women. In this dissertation, I adopt this approach as a conceptual framework to examine women’s informal, home-based gig work in Cairo.

1.4 Fieldwork and Methodology

The methodology for this dissertation is grounded in feminist postcolonial and intersectional epistemologies that challenge Western positivist frameworks and advocate for community-centred research (Hill Collins 2000; Hlabangane 2018; Mezzadri et al. 2025; Smith 2012; Tuck and Yang 2012). Rather than viewing informal labour as simply precarious or residual, I approach it as a generative site for theorizing resistance, creativity, and economic transformation under global capitalism. Drawing on scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000), Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), and Sara Salem (2019), I conceptualize knowledge as relational, embodied, and situated. Feminist postcolonial and Indigenous scholars have critiqued the epistemic violence of Western research traditions that separate researchers from their communities and invalidate lived experience as a source of knowledge (Hlabangane 2018; Mezzadri 2025; Tuck and Yang 2012). I do not treat the SWANA region, specifically Egypt, as a case study, but as a site of theory-building that challenges dominant Western research and knowledge production on labour, gender, and development.

In the initial phase of my research, I conducted a comprehensive stakeholder mapping of public, private, and civil society institutions involved in shaping or implementing gender, labour, and technology policies and initiatives in Egypt. This mapping was not merely descriptive but a strategic component of my research design. It enabled me to identify the institutional architectures

and key actors structuring Egypt's digital economy and to interrogate how formal policies on gender, entrepreneurship, and technology reflect broader neoliberal and market feminist logics. Mapping this ecosystem revealed an epistemological gap between policy narratives and the lived experiences of informal women workers. This led me to focus on women who are not simply underserved by development initiatives but actively excluded from policy imaginaries. My analysis of Egypt's emerging gig economy, therefore, centers on the stories and experiences of informal, home-based women gig workers.

Given that my research is exploratory and aims to examine and understand meanings, contexts, and lived experiences rather than test or confirm specific hypotheses, I chose to adopt a qualitative approach. Using a qualitative approach enabled me to explore the meanings, narratives, and affective dimensions of women's economic practices, which are often flattened or excluded in quantitative and policy-driven research. This approach is essential for capturing the complexity of informal and digital labour, particularly when centring women's own interpretations of their work and value. I conducted in-person fieldwork in Greater Cairo, Egypt, over six months (October 2022 – March 2023), integrating semi-structured life history interviews and ethnographic observation (these methods are described in further detail in the methods section in chapter three). Cairo was selected not only because it is the political and economic capital of Egypt, but also because it is a central hub for food tech platforms and informal household-based enterprises. Upon compiling a database of social media pages selling food and contacting personal networks, I recruited 25 women participants who identify as home-based food vendors preparing and selling food from within the home (on a part-time or full-time basis) and who use digital platforms in some capacity in their work. Although this sample is not statistically representative, it allows for depth, relationality, and contextual understanding. Through 25 interviews and in-depth ethnographic observation of a subset of 4 women workers, I explored the complex aspects of women's labour practices, digital involvement, and everyday forms of resistance and (re)imagining.

This methodological approach aligns with my theoretical intervention of 'stretching' social reproduction, which calls for rethinking what counts as labour, as well as how, and by whom, knowledge about labour is produced. By centring the voices and experiences of women who are often excluded from policy, platforms, and mainstream scholarship, this research advances a feminist methodology that is as disruptive and generative as the labour it seeks to understand. I

recognize that the characteristics of my sample were influenced by online visibility and personal networks. My focus on Cairo also meant that rural or peri-urban experiences of home-based digital work were not included, even though they are equally important. These exclusions were not oversights but reflect real structural, logistical, and political conditions that shape who is seen, who participates, and who remains unheard. Rather than seeing these limits as methodological shortcomings, I understand them as part of what it means to do feminist research, one that is shaped by relational dynamics, ethical boundaries, and the recognition that no study can fully capture the complexity of women's lives or labour. These silences matter. They remind us to listen more carefully and to be cautious of overgeneralizing from a single context or sample. In Chapter Three of this dissertation, I provide a detailed account of my methodological approach and research methods.

1.5 Contributions and limitations

This dissertation makes three core contributions: conceptual, empirical, and methodological. It also advances an epistemic contribution by foregrounding women's situated knowledges as theory-producing. At the same time, I remain attentive to the limits of what can be claimed from a single, contextually grounded research setting.

The first contribution is conceptual, proposing 'stretching' social reproduction as a critical feminist political economy approach to analyze informal home-based gig work in Egypt, where social reproduction and production are not separate realms but fluid and interdependent. Stretching social reproduction centers socially reproductive knowledges (intergenerational teachings, experiential learning, everyday reciprocal practices) and relationalities (intergenerational bonds, dynamic connections and communal networks) as constitutive of labour, value, and participation. It treats these aspects not as mere background constraints on "real" economic activities. This approach addresses critiques that social reproduction approaches can remain wage-focused, production-oriented, and Global North-centred. Instead, it shifts development and labour analysis toward women's everyday lives as a site for theory-building rather than a case to be explained using imported categories.

Second is the empirical contribution: informal, home-based, digitally mediated gig work in Egypt's food economy. Empirically, the dissertation centers 25 informal home-based women food vendors in Greater Cairo and traces how they integrate into the gig economy, even when their work does not fit conventional "platform labour" categories. This moves the analytical center of

the gig economy away from formal app-based employment and toward hybrid and informal digital economies that are difficult to capture through conventional data and policy frames. By focusing on food production (an activity historically feminized and domesticated), the dissertation also shows how value is generated through everyday practices typically rendered “non-economic,” and how women navigate a lived economy shaped by inflation, irregular income, informality, and household burdens. In doing so, the dissertation also offers definitional and analytical clarification that challenges dominant assumptions in development and digital labour literatures. It expands “gig work” beyond app-based platform labour to include informal, digitally mediated, home-based work arrangements that remain under-theorized and undercounted. It treats “the digital economy” not as a separate sphere, but as a set of practical affordances folded into household rhythms, budgets, moral negotiations, and gendered expectations.

Moreover, the dissertation offers analytical contributions to feminist debates on work, precarity, participation, and agency. Across the empirical chapters, the dissertation offers a grounded rethinking of three dominant assumptions in development and digital labour narratives. First, it shows that integration into the gig economy does not require women’s exit from the household; it is achieved through the extension of social reproduction into digitally mediated spaces. Second, it reframes precarity as lived and absorbed within the household rather than as a narrow labour-market condition remediable through formalization or entrepreneurial upskilling. Third, it reconceptualizes agency and participation as relational and conditional: women expand participation through the household as an economic site, yet participation is governed by moral expectations, strategic invisibility, and the costs of “balance”. Women nonetheless articulate value on their own terms through culturally grounded concepts (*nafas*, *kayan*, *istiqlal*) and sustain participation through relational agency and recognition.

Lastly, the dissertation advances a feminist, postcolonial, and intersectional methodology that treats knowledge as relational, embodied, and situated. The research design involved six months of fieldwork in Cairo (Oct 2022–Mar 2023), 25 interviews, and ethnographic observation with four women, centering women’s narratives and meanings, including the moral, affective, and spiritual dimensions of work often flattened in policy-driven research. The dissertation also makes an epistemic contribution by treating women’s narratives, vocabularies, and everyday concepts not as illustrative data but as sites of theory-building and knowledge production. This research does not position women as objects of inquiry within pre-established categories. Instead, it foregrounds

socially reproductive knowledges as legitimate forms of economic knowledge and theorizes from women's accounts of work, dignity, obligation, endurance, and meaning. A related empirical-analytical contribution is the dissertation's stakeholder mapping of Egypt's gender-digital-work ecosystem (see chapter three). By mapping the institutional architectures of entrepreneurship, financial inclusion, and digital upskilling, this analysis shows how market-feminist policy and state-led development logics conceptualize empowerment and participation, and clarifies the epistemological gap between top-down inclusion scripts and the household strategies that sustain work.

In terms of the study's limitations and boundaries, the dissertation's claims are grounded in depth rather than representativeness. The sample is shaped by online visibility and personal networks, which means it cannot capture all forms of informal women's food work, especially those that remain offline or hidden. The focus on Greater Cairo centers an urban context where food tech platforms and informal household-based enterprises are concentrated; rural and peri-urban experiences of home-based digital work are not included, even though they are crucial for a fuller picture of labour, provisioning, and digital mediation in Egypt. The project also does not aim to map the gig economy statistically, nor does it capture the perspectives of customers, platform companies, or state actors as primary research populations. This scope reflects the dissertation's analytic priority: theorizing economic life from women's everyday labour rather than from institutional accounts of platforms or policy. These boundaries reflect the ethical, logistical, and political conditions shaping feminist research rather than simple methodological gaps. They matter because they mark who is visible, who participates, and who remains unheard, which is an issue that aligns with the dissertation's more exhaustive critique of how dominant frameworks decide what counts as work, value, and participation. Rather than offering universal claims, this dissertation offers contextually grounded theorization. Its contribution lies in showing how informal home-based gig work can be read as a site of economic life and feminist economic imagination.

This research opens multiple future directions and can be extended to study food economies, creative labour, care industries, climate crisis responses, and revolutionary movements, areas where women's everyday strategies are central but under-theorized. Methodologically, this work invites scholars to design studies from within the communities they seek to serve, centring knowledge from the margins. It also offers conceptual grounding for

quantitative research on informal home-based work and the use of digital platforms for work activities. From a policy perspective, it urges practitioners to reconsider what constitutes labour, value, and success, and to design programs that reflect people's aspirations, interdependencies, and lived realities. In particular, it highlights the need for social protection policies that align with the realities of informal gig work, which are portable, flexible, and not tied to formal employment, alongside supports that address irregular earnings, platform-based income, and care responsibilities. Ultimately, this dissertation listens to women, not to extract or validate, but to build theory with them. It contributes to a feminist vision of economic life that is already being practiced in kitchens, on sidewalks, through screens and screenshotted recipes, in morning prayers and nighttime hustles. These are not anecdotal stories or side economies; they are central to how women survive, thrive, and reimagine justice under global capitalism.

1.6 Outline of Chapters

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters.

Chapter One (Introduction) introduces the research puzzle and context by examining informal, home-based women food vendors in Egypt's emerging digital economy and the limits of dominant gig economy and development narratives for understanding their work. It outlines the research questions and objectives, defines key terms, reviews key scholarship, and introduces the dissertation's conceptual intervention, 'stretching' social reproduction. The chapter concludes with a summary of the methodological framework and the dissertation's key contributions and limitations.

Chapter Two (Literature Review and Conceptual Framework) situates the dissertation within feminist political economy debates on neoliberal development and market feminism, feminist critiques of digital labour, and social reproduction theories. It draws on postcolonial and intersectional feminist scholarship to propose 'stretching' social reproduction as a critical feminist political economy approach for analyzing gendered labour, value, and development. Chapter Three (Methodological Framework and Methods) outlines the feminist, postcolonial, and intersectional epistemologies that shape the research design. It explains the qualitative approach, fieldwork in Cairo (Oct 2022–Mar 2023), participant recruitment, semi-structured life history interviews, and ethnographic observation, and reflects on positionality, relationality, and the boundaries of the sample.

Chapter Four (Integrating Home-Based Work in the Gig Economy) responds to the first research question by showing how women integrate into the gig economy by extending social reproduction into digitally mediated spaces rather than by exiting the household. It traces four mechanisms of integration: intergenerational knowledge transfer; skill adaptation and professionalization through experiential learning; reciprocal knowledge sharing and community building; and relational market-making through trust and obligation mediated by digital platforms. The chapter argues that the binaries of paid/unpaid and household/market are blurred, as unpaid learning, coordination, and relational maintenance become inseparable from income generation.

Chapter Five (Navigating Precarity through Household Hustling Strategies) responds to the second research question by analyzing how women navigate lived precarity through household hustling strategies. It frames precarity as structural, material, and embodied, produced by inflation, irregular demand, cash-flow pressure, and systemic exclusion. It then shows how women sustain work through four interlinked strategies: spiritual–moral grounding (*rizq*), informal and community-based finance (especially *gam'eyas*), household resource management and relational provisioning networks (including *balady* (local) sourcing), and logistical coordination and advance planning. The chapter argues that women navigate precarity by stretching socially reproductive knowledges and relationalities into everyday hustling practices that make household life and income generation workable under volatility.

Chapter Six (Negotiating Terms of Participation: Redefining Value and Relational Agency) responds to the third research question by arguing that home-based gig work expands participation by transforming the household into a workspace and economic site, while also making participation conditional on gendered moral expectations that can invisibilize and devalue women's labour. Women articulate value through culturally grounded concepts (*nafas*, *kayan*, *istiqlal*), which redefine legitimacy beyond market credentials and highlight purpose and independence under constraint and uncertainty. Moreover, women sustain participation through relational agency: the redistribution of labour, management of risk through trust, and securing of recognition that offsets shame and devaluation, while revealing the limits and uneven burdens embedded in supportive household networks.

Chapter Seven (Conclusion) synthesizes the dissertation's findings, reconceptualizing gig integration, precarity, participation, value, and agency through the framework of 'stretching' social reproduction. It returns to the dissertation's critique of neoliberal development and digital

inclusion narratives. It argues for a feminist economic imaginary grounded in the everyday knowledges and relationalities that sustain life and work under crisis conditions.

Chapter Two - Literature Review and Conceptual Framework

This chapter provides an overview of feminist political economy literature as it relates to the study of development, digital labour, and social reproduction. It draws on postcolonial and intersectional feminist critiques that challenge the dominance of Global North epistemologies and situate women's labour within broader discussions of colonial histories, capitalism and gender. In conversation with this literature, it presents 'stretching' social reproduction as a conceptual approach for researching and analyzing informal and gendered labour in the Global South.

2.1 Neoliberal Development and Market Feminism

The genealogy of neoliberal development and market feminism discourses that are adopted by global financial institutions and implemented by modern nation-states can be traced back to modernization theory of development and liberal feminist frameworks (Wilson 2015). Modernization theory largely influenced the early Women in Development (WID) approach, which sought to 'integrate' women into existing development processes and focused on improving women's market access by promoting education, productivity and the use of technology (Wilson 2015). In the post-war 20th century, modernization theory dominated development thinking, presenting progress as a universal, linear path modelled on the West. Anchored in behavioural and institutionalist frameworks, modernization theory casts nations as evolving linearly from 'traditional' to 'modern' societies via industrialization and liberal democracy (Huntington 1968; Rostow 1956; Valenzuela and Valenzuela 1978). Thinkers such as Amartya Sen (1999) and Francis Fukuyama (2011) linked modernization to human freedom and rational governance, reinforcing the West as both the model and the goal of development. This teleological narrative entrenched global hierarchies between 'developed' and 'underdeveloped' nations, casting the latter as stagnant, deficient and in need of reform.

The WID approach was driven by neoclassical economic and liberal feminist thought, which critiques gender inequalities within the household, economy, and state, often focusing on the exclusion of women from formal structures of power and employment (Pateman 1988). Liberal feminism calls for the inclusion of women into existing political and economic structures through expanded access to education, employment, legal rights, and political participation. It emphasizes formal equality, advocating legal and institutional reforms that ensure women have the same opportunities as men (Wilson 2015). Liberal feminism advocates for policies that position women

as agents of change, often through targeted investments in their human capital, such as microcredit programs, vocational training, and maternal health services (Wilson 2015). Central to this framework is a belief in the transformative power of individual empowerment, in which autonomy is defined by self-reliance and economic participation in formal labour markets (Wilson 2015). However, these frameworks often universalize the liberal subject and fail to account for racial hierarchies, colonial histories, and class power, particularly outside Western contexts. These limitations become especially pronounced when liberal feminist frameworks are institutionalized within international development agendas. In many cases, development institutions adopt a Western-oriented modernization discourse as the blueprint for gender equality, advancing women's empowerment through technocratic and depoliticized interventions (Wilson 2015).

Liberal development frameworks were critiqued by Marxist feminist scholars for instrumentalizing women as sites of intervention, often reinforcing imperial logics of dispossession and control (Bannerji et al. 2010; Shiva and Mies 1993; Wilson 2015). In response to the WID approach, the Gender and Development (GAD) framework emerged to address deeper social norms, patriarchal structures, and class relations (Kongar et al. 2014; Wilson 2015). The GAD approach attempted to shed light on social reproduction and the invisibilized labour and exploitation existing within the household. However, even as GAD emphasized gender as a structural and relational category, it was soon absorbed into institutional frameworks that prioritized technocratic solutions over radical transformations. These logics laid the groundwork for gender mainstreaming, which by the 1990s became a central tool in development programming (Wilson 2015). Gender mainstreaming involved global financial institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, incorporating gender equity into their broader neoliberal development agendas.

Within feminist political economy, Marxist feminists analyze how gender equity discourses within the IMF align with the transnational business narrative, which defines gender equality and women's empowerment as advancing their integration into existing market systems. The incorporation of women into this system of 'smart economics' is what Elaine Coburn (2019) calls 'feminism with a neoliberal face' or market feminism. This logic produces the figure of the '*femina economica*', a woman who embodies entrepreneurial values, participates in paid labour, and upholds reproductive roles in the private sphere (Coburn 2019; Federici 2018b; Price 2019; Wilson 2015). For instance, Silvia Federici (2018b) and Sophia Price (2019) argue that neoliberal gender reforms, including debt-based empowerment programs, target racialized women as micro-

entrepreneurs, deepening their precarity and masking unpaid reproductive labour under the guise of financial inclusion. Critical feminist scholars critique these ‘trickle-down gender’ policies for reproducing colonial logics of saving women in the Global South while ignoring structural violence under global capitalism (Coburn 2019; Federici 2018b; Price 2019; Wilson 2015).

Postcolonial scholars argue that neoliberal development narratives are not merely discursive but are materially embedded in policy and practice, institutionalizing gendered and racialized hierarchies through global governance (Escobar 1995; Mignolo and Escobar 2013; Mitchell 2002; Sultana 2019). Institutions such as the IMF and World Bank perpetuate these logics through technocratic reforms that conceal their colonial underpinnings (Escobar 1995; Mignolo and Escobar 2013; Mitchell 2002; Sultana 2019). Neoliberal development agendas are thus entwined with postcolonial state structures shaped by colonial-era epistemologies of rule. In Egypt, this dynamic manifests in state efforts to institutionalize formal markets, rationalized economic systems, and elite-driven governance as the only viable paths to modernity.

Yet state–society relations in postcolonial contexts are far more complex than mainstream development discourses acknowledge. Critical development scholars such as Timothy Mitchell (1991, 2002) challenge the conceptual separation between state and society, or state and economy, which grants the state a degree of autonomy and enables it to exercise disciplinary power while appearing ideologically distinct. Mitchell (1991, 2002) shows how the state mediates among internal bureaucracies, elite interests, and external forces such as private capital and former colonial powers. Development models that cast the state as a rational, technocratic actor erase these mediations. Mitchell (2002) further argues that the conceptual split between “economy” and “society” depoliticizes economic institutions and legitimizes technocratic governance. Economic progress is framed as a shift from traditional, communal labour to individualized, market-based production. Within this framework, household economies, informal labour, and self-provisioning are deemed non-productive and excluded from formal economic analysis (Mitchell 2002). While Mitchell acknowledges the importance of kinship and family, he leaves the household largely untheorized, thereby overlooking how gendered, socially reproductive labour within households and informal economies actively shapes economic life.

A contemporary iteration of these neoliberal development discourses is the promotion of digital entrepreneurship and online labour as pathways to empowerment, which links women’s digital inclusion to national growth. Just as gender has been framed as a strategic site for

intervention, technology is similarly positioned in development discourse as a seemingly apolitical tool of progress, celebrated for its capacity to modernize economies, foster innovation, and expand women's participation. However, these narratives, like those surrounding gender mainstreaming, undermine the structural inequalities that shape both digitization and women's labour. Monica Grau-Sarabia and Mayo Fuster-Morell (2021) refer to this institutional framing as the "women's participation and economic mainstream" approach. International organizations, state agencies, and corporate actors primarily produce this literature. It focuses on gender differences in technology use and labour market participation, particularly in feminized sectors. However, it does so through a surface-level conception of gender, often reducing it to a variable within market integration strategies. While it provides important data on women's digital inclusion, it does not examine how structural inequalities, historical legacies of colonialism, or the relational aspects of labour shape gendered experiences in the digital economy. Empowerment is often narrowly defined through neoliberal assumptions that equate value with market-based productivity, individual entrepreneurialism, and self-reliance. Moreover, this approach often lacks an intersectional analysis, which fails to consider how race, class, geography, and other axes of difference intersect with gender to shape women's labour conditions and technological access (Crenshaw 1989; Grau-Sarabia and Fuster-Morell 2021). It also rarely interrogates how the economic models, platform governance structures, or technological designs themselves reproduce gendered and racialized hierarchies.

Alternatively, there is a second approach to researching gender and technology, the 'Feminist Theory of Technology and Information Communication Technology (ICT)', which focuses primarily on how gender is embedded in technological systems and design, drawing attention to the symbolic, cultural, and structural inequalities present in digital platforms (Grau-Sarabia and Fuster-Morell 2021). This approach emerges from a long-standing tradition within technofeminist and poststructuralist scholarship that interrogates the deep entanglements between gender and digital systems. Rather than assuming technology to be neutral or universally emancipatory, this literature foregrounds how technological infrastructures and platforms are socially constructed and embedded within patriarchal institutions. Drawing on foundational theorists such as Judy Wajcman, Cynthia Cockburn, and Wendy Faulkner, this body of work reveals how gender is not only shaped by but actively co-produced with technology, highlighting

how digital systems encode and reproduce hierarchies of power, exclusion, and symbolic domination.

This approach advocates transforming technology through feminist intervention. These transformations are imagined as both symbolic and structural: they include designing digital systems that are inclusive, accessible, and oriented toward equity; reimagining the values embedded in technological design (such as competition, efficiency, and surveillance); and developing feminist frameworks for ICT that center lived experiences, relational knowledge, and social justice. The goal is not simply to add women to existing systems but to challenge the normative assumptions and power relations that shape the very foundations of digital technologies. While this approach contributes to understanding the social construction and non-neutral aspects of technology, it falls short in analyzing the material and economic conditions of digital labour, particularly the implications for women's work in informal or precarious settings.

The third approach is *feminist political economy*, which centers questions of power, economics, and the gendered dynamics of ownership, accumulation, and control (Grau-Sarabia and Fuster-Morell 2021). Unlike the other approaches, feminist political economy critically examines the structural conditions of the digital economy, including how capitalist and patriarchal systems shape women's labour. "In contrast to the previous approach, which focuses mainly on the study of gendered cultural processes in technology and ICT, this approach focuses, to a greater extent, on the gendered structure of the economy and the role that gendered economic dynamics play in the process of capital accumulation" (Grau-Sarabia and Fuster-Morell 2021, 6). Scholars who adopt this approach engage with intersectional frameworks to analyze how gender, race, class, and geography are co-constitutive axes of inequality within digital economies. Intersectionality here is not only an identity-based lens but a structural critique that interrogates the material conditions and global hierarchies underpinning digital labour markets, particularly for workers in the Global South. Drawing on traditions from Marxist feminism, social reproduction theory, and decolonial thought, this body of work critiques the neoliberal turn in digital development agendas and the market-based solutions often proposed for women's employment. It is from this feminist political economy perspective that I examine how gig work is woven into development narratives centred on inclusion and empowerment. The following section turns to critical platform studies and feminist critiques of digital labour, to explore the structural, material, and social constraints and possibilities of platforms and their implications for women's work in the digital age.

2.2 Critical Platform Studies and Feminist Critiques of Digital Labour

Recent scholarship has examined the dynamics of the gig economy and platforms, focusing on both the challenges and the possibilities of this emerging digital labour system. In their foundational text, Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham (2020) trace the rise of the platform economy, offering a critical introduction to how gig work is structured, managed and contested through digital infrastructures. They define platform labour as digitally mediated gig work coordinated by apps like Uber, Deliveroo, or Swvl, which use algorithms to manage, distribute, and evaluate labour. While casual, short-term, and piece-rate jobs have long existed, the platform model introduces a centralized, data-driven configuration (Woodcock and Graham 2020). Existing literature highlights the precarious nature of gig work, which reinforces the commodification of labour and reconstructs hierarchies of power between workers and capital owners (Graham and Anwar 2019; Graham et al. 2020; Shade 2018; Wood et al. 2019). In addition to precarity, gig work is characterized by low pay, social isolation, irregular hours, exhaustion, and a lack of work-life balance (Shade 2018; Wood et al. 2019). However, this literature also recognizes potential benefits, including flexible work hours and locations, and the opportunity for workers to use their skills and knowledge in various ways (Shade 2018; Wood et al. 2019).

However, for informal home-based gig workers like the women food vendors in my research, labour is not primarily organized by a single platform in the Uber sense; instead, it is organized through a shifting ecology of platform interfaces, communication features, and transactional supports that mediate work across household life, kin networks, customer relations, and local market conditions. This requires moving beyond “the platform economy” as a bounded sector and toward a more grounded account of what platforms do in everyday working lives, how they are taken up, and how they are made workable (James 2024). Critical platform studies show that platforms are not stable “sites” of work but historically evolving infrastructures. As platforms scale, they become programmable, data-driven systems embedded across multiple domains and organized through unified data infrastructures and ongoing boundary-work that reshapes participation and value extraction (Helmond et al. 2019).

In my dissertation, the platform is treated as one layer within a broader socio-technical arrangement through which home-based work is coordinated, made visible, and sustained across households and social relations. For this reason, I focus on the layered forms of mediation that structure and manage work, including applications, platforms, and systems that organize people’s

labour and convert it into monetizable data. Following the work of Jennifer Pybus, Stine Lomborg, Alessandro Gandini, and Signe Sophus Lai (2025), this requires distinguishing the interlocking components of “infrastructures for datafication” across both material and relational registers: devices (e.g., smartphones) and interfaces (apps and platform features through which women communicate, market their products, and manage orders); the platform infrastructures that organize these interactions (including interface design and visibility mechanisms, as well as back-end components such as dashboards, third-party software modules, and data storage systems); and the services these layers enable in practice (payments via mobile money, customer contact, delivery coordination, and ongoing client retention).

Accordingly, I use “platform” to refer to more than the app interface. Platforms are infrastructural and economic arrangements that organise participation through datafication, multi-sided market logics, and governance frameworks (Poell et al. 2019). Platform power therefore exceeds what users see on-screen, extending through integrations and “platform-ready” data flows such as application programming interfaces (APIs), which enable data exchange between software systems, and software development kits (SDKs), embedded code packages that add functions like analytics, advertising, logins, or payments (Helmond et al. 2019; Pybus and Côté 2024). For labour scholars, these arrangements matter because they function as managerial instruments: platform food delivery work, for example, is shaped by algorithmic management techniques such as ratings, incentives, and opaque allocation systems, through which control is exercised even when work is framed as flexible (Griesbach et al. 2019). Put differently, platform “features” are designed to intensify engagement, and this engagement generates data that can be operationalized through advertising and analytics infrastructures across the wider app ecosystem (Pybus and Côté 2024).

This layered view also builds on Susan Leigh Star and Karen Ruhleder (1996) insight that infrastructure “sinks into the background” as it becomes taken for granted in everyday routines, even as it structures what becomes possible and for whom. Attending to these layers also keeps in view the material and relational infrastructures that platformised work presupposes, including the home as a site of production and the social relations through which participation is sustained. In this sense, platformisation is not simply a technological shift but a reorganisation of everyday economic life through infrastructures, markets, and governance that are lived through household space and sociality (Poell et al. 2019; Pybus et al. 2025). Making these components explicit

provides a clearer basis for evaluating what the dominant literature captures well and what it tends to miss when it centres formal, platform-based work as the default model of the gig economy.

Building on this, describing gig work primarily as “platform-based” risks making the platform the default unit of analysis and obscuring the multiple layers through which labour is mediated in everyday life. Existing material and structural analyses of platform and gig economies offer researchers and policymakers a foundation for assessing how technology affects labour, including how gig work intensifies precarity, commodifies labour, and restructures power relations between workers and tech companies. However, much of this literature lacks an intersectional lens that can capture how gig work is experienced differently across identities and geographies. As a result, these accounts tend to privilege formal employment and macro-political dynamics, marginalizing informal, feminized, and socially reproductive labour that unfolds beyond formal platform work.

Critical feminist scholars of digital labour argue that these platforms exploit gendered, racialized, and classed bodies by reframing care and service work as individual entrepreneurial opportunities, thereby undermining the structural precarity on which such work depends. For example, the literature critiques how platforms manage labour through mechanisms such as immunity, achieved through the misclassification of workers as independent contractors, and control, which operates through customer ratings and behavioural nudges that fragment time, accountability, and autonomy (Lobenstine and Bailey 2015; van Doorn 2017). Platforms also cultivate fungibility, which means treating workers, especially racialized migrants and women, as interchangeable and disposable (Lobenstine and Bailey 2015; van Doorn 2017). This logic of disposability echoes the historical devaluation of domestic and care labour performed by women of colour, reinforcing stratified labour regimes in the name of innovation and entrepreneurship (Lobenstine and Bailey 2015; van Doorn 2017). In terms of home-based gig work, scholars such as Frances Flanagan (2019) describe how it becomes governed not through direct employment relationships but through rating systems and fragmented interactions that obscure responsibility and erode labour protections.

The literature on women’s work in the digital economy often intersects with discussions of social reproduction and demonstrates that a feminist analytical lens is crucial for understanding how gig work shapes women’s everyday lives, particularly under neoliberalism (Flanagan, 2019; Wallis, 2021; Webster and Zhang, 2020). For many women, especially in the Global South or

those racialized in the North, gig work offers both challenges and opportunities. On the one hand, gig work provides women with the flexibility and autonomy to manage their own time, define their responsibilities, and pursue financial independence and personal growth (Flanagan 2019; Wallis 2021; Webster and Zhang 2020). Work in the gig economy, therefore, provides women with opportunities to make a living despite economic and social challenges that may prevent them from working outside the home (Flanagan, 2019; Wallis, 2021; Webster and Zhang, 2020). Gig work also opens pathways for women to pursue entrepreneurship, a model widely promoted by policymakers and financial institutions as a strategy for empowerment (Flanagan 2019; Wallis 2021; Webster and Zhang 2020). In contexts where formal employment remains inaccessible or exclusionary, home-based digital work may provide an avenue for autonomy and economic participation.

However, gig work is critiqued for frequently exacerbating the double burden of paid and unpaid labour (Wallis 2021). The pressure of time, workload, and the precarious nature of gig work often affects family relations and household responsibilities (Wallis 2021; Webster and Zhang 2020). These impacts include added stress and the need to multitask and balance household/work responsibilities, including managing childcare and family needs, and navigating how gig work disrupts the intimacy of the home and family life (Wallis 2021). As Wallis (2021) notes, “crowdworkers with care responsibilities in particular face the challenge of navigating between wage labour, chopped into many small task units, and reproductive labour, all while they need to make their workday ‘elastic’ in order to be able to meet the pressure of constant availability generated by the digital platform” (p. 9). Rather than resolving inequalities, the gig economy can deepen existing patriarchal, capitalist, and racialized constraints by extracting value from women’s unpaid care work while framing it as entrepreneurial flexibility. These intersectional feminist analyses reframe gig work not only as a site of economic transformation but as a space of social reproduction and emotional labour. However, much of this literature remains focused on formal, platform-based labour in the Global North, which risks universalizing the experiences of gig workers.

Scholarship on gig work and gender in the Global South highlights how digital platforms, often promoted as tools for empowerment and poverty alleviation, often reproduce and deepen structural inequalities. Women gig workers navigate intersecting challenges rooted in gendered, racialized, and class-based hierarchies that shape local labour markets (Anwar 2022; Cook and

Rani 2024; Dixit and Banday 2022; Majid and Mustafa 2022; Rani et al. 2022; Silva 2022). Platforms exploit sociocultural norms and systemic inequities, relegating women to precarious, low-paying tasks and systematically excluding them from higher-value digital work like software development or AI annotation. In male-dominated sectors like ride-hailing, visibility discrimination and safety concerns further limit access; in feminized sectors such as domestic or care work, platforms capitalize on the longstanding devaluation of women's labour (Cook and Rani 2024; Rani et al. 2022). These exclusions are compounded by the double burden of paid and unpaid work, as productivity metrics erase caregiving responsibilities and intensify the pressure to perform across domestic and digital spaces. However, despite these constraints, women exercise agency through creative and relational strategies, drawing on community networks and local knowledges to adapt to platform economies in their everyday realities (Anwar 2022). For instance, many women use platforms like Upwork not only to generate income but also to gain digital skills, assert independence from patriarchal family structures, and reconcile paid work with childcare responsibilities (Anwar 2022).

Moreover, Hadia Majid and Maryam Mustafa (2022) show in their research with low-literate, low-income women workers in Pakistan, specifically home-based workers, how they leveraged platforms such as Facebook to expand their small businesses, access clients, and build supportive networks. Women reported using social media to share embroidery work, coordinate deliveries, and communicate with trusted circles, thereby circumventing patriarchal restrictions on mobility while enhancing their income and self-worth (Majid and Mustafa 2022). These women made conscious trade-offs between digital and physical mobility, not only to resist stigma but to carve out space for themselves in an otherwise exclusionary economy. Research demonstrates that, in the Global South context, micro and small-scale enterprises commonly use digital platforms to conduct online transactions cost-effectively and to contract and collaborate with other service providers to grow their businesses (Majid and Mustafa 2022; Rizk and Rashed 2019; Silva 2022). This demonstrates that digital platforms are not inherently empowering; rather, through these women's situated and often relational practices, they are transformed to serve their needs.

These insights call for critical feminist and intersectional approaches that center the lived experiences of women in the Global South in rethinking digital labour, economic justice, and global development, rather than treating them as peripheral. Building on this body of work, I bring feminist theories of social reproduction into conversation with studies of digital labour to examine

how platformisation is reshaping both paid and unpaid forms of work in women's everyday lives in the Global South. This approach foregrounds the gendered dynamics of global capitalism, which systematically exploits and devalues women's productive and socially reproductive labour. The literature also highlights feminist economic imaginaries and anti-capitalist struggles, such as the commons, which are rooted in household labour, community ties, and subsistence logics. Together, these perspectives reveal how social reproduction is not only a site of survival, but also one of resistance, reimagination, and possibility.

2.3 Social Reproduction

Social reproduction is commonly defined as the set of activities necessary to sustain life on a daily basis and across generations, at both individual and societal levels (Winders and Smith 2019). The bulk of literature in this area stems from Social Reproduction Feminism (SRF), which offers a foundational critique of capitalism's gendered division of labour, emphasizing how the separation between production and social reproduction has historically devalued women's unpaid domestic work (Federici 2004; Mies 1986; Winders and Smith 2019). SRF scholars analyze how macroeconomic institutions such as the state, capital, and development regimes recognize and reward paid labour while systematically rendering reproductive labour invisible and economically irrelevant. Maria Mies (1986) laid the groundwork for theorizing the relationship between capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism by tracing how women's unpaid reproductive labour and bodies were subordinated through land dispossession, colonial expansion, and the enclosure of the commons. Building on Mies, Silvia Federici (2004; 2012) elaborates this framework through her analysis of the witch hunts and the disciplining of women's bodies as central to the formation of capitalist social relations. Federici argues that women were systematically excluded from wage labour and positioned instead as reproducers of the labour force, their bodies subject to state and institutional control. Expanding on this work, Massimo De Angelis (2019) engages Federici's analysis to interrogate the political economy of social reproduction, emphasizing the processes through which reproductive labour is both exploited and a potential site of resistance within capitalist accumulation.

(SRF) has long framed the household as a foundational site of reproductive labour that sustains capitalist accumulation. Scholars such as Silvia Federici (2004; 2012) and Maria Mies (1986) conceptualize the household as the locus of unpaid, feminized labour, including care work, childrearing, and domestic tasks. Although this work is essential to reproducing labour power, it

remains structurally devalued and largely excluded from economic recognition. They argue that by naturalizing domestic labour as women's duty or moral obligation, capitalism extracts surplus from reproductive labour without compensating it. Although Social Reproduction Feminism (SRF) has been crucial in revealing the material hierarchies and everyday violence that underpin capitalist accumulation, its analytical categories often rely on universalizing assumptions that reinforce dichotomies between 'private' and 'public' and between 'unpaid' and 'paid' labour. Such framings risk homogenizing women's experiences across vastly different contexts and positioning the household solely as a site of exploitation, overlooking how women actively resist and reshape their economic and social realities within and beyond the household.

Social Reproduction Feminism (SRF) is critiqued by Marxist feminist scholars who advocate for Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), which shifts attention from static structures to the dynamic, relational, and often invisible processes that sustain labour (Arruzza et al. 2019; Bhattacharya 2017; Ferguson 2016). SRT challenges the analytical separation of production and reproduction, arguing instead that reproductive labour, whether in the home, schools, or public services, is foundational to capitalist accumulation. It emphasizes that labour power is socially constructed and reproduced through relations of care, power, and infrastructure across states, global value chains, and everyday life (Bhattacharya 2017; Ferguson 2016). For instance, Tithi Bhattacharya (2017) reframes SRT as a methodological refusal to treat the 'worker' as a given, asking instead which social conditions (for example, nourishment, rest, education, or care) make labour possible at all. Her intervention, along with other feminist scholars such as Nancy Fraser, Susan Ferguson and Cinzia Arruzza, urges us to look beyond the factory or the platform and into the kitchen, the neighbourhood, and the schoolyard to understand capitalism as a total social relation, not just an economic system (Arruzza et al. 2019; Bhattacharya 2017; Ferguson 2016). In this way, SRT calls for a revaluation of reproductive labour, not simply to integrate it into existing value-centric models as SRF often attempts, but to rethink what we even mean by 'value', 'labour', and 'production'. According to SRT, rather than treating domestic work as isolated, the household must be understood in relation to broader political and economic structures. The theoretical shift between SRF and SRT is crucial because it moves the analysis of social reproduction beyond invisibility and marginality, toward a recognition of its centrality in sustaining capitalist value systems.

These theoretical shifts have not only reshaped understandings of reproduction and value but have also inspired feminist imaginaries that challenge capitalist temporalities and reclaim everyday life as a site of resistance and political possibility. Marxist feminist scholars have long advocated for feminist economic visions that challenge the dominance of neoliberal capitalism and linear development discourses. Kathi Weeks (2011), for example, offers a vision of feminist political time that is nonlinear and multidirectional, urging us to view past struggles not as outdated, but as tools for cognitive mapping. Through historical examples such as the refusal of work, wages for housework, and postwork movements, she illustrates how feminist demands, however utopian, carry radical potential. Their significance lies not in universal realizability, but in how they unsettle capitalist norms and expand the horizon of feminist political thought.

Building on this call for radical imagination, Federici (2012) develops a vision of a *feminist revolution of everyday life* that resituates reproductive labour, care, and subsistence as central terrains of political struggle. In *Revolution at Point Zero*, she argues that daily activities such as food preparation, housework, and informal labour should not be viewed solely as burdens but as sites where alternative social relations and economic imaginaries are actively produced. In *Re-enchanting the World* (Federici 2018a), she draws on Indigenous and anti-capitalist traditions to envision the commons as spaces of solidarity, cooperation, and collective autonomy, marked by horizontal relations, shared resources, and grassroots democratic practices. The commons are not simply alternatives to privatization or market redistribution, but frameworks for reclaiming everyday life from commodification and revaluing interdependence, care, and collective well-being. Extending these insights, Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) also links feminist and anti-capitalist struggle, rejecting both liberal feminism's "equal opportunity domination" and narrow Marxist economism (Arruzza et al. 2019). Instead, SRT calls for a feminism rooted in the lives, labours, and futurities of working-class, racialized, and marginalized women across the globe and centers reproductive labour not only as a site of exploitation, but as a space of social power, radical imagination, and insurgent possibility (Arruzza et al. 2019).

While these visions open critical space for imagining alternatives, recent feminist scholars have called for further decentering Global North frameworks by foregrounding the colonial entanglements and localized knowledges that shape social reproduction across the Global South. For instance, Alessandra Mezzadri (2021; 2019), Juanita Elias and Shirin M. Rai (2019) have critiqued SRT for reproducing abstract binaries between public and private or the household and

market, while failing to engage fully with colonial histories, localized gendered experiences, or the blurred boundaries between production and reproduction in the Global South. Through her “value theory of inclusion,” Mezzadri (2021) reframes reproductive labour as a site of labour control and surplus extraction, which means capitalism does not merely ignore or exclude reproductive labour but actively exploits and incorporates it into global circuits of value, albeit in hidden or uncommodified ways. From this perspective, value is co-produced in spaces often deemed outside the economy, such as the household, the neighbourhood, and the community. Informal labour in the majority world is thus not a residual form of economic activity, but central to the functioning and reproduction of global capitalism itself (Mezzadri 2021; Mezzadri et al. 2021). This critique challenges SRT’s tendency to confine value generation to commodified circuits and demands a reframing of social reproduction as a site of both exploitation and economic generativity.

Building on these debates within social reproduction literatures, a group of critical feminist political economy scholars, namely Alessandra Mezzadri, Shirin M. Rai, Sara Stevano, Donatella Alessandrini, Hannah Bargawi, Juanita Elias, Shireen Hassim, Surbhi Kesar, Jayanthi Thiyaga Lingham, Serena Natile, Neetha N., Lyn Ossome, Parvati Raghuram, Dzodzi Tsikata and Stefanie Wöhl, call for a pluralization of social reproduction approaches (SRAs). Rather than proposing a single alternative framework, they advocate for contextually grounded and historically situated analyses that are attentive to the multiplicity of life-making processes across racialized, gendered, and colonial terrains (Mezzadri et al. 2025). Rather than replacing SRT, this intervention seeks to decenter it, arguing that the entanglements of reproduction and capitalist accumulation cannot be theorized through a singular or universal lens. This includes a critique of the public/private and production/reproduction binaries often reproduced in Global North-centric analyses. As Mezzadri et al. (2025) assert, the organization of life and labour in the Global South cannot be reduced to “deviations” from northern norms. Still, it must be understood as co-constitutive of global capitalism. Instead, they argue for a more expansive understanding of reproduction that is not a fixed set of roles or functions, but as a set of everyday, relational, and politically charged practices that are embedded in diverse economic and social landscapes. This includes recognizing informal and household-based labour as not peripheral but foundational to the functioning of global capitalism. Pluralizing SRAs also requires methodological openness, which includes theorizing from the ground up, engaging with situated knowledges, and foregrounding how life and labour

are organized under conditions of dispossession, structural violence, and systemic inequality (Mezzadri et al. 2025).

In this dissertation, I engage with this call to pluralize social reproduction and to extend it beyond existing epistemological and methodological boundaries, drawing on feminist postcolonial and intersectional frameworks. This literature also highlights family-based and hustle economies, where everyday practices of resistance and reimagination disrupt dominant development discourses and make space for alternative economic futures.

2.4 Feminist Postcolonial and Intersectional Frameworks

Postcolonial and intersectional feminist literatures highlight the historical and social contexts of marginalized women's lives and labour under global capitalism (Agathangelou 2004; Crenshaw 1989; Hill Collins 2000; Taha and Salem 2019; Valiavicharska 2020; Olmsted 2005; Salem 2020). By centring the social relations often deemed as private in the analysis of global political economy, critical postcolonial feminists shift the analysis of social reproduction away from Western-centric discussions of production and labour value towards a more global context that highlights the economic, social and epistemic violence of neoliberalism on women's everyday lives (Agathangelou 2004; Cook 2021; Taha and Salem 2019). They highlight the central role of the state and global capitalist bourgeoisie in structuring and maintaining the gendered division of labour through the domestication of women and domination of their bodies to reproduce labour. Ultimately, by integrating everyday life into macro-level economic and political analysis, this literature calls for the (re)politicization of social reproduction and its integration into discussions of colonialism, capitalism, and gender. This body of work challenges the dominance of liberal and Marxist categories that separate production from reproduction, and instead offers grounded, intersectional frameworks that attend to how race, gender, and colonial histories shape economic life (S. Salem 2018; 2020; 2019a; Olmsted 2020; Wilson 2015).

Intersectionality has been a critical lens for conceptualizing and theorizing resistance, encompassing both structural, relational and affective strategies used in everyday life. Drawing on the work of Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000) she shows how everyday acts of care, kinship, and community-building are not only political, but also epistemological. These practices are grounded in lived experience and generate subjugated knowledges that disrupt dominant ideas of what counts as labour, resistance, or value. Crucially, Black feminist scholars insist that race is not an additive category but a structuring force that shapes how social

reproduction, resistance, and knowledge production are lived and understood. In contexts where formal politics and economic participation are shaped by exclusion, these relational strategies offer alternative ways to make claims, sustain life, and imagine justice. They are not simply coping mechanisms, but modes of knowing, rooted in collective histories, that challenge the hierarchies embedded in development and feminist discourse alike.

Postcolonial feminist scholarship from and about the Global South shows how women engage in everyday survival practices and family-based economies that challenge their marginalization as underpaid workers, unpaid caregivers, and indebted subjects. Brittany Cook's (2021) research on home-based food production in rural Jordan looks at how women reformulate social reproduction by forming organizations, building networks, innovating traditions and knowledge, and mobilizing social identities. Similarly, critical feminist work in Egypt complicates the assumption that market-based employment inherently increases women's agency (Agha 2019; Malak and Salem 2017; Olmsted 2020; Salem et al. 2018). Alternatively, women engaged in household or subsistence labour, including unpaid activities for household consumption, may experience greater mobility, autonomy, and decision-making power within the family (Salem et al. 2018). It is often challenging to separate productive and reproductive activities within the home. Still, the literature highlights the need to study household labour further to capture the multiple meanings and forms of work that women perform in non-market economies (Salem et al. 2018). These household economies not only shape women's economic agency but also profoundly structure the temporality of their everyday lives.

A key intervention across critical feminist political economy is that social reproduction is not only work that happens in certain spaces (the household, the community), but work that happens in time; through the organization of rhythms, routines, waiting, endurance, and the uneven allocation of rest. Within the social reproduction literature, scholars conceptualize everyday labour as "life's work", a framing that destabilizes the binary between work and non-work and highlights how social reproduction unfolds through blurred, embodied, and affective temporalities (K. Mitchell and Katz 2004; Winders and Smith 2019). In the context of informal household economies, time is experienced by women gig workers in ways that blur binaries between paid/unpaid labour and production/social reproduction, and it is precisely these entanglements that are important to analyze. Juanita Elias and Shirin M. Rai (2019) similarly propose a *Space-Time-Violence* (STV) framework to interrogate how time is used to discipline bodies, organize domestic

labour, and reproduce gendered hierarchies across households and global orders. Time is therefore not neutral but deeply gendered, racialized, and classed.

Postcolonial feminist theorists advance a politics of time that challenges dominant logics of linearity, progress, and productivity embedded in capitalist modernity and development discourses (Agathangelou and Killian 2016). For instance, Anna Agathangelou and Kyle Killian (2016) show how temporality functions as an imperial mechanism that constructs feminized and racialized others as backward, nonmodern, or out of time, thereby justifying their exploitation within global capitalist hierarchies. In this sense, time is not a neutral container but a political technology through which capitalist and colonial projects normalize particular rhythms of productivity, discipline, and “progress,” relegating other temporalities to the status of backward, inefficient, or disposable (Agathangelou and Killian 2016). This focus also helps make sense of how platforms mediate participation: they can enable new forms of coordination and what Wallis (2021) calls “temporal autonomy,” while also intensifying responsiveness, compressing boundaries, and multiplying overlapping timelines. These temporal hierarchies shape what is recognized as work, who is legible as a worker, and what forms of labour count as a contribution to growth and development. Put differently, the production/reproduction divide is also a temporal division, sustained through the idea that “real work” belongs to linear, measurable, market time. In contrast, social reproduction is rendered as flexible, endless, and naturally available.

Beyond the household and digital platforms, these temporal politics also structure life in broader informal economies, where everyday acts of labour and survival become deeply political interventions. Saba Mahmood (2006), for example, reframes agency beyond liberal logics of autonomy and resistance by illustrating how ethical and spiritual practices, such as those cultivated in Egypt’s mosque movement, become modes of self-making and moral engagement. This opens space to think about agency beyond resistance, especially in contexts where women’s labour, faith, and care are tightly intertwined. Similarly, Asef Bayat (2013) describes how urban poor women engage in *quiet encroachment*, claiming space and securing livelihoods through informal practices such as street vending or housing extensions, often without confrontation. These acts constitute deeply political claims to dignity and belonging, especially when formal avenues of participation are blocked. Women’s informal labour, both in the household and public space, embodies what Bayat (2013) calls a ‘collective presence’ that exceeds the formal language of protest. Other scholars, such as Salwa Ismail (2006), Diane Singerman (2006) and Farha Ghannam (2011),

discuss various ways that women, especially working-class women, navigate material and social precarity through economic and social strategies grounded in community trust, social networks, morals, and social norms. These feminist interventions offer critical entry points for rethinking labour and resistance within informal and digital economies in the Global South.

In the context of digital and informal economies, scholars such as Lori Lobenstine and Kenneth Bailey (2015) and Tatiana Adeline Thieme (2018) use the concept of ‘hustling’ as a critical lens for moving beyond formalized, Northern-centric frameworks. Much of what is celebrated today as innovation in the gig economy, such as ride-sharing, food delivery, and short-term rentals, has long existed in communities of colour as part of what Lobenstine and Bailey (2015) term “hustle economies.” These are shared, social responses to economic crisis, forged through necessity, creativity, and interdependence. These practices were historically criminalized or excluded from institutional support, only to be repackaged by platforms as disruptive business models. As Lobenstine and Bailey (2015) argue, gig work’s celebrated features, such as peer-to-peer services, communal labour, and DIY (Do It Yourself) production, are derivative of what they term the *adjacent possible*, that is, survival-based practices that refuse the erasure of marginalized labour.

Moreover, Thieme (2016) builds on this framing by theorizing *hustling* not just as a practice, but as a condition and identity. Drawing on ethnographic work in Nairobi, she situates hustling within youth experiences of *waithood*, informality, precarity, and urban uncertainty. Throughout her work, Thieme (2016) argues that “the conceptual lens of ‘hustle’ offers a way to capture the everyday incremental livelihood strategies that inform youth identities and expressions of resistance in the face of both failed promises and increasingly outmoded cultural expectations” (42). Hustling here is both an economic necessity and aspirational labour, encompassing informal services, waste work, and civic engagement. It reflects not a desire to escape precarity, but to rework and inhabit it with agency, innovation and creativity. Hustling, as a lens, therefore creates space to analyze and research liminal, invisibilized, precarious, and informal spaces and communities marginalized from dominant urban development discourses. In chapter five I draw on this lens to analyze how women experience and navigate precarity through household-embedded hustling strategies.

In this dissertation, I follow critical political economy scholars who reject separating capitalist accumulation from social reproduction, or the formal from the informal, and instead

emphasize relational, embodied, and context-specific understandings of labour and development (Agha 2019; Bayat 2013; Mezzadri 2025; Mezzadri et al. 2021; Mignolo and Escobar 2013; Salem 2018). For instance, feminist scholars such as Mezzadri (2021) emphasize that across the Global South, informal workers are engaged in an ongoing struggle over recognition, pushing back against their exclusion from dominant value frameworks and fighting to have their lived experiences of exploitation recognized as central to class struggle. More recently, critiques of development call for building resilient economies based on solidarity and community-centred alternatives that are inspired by informal economies (Mezzadri 2025). Drawing on this literature, I shift the conversation to frame informality not only as precarious and exploitative, or as a descriptive category, but as a generative site for theorizing resistance and social change under global capitalism. By centring informal and household economies in the Global South as key sites of analysis, I extend social reproduction theory beyond its epistemological and methodological limits, bringing development, digital labour, and social reproduction into conversation.

2.5 Conceptual Framework: ‘Stretching’ Social Reproduction

To develop my own intervention, I reposition SRF and SRT not as opposing schools, but as elements of a broader feminist political economy conversation. My aim is to build on and extend these traditions, rather than reject them, by proposing the ‘stretching’ of social reproduction as a critical feminist approach grounded in Egypt’s specific context. I contribute to SRF’s ongoing critique of universalism by centring the everyday experiences, relationships, and knowledges of women gig workers in Egypt. In particular, I focus on how they navigate informal work and social reproduction under overlapping systems of patriarchy, neoliberalism, and postcolonial state governance. Rather than relying solely on structural explanations, I emphasize the importance of relational and context-specific cultural understandings of reproductive labour that reflect the historical, political, and social realities shaping women’s lives. ‘Stretching’ social reproduction entails centring socially reproductive knowledges and relationalities in the analysis of labour, value, agency and participation.

Socially reproductive knowledges, as I define them, are the intergenerational teachings, experiential learnings, and reciprocal practices embedded in social reproductive activities and gained, transferred, and nurtured in everyday life. Contrary to Western knowledge systems that are built on ‘othering’ and delegitimizing traditional forms of knowledge, socially reproductive knowledges complicate what is considered valid and legitimate knowledge in work and daily life

(Bengezi et al. 2023; Smith 2012; Starblanket and Stark 2018). For example, Egyptian women gig workers, as demonstrated in chapters four to six, frequently draw on inherited cooking techniques, budgeting skills, and community wisdom to integrate and sustain their home-based gig work. Such knowledges not only provide a foundation for income generation and the capacity to navigate precarity but also the agency to redefine skills and value beyond material and measurable market credentials or outcomes. Socially reproductive knowledges is a term inspired by Indigenous feminist thinkers who highlight how the colonial mentality separates the past from the present and future, creating conceptual divides between peoples' histories and a dichotomy between traditional and modern thought that subordinates non-Western knowledge (Smith 2012; Starblanket and Stark 2018). Similarly, socially reproductive knowledges are non-individualistic, non-isolated ways of knowing and being rooted in communal, interpersonal, and collaborative relationalities, which I term socially reproductive relationalities.

Socially reproductive relationalities, as I define them, are the intergenerational bonds, dynamic connections and communal networks formed through social reproductive activities and gained, transferred, and nurtured in the everyday. These include family bonds, friendships, social networks, and community connections that are integral to launching and growing home-based gig work, navigating precarity and resisting the isolating effects of neoliberal capitalism. For instance, women in Egypt often rely on *gam'eyas* (Rotating Savings and Credit Associations) to informally pool resources within the community and bypass exploitative financial systems (see Chapter Five). Socially reproductive relationalities is a term inspired by Indigenous feminists who explain how Indigenous political systems are built on interconnections, networks, hubs, and communities that recognize and mobilize around shared struggles and goals (Lugones 2016; Simpson 2017; Smith 2012). Reconnecting people to one another allows for ongoing reciprocal practices of mirroring, valuing the uniqueness of beings, reflecting on relations with oneself, and continuously building societies grounded in positive identities, self-worth, dignity, consent, and freedoms (Simpson 2017). Similarly, socially reproductive relationalities highlight the multiple localities women hold across time and space and challenge claims about the universality of norms or experiences. Ultimately, socially reproductive relationalities complicate the transactional nature of work relations by integrating social reproductive activities into the analysis of economic structures.

'Stretching' social reproduction is an approach in which the analysis of labour moves beyond fixed binaries, treating production and social reproduction as fluid and interdependent

rather than analytically separate realms. While existing social reproduction theories, such as SRF and SRT, critique the subjugation of social reproductive labour in relation to production, they remain analytically embedded in liberal frameworks that uphold dichotomies such as public/private, paid/unpaid, and production/reproduction. Reframing social reproduction is an invitation to disrupt these binaries by examining how these realms intersect, merge, and converge across time and space. This is not an attempt to erase or undermine the different experiences of violence or exploitation that exist in these realms. Instead, it aims to highlight their interdependence and fluidity. Work and non-work relations are thus deeply entangled, as neighbours may also be customers or market vendors, and the spaces of the home, street, and marketplace blend into one another. These intersections of time, space, money, and social relations complicate neat analytical divisions and require us to examine them in their overlap rather than accept their separation.

Moreover, ‘stretching’ reclaims social reproduction not only as a structural condition that sustains capital, but also as a lived and agentic site of creativity, resistance, and reimagining. I define “resistance and reimagination” as the ways women disrupt capitalist and patriarchal hierarchies through creative, relational, and alternative approaches to labour. These practices are dynamic and fluid rather than fixed or uniform, and they are deeply embedded in women’s everyday negotiations of work, care, and community. Resistance and reimagination unfold through embodied experimentation, improvisation, and creative adaptation to shifting economic and social conditions. For example, as women navigate the layered demands of informal gig work, they mobilize household networks and culturally embedded forms of knowledge to transform both their labour and their lives. These practices are not only reactive but generative, as they produce new possibilities for relating, organizing, and sustaining life amid precarity and marginalization by state development and global neoliberal discourses.

By ‘stretching’ social reproduction, I propose both a conceptual and methodological pathway for analyzing women’s work in the digital age. The next chapter outlines the methodological framework that guided this research, followed by an account of the methods employed.

Chapter Three - Methodological Framework and Methods

October 19, 2022: Being here.

Being here. It's like walking on a path, full of bridges and mountains and slopes, but with two different sides on my right and left (Egypt and Canada)... each side bringing its own additions and challenges to my path... each side influencing how I navigate it... and even what it looks like... I embraced the fact that I don't have to let go of either or reject either... both sides live within me too...

These streets, homes, and people have carved my past. But also remind me of pain, injustices, and many losses and fears.

And the life I've built in Canada feels closer and more me.

But that in itself is a constant reminder of a certain type of loss I feel when I am here.

I guess it doesn't have to be a "loss". This part and past still live within me... but more of a memory rather than a reality.

I begin this chapter with a personal note I wrote in my first month of fieldwork. That 'field' was Cairo, the city I was born in, the streets I first walked in, the people I first talked to, a home that continues to live within me, as I live and work somewhere else. In this chapter, I outline my methodological framework and methods while also holding space for my personal journey throughout the fieldwork.

3.1 Methodological framework

The theoretical and methodological frameworks for this dissertation are inspired by feminist postcolonial, Black and Indigenous scholarship that critiques the epistemic violence of Western knowledge production across disciplines (Hill Collins 2000; Hlabangane 2018; Lugones 2016; Mezzadri 2025; Taha and Salem 2019; Smith 2012; Sultana 2019; Tuck and Yang 2012). This scholarship critiques how Western positivist frameworks construct dualisms between nature/science, reason/emotion, universal/particular, and body/mind, positioning Western science as the ideal, universal, neutral, and normative foundation for knowledge (Hlabangane 2018; Smith

2012). Positivist approaches create objective generalizations about social realities, whereby this supposed ‘objectivity’ of knowledge demands separating researchers from their communities, relationships, lived experiences, and situated knowledges (Hill Collins 2000; Hlabangane 2018; Smith 2012). In doing so, this notion of objectivity invalidates and delegitimizes research and knowledge that centers on values and lived experiences, thereby reinforcing the dominance of Western knowledge systems. Linda Smith (2012) calls this “research through imperial eyes” (p. 44), in which objects of analysis are constructed and certain people are Othered further to reinforce modern colonial gendered and racialized hierarchies and discourses.

In researching the SWANA region, specifically Egypt, I draw on critical feminist postcolonial and intersectional scholarship that advocates community-centred research as a mechanism for transformative knowledge production (Hill Collins 2000; Mezzadri 2025; Salem 2019a; Smith 2012; Sultana 2019). This body of work argues that community-centred research requires a shift away from extractive or top-down methods and instead prioritizes relationality, trust, and mutual accountability. It entails treating participants not as data sources but as knowledge holders whose experiences, perspectives, and ways of knowing actively shape the research. It calls for research practices grounded in meaningful alliances, critical reading and writing, inclusive and holistic approaches, empathetic and sisterhood-based relations, engagement with non-material relations and connections to land and (non)living beings, and the envisioning of alternative radical futurities that directly challenge and resist colonial violence. It also demands ongoing reflexivity and self-critique regarding positionality, privilege and power dynamics in the field and beyond.

It is important to write and reflect on how I enter this research as an Egyptian Canadian scholar, an immigrant, and a young woman who has lived exactly half her life in Egypt and the other half in Canada. I write this dissertation ten years after my last time living in Cairo, and with the distance comes a longing and a need for belonging that I seek through my work. I recognize my privilege of coming from an upper-middle-income background in Egypt and having access to internationally recognized educational opportunities. In Canada, I have also been privileged to access education and graduate training opportunities at top universities, where I completed both my undergraduate and master’s degrees. Alongside these privileges came personal experiences of racialization and sexism that reshaped my worldview and strengthened my passion for social justice and change. This dissertation is not merely a political economy research project for me, but

also a way to personally navigate the in-between space between two homes, my past and present, and the intertwined feelings of hope and despair that emerged with the January 25th Revolution in 2011. Rather than separating my lived experiences, passion, and curiosity from my work, I ground my research in them. I intentionally make space for stories and narratives that are often unheard and unseen, to centre the everyday as a site of understanding, theorizing and (re)imagining.

This dissertation is among the first projects in Egypt to empirically examine women's participation in the food tech economy, focusing on their experiences in informal home-based gig work. Because this dissertation develops interpretive concepts and focuses on meanings, contexts, and lived experiences rather than causal testing, I use a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is well suited to examining how people make sense of their lives, work, and relationships in context and to analyzing processes, subjectivities, and meanings that are difficult to quantify, especially in informal, household-based work that is often statistically undercounted. There is a wide range of methods available for conducting qualitative research, including ethnographic observations to contextualize everyday practices and in-depth narrative interviews to capture lived experiences and community-based knowledges (Agathangelou 2004; Cook 2021; Elias and Rai 2019; Hill Collins 2000; Mezzadri et al. 2025; Olmsted 2005; Salem 2019a; Smith 2012). For this dissertation, I used two primary qualitative methods: semi-structured life history interviews and ethnographic observation. Together, these approaches offered the flexibility to follow participants' narratives, while allowing me to observe everyday practices, affective dynamics, and relational labour as they unfolded in real time.

The life history method created space for storytelling, allowing participants to narrate their work and life experiences in their own words. It was significant for revealing how women's socially reproductive knowledges and relationalities evolve and adapt in response to shifting economic, social, and technological conditions. These narratives not only highlighted women's current strategies for managing informal gig work but also captured their reflections on past experiences and visions for the future. In doing so, the interviews provided a longitudinal perspective on agency, resilience, and value that is often absent from standardized or policy-oriented accounts of labour and development. While the field of political science often privileges quantitative approaches for their generalizability and perceived neutrality, I found qualitative methods more suitable for capturing the relational, embodied, and socially reproductive dimensions of women's gig work in Egypt, which are often invisibilized by survey-based or

economistic research. My aim was not only to document their labour practices, but to learn from the epistemologies embedded in their daily negotiations with work, care, and platforms. This approach supports my broader intervention to reposition informal home-based labour as central to feminist political economy and digital labour studies. My data analysis was guided by a feminist postcolonial analytical framework. While the coding process was inductive, the analytical categories were informed by this framework, particularly in how I organized and interpreted women's narratives on social reproduction, resistance, and value.

The decision to work with 25 women gig workers was rooted in a commitment to depth, relationality, and contextual understanding, rather than statistical representation. While this number might seem modest relative to the overall population of working-age women in Egypt, my goal was not to generalize but to learn deeply from the everyday experiences, knowledges, and strategies that emerge in informal economies. This sample size enabled rich, relational engagement and in-depth conversations that highlighted how women navigate and disrupt structural, material, and social barriers and (re)imagine work, economic justice, and development on their own terms. By the tenth interview, recurring patterns and differences had begun to emerge, and subsequent interviews both built on and complicated these insights.³ In the following section, I further outline my methods, including my research design, recruitment and sampling, data collection and analysis, and my reflections and challenges as a researcher.

3.2 Methods

December 21, 2022: 2 months.

2 months since the beginning of my research... so many stories, narratives, relationalities, challenges and adventures... but in the middle of this hustle, there has to be a moment of serenity and pride towards the journey.

In the initial phase of my research, I conducted a comprehensive stakeholder mapping of public, private, and civil society institutions involved in shaping or implementing policies and initiatives

³ My approach prioritizes depth over breadth, reflecting a feminist postcolonial methodology that values lived experience, community-specific knowledge, and the multiplicity of meaning. This aligns with the growing qualitative literature that challenges rigid metrics of sample size and instead emphasizes saturation as relational, contextual, and purpose-driven (Wutich et al. 2024). For instance, studies on theme saturation, which is the number of interviews needed to identify a wide range of themes, suggest that a minimum of nine interviews is often sufficient. Meanwhile, research on theoretical saturation, which refers to the point at which all major themes, their meanings, variants, and interconnections are fully captured, recommends a range of 20 to 30+ interviews (Wutich et al. 2024). In the context of my research, I found 25 interviews to be an appropriate and robust sample for a preliminary exploration of informal home-based gig work.

on women's economic participation and digital labour in Egypt. I identified at least 20 private-sector cloud kitchen companies providing food services through online platforms. Most were locally based in Egypt, with five also operating offices in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). I also identified 60 organizations that funded, managed, and led initiatives to integrate women into the labour force. Of these, 30% were international development organizations, including the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), USAID, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and Global Affairs Canada. Another 30% were national state bodies, such as the National Council for Women, the Micro, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Development Agency, and the Technology Innovation and Entrepreneurship Center (TIEC). These organizations often collaborated with the remaining 40%, which consisted of national corporate and civil society organizations implementing initiatives to promote women's entrepreneurship and integration into the digital economy. Notably, the corporate actors were mostly banks and telecommunications companies offering a range of services through digital platforms, including e-wallets, money transfers, and mobile internet services.

I identified 20 initiatives that specifically focus on women's entrepreneurship, digital literacy training, capacity-building, and microfinancing, half of which were launched post-COVID (2021–2022). Across these programs, a relatively consistent policy logic emerges: women's economic participation is framed simultaneously as a gender justice issue and as a development strategy to be advanced through entrepreneurship support, access to finance, and digital integration. Many initiatives prioritize women entrepreneurs and women-led SMEs through training, mentoring, grants, and networking (such as Rabeha, She's Next, and هي رائدة (She is a Pioneer)). In parallel, another set of programs addresses the financing gap through dedicated funds and financial products, including the HSBC Female Entrepreneur Fund, the EBRD Women in Business Programme, and microfinance schemes targeting women micro-entrepreneurs and home-based workers (for example, Tamweely). A third strand emphasizes the “future of work” and digital upskilling, most visibly in large-scale programs such as *Egypt FutureWork is Digital*, which position digital literacy and platform readiness as prerequisites for participation in the digital economy.

Notably, many programs explicitly target populations commonly excluded from formal labour market framings, including home-based workers, micro-entrepreneurs, and women in Upper Egypt and rural governorates. Their stated aim is to formalize and professionalize these

women's economic activity and, in some cases, to integrate them into corporate supply chains (for instance, UN Women–private sector initiatives focused on “equal opportunities” and supplier inclusion). Taken together, these initiatives form a coherent top-down narrative aligned with the National State Development Strategy - Egypt Vision 2030: women's empowerment is framed primarily as an economic investment, while barriers such as limited access to credit, uneven digital skills, and exclusion from formal business networks are treated as technical constraints to be addressed through capacity-building, financial instruments, and market integration.

This mapping was not just descriptive; it was a strategic part of my research design. It allowed me to identify the institutional architectures and actors shaping Egypt's digital economy and to interrogate how formal policies on women's economic participation and integration into the digital economy reflect broader neoliberal and market feminist logics. Across many of these initiatives, empowerment is imagined as an individualized trajectory: a woman becomes more “included” by acquiring skills, becoming financially literate, formalizing a business, and translating her work into measurable market outputs. In doing so, these programs often treat the household as either a constraint to be managed (through flexibility and childcare) or a private backdrop that should not matter to economic life, rather than as the very site where work is organized, sustained, and made possible. By mapping this ecosystem, I identified the epistemological gap between policy narratives and the lived experiences of informal women workers. This informed my decision to focus on women who are not simply underserved by development initiatives but actively excluded from policy imaginaries. Methodologically, this mapping exercise also clarified the broader orientation of the dissertation. Instead of starting from state-centric or neoliberal policy definitions of participation and empowerment, I propose ‘stretching’ social reproduction to take seriously forms of value, agency, and labour that market-based metrics and inclusion narratives routinely overlook.

My primary method for collecting data was through conducting fieldwork in Greater Cairo, Egypt, for a period of six months (October 2022 – March 2023) where I interviewed 25 women who identify as home-based food vendors who prepare and sell meals using platforms (this is not confined to specialized food delivery applications, but includes platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Facebook messenger and YouTube). While home-based food vending differs from conventional gig work, such as ride-hailing or food delivery, it shares key characteristics of gig economies, including digital platform integration, visibility dynamics shaped

by platform features (feeds, engagement metrics, ads, reviews) and precarious work conditions (Flanagan 2019; Majid and Mustafa 2022; van Doorn 2017; Webster and Zhang 2020). By framing home-based food vendors as gig workers, I challenge narrow platform-based definitions of gig work and expand the concept to include informal, non-standard, home-based digital labour.

To recruit research participants, I created a database of 100 active online food vendors on Facebook and Instagram located in the Greater Cairo Area (Cairo and Giza), the capital city and central economic hub of Egypt. The database also included recommendations from personal contacts connected to food vendors via Facebook groups and WhatsApp group chats. To remain within the scope of informal home-based gig work, I excluded pages that indicated in their descriptions that they were catering companies, since they had official business licenses and hired professional chefs. I then filtered the database and organized the pages by those with the most online activity and engagement, based on post recency and level of online engagement (e.g., likes, followers). The focus on social media engagement helped ensure participants actively used platforms in their daily work. I recruited participants by calling the phone numbers listed on their online pages or by sending them direct messages. To avoid over-scheduling and allow participants more flexibility in choosing a convenient time, I conducted recruitment in stages. In total, I contacted 49 women and successfully recruited 25 participants, meeting my target.

Participants came from diverse backgrounds, with an almost equal distribution across age groups. All 25 participants were between 30 and 65 years old: six were 30–35, five were 35–40, seven were 40–45, two were 45–50, and five were 50 or older. Most participants (20 of the 25) were married, the remaining five were single, widowed, or divorced. Fourteen women had children in daycare or of school-age, three single women had no children, one woman was pregnant, and the remaining seven had children over 18 years old. Socio-economic diversity among the women was evident. I categorized it by neighbourhood and by the women's own descriptions of their economic status. Those from lower-income backgrounds described the areas where they lived as *sha'by*, an Arabic term that, in this context, broadly translates to “popular class.” These areas, such as *Muqattam*, *Hurraneya*, *Shubra*, and *Ard El Liwa*, were located on the outskirts of Cairo or Giza (Greater Cairo) and were known for informal housing and relatively affordable rents. In contrast, neighbourhoods such as *Maadi*, *Dokki*, *Heliopolis*, or New Cairo had higher real estate values and well-maintained buildings and infrastructure (including roads and hydro) reflecting middle- or upper-income backgrounds.

Other indicators of socioeconomic background included physical appearance (generally, *sha'by* women dressed more conservatively) and familiarity with languages other than Arabic (women from upper-middle-income backgrounds tended to have greater access to learning English or French). Of the 25 women I interviewed, six came from upper-middle-income backgrounds, six from middle-income households, six from *sha'by-middle backgrounds*, and seven from *sha'by* backgrounds. What differentiated *sha'by-middle* from *sha'by* was not only the neighbourhood of residence but also the level of education. Educational backgrounds varied and served as a key indicator in my categorization of socio-economic status. One participant held a master's degree from Canada, while thirteen held bachelor's degrees from public universities in Cairo in fields such as Business, Law, Computer Science, Engineering, and Art Education. All belonged to middle or upper-middle-income backgrounds. Moreover, seven participants held commerce diplomas from vocational secondary schools⁴ (*sha'by-middle* or *sha'by* income backgrounds), and four had completed only general secondary school⁵ (all from *sha'by* income backgrounds).

Most of the women (20 out of 25) had prior experience working outside the home, mainly in the corporate or education sectors. None had a formal culinary education or previous professional experience in the food industry. However, three pursued cooking certificates, and five took online or in-person courses to develop their cooking or business skills; these participants were mostly in the 30–40 age range and from more affluent backgrounds. This pattern of uneven access to skill-building opportunities is mirrored in their relationships to digital tools. Participants rated their comfort with using platforms on a low to high scale. Seven reported high comfort, primarily women from upper-middle or middle-income backgrounds with bachelor's degrees. Ten reported medium comfort, while eight reported low comfort, most of whom came from *sha'by* or *sha'by-middle* income backgrounds. These patterns suggest that self-reported digital comfort varies with social position and educational attainment, likely reflecting differences in exposure to and access to devices and platform use. Most of the food-vending projects (17 out of 25) were launched between 2015 and 2019, reflecting a broader shift in women's use of platforms such as Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp for income generation during this period. Three projects were launched during the COVID-19 pandemic, two of which followed job losses in the formal corporate sector.

⁴ These are two-year programs that grant a specialized technical certificate in the field of commerce and are considered to be equivalent to a high-school degree that qualifies holders to apply for a college or university bachelor's program.

⁵ Those who completed primary school were fully literate.

Regarding work location, 17 participants worked from their own homes, three alternated between their homes and an employer's home, and five operated out of informal rented kitchens. Of those working in rented kitchens, only three held a formal business license. I still considered the women working outside their homes eligible for research on "home-based" food vendors because their rented kitchens were either in the same building as their homes or on the same street. These spaces also included areas for daytime rest, furnished with mattresses or sofas and a television. In their own words, the women described the rented kitchens as extensions of their homes and as the places where they spent the entire day. Thus, these kitchens were not designed or managed as commercial spaces, but operated as home-based kitchens, which is why I included them in my sample. In terms of work arrangements, 14 participants worked entirely on their own, eight participants worked with family members (five through official partnerships and three through informal family support), and three hired paid workers to assist them (all three of whom operated out of informal rented kitchens). Five participants held additional part-time jobs alongside their food-vending work; one employed paid support, and four collaborated with family members. Among these four, three women identified as coming from *sha'by* or *sha'by*-middle socioeconomic backgrounds, highlighting the connection between economic precarity and reliance on family support to sustain multiple income streams.

As outlined in the methodology section, I conducted semi-structured life history interviews with 25 women using a flexible interview guide that invited reflection on work, household dynamics, community ties, and digital platforms. The interview guide, developed in both English and Arabic, consisted of 89 semi-structured questions covering the dissertation's central themes, including socially reproductive knowledges, relationalities, experiences with platforms, navigating economic and social barriers, and (re)imagining work. The guide was divided into seven main sections: (1) personal introductions, (2) launching a home-based project, (3) running and managing the project, (4) balancing paid work with household responsibilities and expenses, (5) family and social relationships, (6) access and use of smartphones and digital platforms, and (7) overall reflections on work and personal aspirations. All interviews were conducted in person in Arabic and audio-recorded, with an average duration of one and a half to two hours. Participants chose the interview location based on their preference and comfort. More than half opted to meet in public spaces such as local coffee shops or community centers, while others invited me into their homes or rented kitchen spaces. Each interview was conducted with informed consent, and ethical

considerations were central throughout the research process. I prioritized participant safety, voluntary disclosure, and the protection of sensitive labour narratives, in line with feminist ethics and relational research practices.

To complement the interviews and deepen my understanding of the everyday contexts of home-based gig work, I conducted ethnographic observations with four participants. The first was Naglaa, who came from a *sha'by*-middle background and prepared and sold food from her employer's home. The second and third were Fatma and Maryouma, who were also from *sha'by* neighbourhoods, and worked from their own home and an informal rented kitchen, respectively. The fourth participant, Mona, came from a *sha'by* background and operated out of a rented kitchen space near her residence. Each observation involved shadowing the participant for approximately six hours over the course of a full workday, which also included social reproductive tasks (such as supporting their children with homework or childcare, cleaning the kitchen, and calculating household budget and expenses). These sessions allowed me to observe not only the technical and logistical aspects of food preparation and delivery, but also the embodied rhythms of work, familial interruptions, multitasking, and the social interactions that shape women's gig work in the household. To avoid disrupting the natural flow of their routines, I did not audio-record or videotape these sessions. However, I took photographs of the food being prepared (with consent) and recorded my fieldnotes and reflections immediately afterward. These observations provided vital contextual layers to the interview data, helping me better understand how space, time, and labour are negotiated within the informal gig economy.

In addition to conducting interviews and ethnographic observations with home-based women gig workers, I also carried out semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholders in Egypt's emerging food tech sector. These participants included the co-founders of two cloud kitchen startups, FoodLab and KitchenCo, as well as six customers who purchased home-cooked meals from some of my participants. Several of these customers were referred to me directly by the women gig workers. To further contextualize the ecosystem in which these workers operate, I also visited two community bazaars in Cairo where home-based vendors showcased their food products and services, as well as two downtown Cairo restaurants specializing in serving home-cooked meals. These supplementary interviews and site visits were not part of my primary dataset but were instrumental in mapping the broader relational and institutional environment surrounding women's informal gig work. They offered additional insight into how competition, collaboration,

online presence, and consumer preferences shape the everyday economic strategies and aspirations of home-based gig workers. This ecosystem mapping complements my core methods by situating women's labour practices within the broader dynamics of Egypt's informal food economy and the digital platforms reshaping it.

While these additional interviews and site visits were not formally transcribed, coded, or analyzed in the same way as my primary data, they significantly informed my understanding of the relational tensions and structural inequalities that shape women gig workers' experiences. The perspectives of cloud kitchen founders highlighted the increasing formalization and platformisation of Egypt's food tech economy, often framed as innovation or entrepreneurial opportunity, while simultaneously excluding or overshadowing the labour of informal home-based vendors. Conversations with customers revealed both the value placed on authenticity and trust in home-prepared meals, as well as the perception of home-based vendors as "less professional" or risky to engage with at scale. Observations at bazaars and restaurants helped me understand how informal women workers navigate market presence, engagement, pricing, and competition in a rapidly digitizing food-tech economy. Together, these insights reinforced the importance of analyzing not only women's individual strategies but also the broader infrastructural and discursive forces that influence how their labour is recognized, valued, or marginalized within the gig economy.

After each interview, I recorded preliminary reflections and notes in my field journal, identifying key themes, tensions, and relational dynamics as they surfaced. Some of the themes that emerged were family and social relations, motherhood, household responsibilities, economic need, financial management, precarity, market relations, customer experience, formality and informality, knowledge, social media, learning and creativity, time management, space and mobility. These reflections informed the initial stages of coding and helped me remain attuned to both shared patterns and divergent experiences across the dataset.

Upon completing the field research, I simultaneously translated and transcribed all 25 interviews, translating from Arabic to English to streamline the process and facilitate later integration with the predominantly English-language literature.⁶ This meant that transcription was

⁶ Although my analysis was conducted primarily in English, this was a pragmatic decision to ensure accessibility for an English-speaking academic audience and to facilitate dialogue with existing scholarship. At the same time, I remained attentive to the risks of translation loss. I addressed this by retaining key Arabic concepts in their original form, engaging with their layered meanings, and reflecting on their cultural and relational significance in my analysis.

not a purely mechanical step but also a first layer of interpretation. To remain attentive to the cultural and linguistic specificity of participants' narratives, I retained key terms in Arabic when their meanings could not be fully conveyed through translation, such as *rizq*, *nafas*, *kayan*, *istiqlal* and later returned to them in their original forms during analysis. Throughout the transcription process, I employed inductive thematic coding in MAXQDA software. I adopted a bottom-up approach, allowing themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than imposing a pre-set coding structure. In my ethnographic observations, I consulted my field notes to ensure that the themes I developed were grounded in women's lived experience.

After completing the coding process, I summarized the content of each code. I grouped related codes to develop broader analytical categories such as socially reproductive knowledges (e.g., intergenerational skills, experiential learning, creativity), socially reproductive relationalities (e.g., family and motherhood, community support, market networks), resistance and reimagination (e.g., financial management, household responsibilities, (re)envisioning space or time, redefining agency), and digital practices (e.g. social media marketing and online learning). These categories served as the basis for my thematic analysis and were used to identify key patterns, contradictions, and grounded concepts.

February 28th, 2023: Self.

From non-belonging and longing.

I was able to find myself and ground it.

I did my work. Met people. Built relations. Heard stories. Wrote narratives.

In reflecting on my methodology and fieldwork experience, I realize that I designed my research on foundations that acknowledge context, including multiple positionalities, vulnerabilities, power dynamics, and concerns around safety and security. For me, this commitment to context began long before being in the field. It was critical when envisioning the methods I wanted to use and drafting the consent forms and research ethics application. It was vital for me to do this work with honest and genuine acknowledgement of my positionality and privileges as a researcher and scholar trained in the Global North. Living and studying in Canada means I am not subjected to the material, financial, and emotional challenges that many of the women I interviewed experience daily. This distance (both geographic and socio-economic) may

This approach allowed me to balance the demands of writing within an English-language academic context while remaining grounded in the voices of my participants.

have affected my respondents' willingness to participate or the kinds of information they shared with me, especially if they were not trusting of researchers from Western institutions. Many people, including family and colleagues, warned me that participants might hesitate to speak openly for fear that I would report them to tax authorities. Throughout the recruitment and interview process, I was honest about my affiliation with Western University, yet reassured participants that their stories would be securely stored and used for this doctoral project in the form of written work, conference presentations, and, upon completion, potentially a short video.

During my recruitment phase and throughout the interview process, I intentionally refused to separate my identity from my work, my research, or my praxis. I was vulnerable and open about my personal background, including where I live and study, my age, my marital status, the aims and objectives of my project, and my vision behind a dissertation that centers women's informal gig work. In doing so, I found that my identity as a young single Egyptian woman and student became a source of connection rather than distance. Many participants expressed pride in my research and described their participation as a way to support me in my academic journey. They offered leads on other vendors or restaurants I could speak with, and shared resources, tips, and insights from their own knowledge of the emerging food tech economy. This reciprocal dynamic blurred the traditional boundaries between researcher and participant. It grounded our interaction in relationality and trust, and helped establish a more ethical, collaborative foundation for the research.

Building on this foundation, I deliberately prioritized accessibility and comfort in every aspect of the research interactions. I purchased a local phone number and communicated via WhatsApp, which all participants were already using for work. This allowed me to follow up via voice notes and Arabic text messages, using colloquial, accessible language. I avoided academic or technical terms and ensured my questions were clear across all literacy levels. I also prioritized participants' spatial comfort and convenience, interviewing in cafés or sports clubs near their homes, or, when they offered, visiting them in their own households or kitchens. In thinking about mobility, I built a trusting relationship with a local taxi driver, Galal, who became my go-to transportation partner during the fieldwork. He understood the purpose of my work and often referred to our outings as "adventures," which added an unexpected but meaningful layer of support and sense of community.

The ongoing practice of active engagement and relationship-building involved openly communicating with participants, actively listening to their stories, and understanding their needs and expectations for the research experience. Actively engaging with participants for me often meant having personal or side conversations before, during, or after interviews that were not necessarily related to the research topic. Being genuinely invested and interested in them as people, not just “research participants,” helped me build and nurture my relationship with them. I felt these women had stories to tell; they wanted to be heard, and many of them expressed that the interviews made them remember so many details and moments they had long forgotten, or made them realize how much effort they put into their work and the daily activities within their household. Many of the women shared with me how proud and happy they felt that they were “finally being seen” or that “their work is being taken seriously”.

Relationship building was reciprocal, as many of these women insisted that I try some of their dishes, especially when they invited me to their homes. After the interview, they sent me voice notes sharing their reflections and feelings, and they also expressed interest and curiosity about when I will begin writing my dissertation. These relationships have endured even after I left the field. I remain in contact with all 25 women. We exchange greetings on holidays, they share updates about their work, and I send them reflections when I cite or analyze their stories. I am grateful to each participant for the trust they extended to me and for the many ways they continue to shape and inspire alternative frameworks for understanding work, gender, and development.

Chapter Four - Integrating Home-Based Work in the Gig Economy



Image 1: Photo taken by the author in an interview location in the Greater Cairo area

“I am one of those people who really push themselves. My mum cooks well, but you know, when a student outshines their teacher (laughing). She told me this. At the beginning of my marriage, all I cared about was making my husband happy, so I had to diversify the food and make lots of good meals so he wouldn’t look elsewhere or marry another woman. He always used to tell me, when the food wasn’t good, that he’d marry someone else (laughing). I used to innovate, I had to be excellent, especially since I am from Upper Egypt. He is from Cairo, so I didn’t want upper Egyptian women to appear as if they didn’t know how to cook, compared to Cairo women.⁷ But turns out it’s the opposite; you Cairo women don’t know! I used to always watch Chef Osama El Sayed. When he was young, I learnt a lot from him. When he got older, his food wasn’t that great, so I started developing myself. Thank God I now have a lot of experience. What do chefs do? They combine ingredients to create their own thing. That is what I want to do for myself, I want my own thing. I started adding things and creating my own dishes. This *hamam mahshy* [stuffed pigeon] is my own recipe; you won’t find it anywhere else. No one else does it like that. Why? Because it has a little something or a trick that I have. It’s a mixture between Upper Egyptian and Cairo flavours.”

This is the beginning of Roaaya’s narrative, one of the earliest interviews I conducted in November 2022. We sat in a local coffee shop by the Nile River in Zamalek, an older neighbourhood in Cairo known for its embassies, expat communities and affluent residents.

⁷ Upper Egypt is generally poorer and more socially conservative than Northern Egypt, hence the desire to prove her worth.

Roaaya had to take a few modes of transportation to get to the interview. Still, she was the one who chose this location, confessing to me that it is her happy place, where she relaxes away from family, social obligations, work, and life's stress. That day, we talked for three hours. Later, Roaaya texted me to say it was the first time she had been able to narrate her experiences out loud and truly recognize how much effort and dedication she had invested in both her work and her family.

Roaaya was 42 years old, married, and had four children (two in school and the other two in university). She was born and raised in Upper Egypt, but in Cairo, she lived in a *sha'by* neighbourhood. Roaaya was proud to share that, despite barriers to girls' education in regions like Upper Egypt, she had attained a commerce diploma and specialized in accounting. Similar to many women from *sha'by* backgrounds, Roaaya was proud of her family cooking knowledge and of her ability to adapt and evolve it through her own experiential learning and creativity. Roaaya's motivation to enhance her cooking skills was initially centred on gendered social roles, in which she felt responsible for cooking good food for her husband. With humour, we witness how this initial motivation shifts throughout time, with Roaaya now focused on cooking the best food for her customers. Through her cooking, Roaaya merges her family and experiential knowledge with her family and social relationalities.

I asked Roaaya about her Facebook page 'Koky Food' (through which I initially recruited her). She explained that it was named after her third daughter, Koky, who was the closest one to her and her biggest supporter. Roaaya created this page in 2015 to launch her home-based food project. She shared, "When I wanted to start, I created a Facebook page. No one taught me anything, so I just started the page myself and figured things out." Before launching her food vending project, Roaaya was not active on social media. Over time, however, she came to see platforms like Facebook and messaging apps such as WhatsApp as valuable tools for promoting her work and connecting with customers. Reflecting on her aspirations, she said, "I want to be famous. Even though it's not my name or my picture. But Koky Food is my brand, and I am happy with that." Beyond this desire for recognition, when I asked how these platforms were affecting her work, she explained, "My work became better and easier. It became easier because it's something I love and can do from home, without any problems." These platform-based features, particularly on Facebook, enabled Roaaya to launch her project from home, integrate into the growing food-tech economy, and conveniently manage, sustain, and expand it over time.

This chapter addresses the first research question: How is home-based gig work integrated into the broader gig economy, and what does this reveal about binaries of paid and unpaid work in the digital domain? Drawing on field interviews with Roaaya and 24 other women food vendors, I argue that home-based gig work integrates into the gig economy by extending social reproduction into digitally mediated spaces, rather than by requiring women to leave the household and separate work from daily life. In this context, platforms offered affordable, accessible ways to support integration while remaining grounded in the household. Consequently, binaries of paid and unpaid work are blurred in the digital domain, as unpaid learning, practice, coordination, and relational support within the household become inseparable from paid work preparation and economic activity.

The chapter focuses on the foundations and mechanisms through which women's home-based work becomes integrated into the gig economy. It is divided into four main sections that begin by analyzing the transferability of socially reproductive knowledge and skills across generations and spaces, followed by how women adapt and transform these skills, and how they share and collectively maintain them through reciprocal communal networks. The final section analyzes how, through these networks and socially reproductive relationalities, women extend household-based skills into market relations and income generation. Throughout the chapter, I show how 'stretching' operates in situ, whereby women continually extend their skills, time, and relationships across domestic and market spheres.

4.1 Transferring Intergenerational Knowledge and Household Skills

This section shows how cooking becomes a transferable economic capacity through intergenerational and household-based social reproduction. Of the 25 women I interviewed, 20 learned to cook entirely through intergenerational teachings and household practice rather than formal training. Across interviews, women describe learning domestic skills through everyday observation, assisted practice, and ongoing guidance from mothers, grandmothers, and other women, which are forms of unpaid labour that later become the foundations of paid home-based food vending.

"I learnt cooking from my mother and grandmother. I woke up every day to the smell of fresh baking. This gave me a sense of warmth, affection, nurturing, giving and love, which I want to transfer to my customers." (Hala)

“When I was in primary school, I studied in the village, so I lived with my aunt and grandmother. They are *fellahin* (farmers) who make everything at home, including bread and pie. I loved the smell of this food and would sit and bake with them and learn everything.” (Huda)

Hala (39) and Huda (33) shared a passion and dedication for upholding intergenerational family traditions and recipes. Hala was a single woman with an upper-middle-class background and a master’s degree in marketing communication from a university abroad. She had previous work experience in the corporate and education sectors. Eventually, she launched her home-based food project, *Lola*, in 2016 after attending an entrepreneurship course that inspired her to turn her passion for baking into a livelihood. As for Huda, she was married, had three school-aged children, lived in a *sha’by*-middle-income neighbourhood, and held a commerce diploma (similar to Roaaya). Huda had to resist barriers to education in the context of family norms in Upper Egypt. Her previous work experience included several jobs, including a sales agent role at a corporation and at a clothing shop, as well as opening a street food truck with her husband. Most recently, Huda completed a life coaching certificate and a leadership development diploma (subsidized by the Ministry of Social Affairs), which encouraged her to launch her online food vending project, *Cookery*, in 2019. Despite differences in socioeconomic and educational backgrounds and lived experiences, Hala and Huda both spoke to how elder women in their families influenced and motivated their work practices, and to how their passion for cooking emerged from a young age. Both accounts demonstrate how intergenerational teaching functions as a form of socially reproductive labour that generates not only technique but also meaning and motivation, which later become resources mobilized for income generation.

In contrast to Hala and Huda’s experiences, where they learned to cook out of interest, there was Reda, who had to learn to cook at a young age to support her mother and siblings. Reda was 44 years old, widowed, had three children (all over 18), lived in a *sha’by* neighbourhood on the outskirts of Cairo, and completed her education through middle school. Reda was one of the three women who also provided cooking services from other people’s households and began selling home-made food in 2010 without a specific brand name for her project. When the interview started, right away, Reda shared,

“I was 14 years old, and my mum worked in a private school. I was the oldest of my siblings, and my dad had passed away as well. We were five kids, so I used to help my mum and family out all the time. Some teachers would ask her to make

them food, so I was the one who would buy groceries and help her prepare, clean, and cook, and then she would take it to them. She would make *mahshy* (stuffed vine leaves) and other food and sell it to them. This was my mum's work, but I used to help her out.”

Reda's narrative shows how intergenerational transmission can be driven by necessity, where learning to cook is inseparable from the labour of sustaining the household materially and emotionally, and, over time, becomes the foundation on which income generation becomes possible.

The role of mothers in teaching and guiding was central to the transmission of socially reproductive knowledge across generations. This was the case across socioeconomic backgrounds; for instance, Samar was 42 years old, divorced, had two school-aged children, lived in an upper-middle-income neighbourhood, and had a bachelor's degree in literature. She used to work as a real estate agent for a corporation, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic, she was let go. She decided to launch '*Aklit Samar*' (Samar's Food) at the end of 2020 after her friends encouraged her to monetize her cooking skills. When I asked her where she learned to cook, she shared, “I learnt how to cook after I got married. Back when I lived at home, I would observe my mum and learn from her. First year of marriage, of course, you are always on the phone with your mum asking her for advice and instructions.” Samar's narrative reflects the central role of mothers in providing ongoing support and guidance, especially when implementing and practicing cooking skills in a new household and family dynamic. It is important to note that intergenerational knowledge around domestic skills is gendered, as it is primarily upheld and transferred through women in the family. Across class and educational backgrounds, women repeatedly framed mothers as the primary source of learning and ongoing guidance, especially as marriage shifted cooking from observation into daily responsibility.

Marriage for Samar was a turning point, especially as it shifted cooking from observation to a daily responsibility. This was the case for many of the women I interviewed, across their different socio-economic backgrounds, whereby getting married presented opportunities for them to uphold and transfer their socially reproductive knowledge from one household to another. For example, one of these women was Rabab, who was 33 years old, married, had two children (one in school and the other in daycare), lived in a middle-income neighbourhood, and had a bachelor's degree in art education. Rabab was one of five women who worked another job along with their home-based food project. She is a graphic designer and continues to work in that field, but her

passion for cooking and desire to launch her own business led her to start ‘*Halet-halik*’ (Solved it for You) in 2018. I asked Rabab where she learned how to cook, and she shared,

“Mama, of course! I want to tell you that before I got married, my mum used to make me cook on Fridays and Saturdays. But that’s why I didn’t face any problems with cooking when I got married; in fact, my husband, his family, and his friends were amazed. They would tell him, “Let your wife make us food,” or bring us food when you visit (laughing). I love to cook anyway; I love it when people ask me to help out and cook for them.”

Rabab’s narrative reflects how her mother’s training enabled a smoother transition into marriage and generated recognition from her husband’s family and social circle.

This was echoed by Sabah, who was 42 years old, married, and had four children (three school-aged and one starting university). Sabah lived in a *sha-by*-middle income neighbourhood and held a bachelor’s degree in business, specializing in management. Before launching her home-based food project ‘*Matbakh Mamty*’ (My Mum’s Kitchen) in 2018, Sabah took English and German language courses and worked as an accountant for a clothing factory for ten years. Upon getting married, Sabah decided to stay at home to take care of her children. Still, due to her husband’s illness and the subsequent financial constraints, she found herself seeking informal gigs to bring in extra income for the household. When I asked Sabah where she learned to cook, she responded, “I learned at home, like any middle-class Egyptian home, it’s basic knowledge.” Sabah then added,

“After I got married, my husband, who really loves food, would ask to speak to the chefs at restaurants and get them to tell me how they made certain dishes (laughing). That was before he got sick. If something good comes up on TV or YouTube, I would jot it down on paper... That’s how I started evolving and learning, but the basics were always there.”

Sabah’s narrative framed “the basics” as inherited, while emphasizing how her husband’s tastes and media exposure (TV/YouTube) pushed her learning forward. Cooking was, therefore, a skill valued and embraced by family members and often framed by women, like Sabah and Rabab, as aligning with their own passions and interests. However, even though the women spoke proudly of their cooking skills, it is important to note that socially reproductive knowledge often reinforced the gendered social norms and expectations that women would be responsible for domestic household duties, including feeding their husbands and children upon marriage.⁸

⁸ I return to how women negotiate these responsibilities in Chapter Six.

In contrast to narratives of intergenerational family teachings, five women shared that they lacked practical cooking experience and had to find ways to enhance their basic knowledge, especially when they got married. It is interesting to note that three of these women came from *sha'by* backgrounds, and two from *sha'by* middle-class backgrounds, groups that are generally assumed to be especially committed to upholding and reinforcing gendered social norms. One example is Hanady, who was 47 years old, widowed, had three sons (one school-aged and two in their early 20s), lived in a *sha'by* neighbourhood in Greater Cairo (Giza), and held a commerce diploma. Hanady did not have work experience before launching her home-based food project '*Ghadakom A'andina*' (Your lunch is on Us) in 2017. Hanady is one of the women who worked from an informal rented kitchen in the same building as her home and had an official partnership with one of her sons (he was responsible for marketing and management, while she was responsible for the cooking). I interviewed Hanady in her home after a long workday in the kitchen, which created space for an intimate conversation and made her feel more comfortable sharing her lived experiences. When I asked her about her cooking knowledge, she shared,

“When I got married, I learned how to cook; until then, my mother wouldn't make us go into the kitchen, no way, we were only responsible for cleaning the house. The kitchen was her space. So, when I got married, all the food and the pans would get burnt, and I would have to throw things away; it was so frustrating. There was no internet to search and see how to do things. I taught myself, I went through trial and error, adding things and seeing if they would taste good. I would ask about everything, I knew nothing, I was lost, I would ask my neighbours, my sister and mum.”

Hanady's narrative reveals tensions among women in the household over social reproductive roles. In her account, the kitchen symbolized both authority and care, a space where her mother's dominance was unquestioned. Hanady could not challenge this control while living with her mother, yet when she got married and had to cook for her own family, she depended on her mother's advice and guidance. The same space that was once restricted to her became the source of her learning and growth. Through trial and error, frequent calls to her mother, and advice from neighbours and her sister, Hanady cultivated her own skills and confidence. The kitchen reflects a complex dynamic, functioning as both a site of generational hierarchy and a medium for sustaining relational ties and knowledge.

In other instances, intergenerational teachings were being transferred by women from different families and households, such as mothers-in-law. This was a sentiment shared by one of

the workers, Rasha, who was 35 years old, married, had one son (in daycare), lived in a *sha'by*-middle-income neighbourhood in Greater Cairo, and held a bachelor's degree in computer science. Rasha had previously worked full-time in a corporation before deciding to launch her home-based food project '*Home-made Food Mohandiseen*⁹' in 2017. In the interview, Rasha mentioned how supportive her mother-in-law was from the beginning of the project, and when I asked her if she was the one who taught her how to cook, she shared,

“I already cooked at my mum's place from a young age, I did everything. But my mother-in-law encouraged me to get more creative and innovative with food, adding extra ingredients and using different spices that really take the dish to a whole new level. For example, with *mahshy* (stuffed vegetables), everyone uses the same mix at my mum's place. But with my mother-in-law, each type has its own mix; for example, you add mint or pomegranate molasses. When you eat it, you feel that it's unique.”

Rasha's narrative highlights how shifting into new family dynamics and households creates opportunities for learning and gaining access to different intergenerational teachings and practices. This highlights that socially reproductive knowledge is not standardized and differs from household to household.

In some instances, when women integrate into new families or new communities, they become exposed to different teachings. One example is Maryouma (nickname for Maryam), who was 49 years old, married, had four children (all over 21), lived in a *sha'by* neighbourhood in New Cairo, and completed her education up to middle school. Maryouma had previous work experience as a cook in a school before launching her home-based food project '*Matbakh Maryouma*' (Maryouma's Kitchen) in 2019. Alongside the project, she worked as a part-time cook at a nursery school. Maryouma was one of the women who worked in an informal rented kitchen right in front of her home and partnered with her daughter, Nour, who helped her with management and marketing. Maryouma invited me to an interview at her home (which turned out to be Nour's). The entire family welcomed me¹⁰. When I asked Maryouma about her cooking skills, she shared,

“When I got married, I was really young, and I didn't know anything. I lived with my mother-in-law, my sister-in-law, and my brother-in-law, who were younger than I was. Since my mother-in-law used to work, I wanted to learn how to cook. There was a lady from *Mansoura* (a provincial city) who lived close to me. I used to sit next to her and watch her do everything; I learnt everything from her. There

⁹ Mohandiseen is an upper-middle class neighborhood in Cairo, which is the primary customer base and target market for Rasha.

¹⁰ Maryouma was one of the women who I did ethnographic work with following the interviews.

was another lady who worked as a chef at a hotel, and she made an amazing *macarona bachamel* (pasta dish), so I asked her, and she told me she puts extra cream. I made amazing food for my family and neighbours. I made amazing *mombar* (stuffed intestines) and pigeons. I learnt everything. My husband used to work in the post office, and when he had money, I would buy meat and ask my neighbours how to cook it. A word from here and word from there, by the time I moved to this home, I was unreal at cooking!”

Maryouma’s narrative highlights how socially reproductive knowledge was not confined to the nuclear definition of ‘family’ but involved the transfer of intergenerational teachings across diverse social ties and networks within and outside the household.

These narratives show that intergenerational teachings and practices are deeply embedded in everyday life. Through early passion and inspiration, caregiving responsibilities, marriage and motherhood, and community engagement, women uphold and transmit socially reproductive knowledge within and beyond the household. This knowledge is not static but relational, constantly nurtured and modified as it moves across generations and between households. This section argues that home-based labour is integrated into the gig economy not as a distinct domain but as an extension of intergenerational and household-based social reproduction. The unpaid labour of learning by watching, practising, being corrected, feeding others, and sustaining relationships through food becomes inseparable from the paid labour of producing and selling meals. As a result, binaries of paid and unpaid work are blurred, because the household is not outside the economy; it is the site where economically valuable capacities are produced and sustained. The following section explores how women adapt and transform this knowledge to increase the economic value of their skills.

4.2 Adapting and Transforming Cooking Knowledge and Skills

This section focuses on how women enhance, adapt, and professionalize socially reproductive knowledges and skills through courses and experiential learning. In this context, I define experiential learning as exploring and adapting socially reproductive knowledge by trying out new recipes, adding or changing ingredients to conventional meals, or even creating unique signature dishes. Women participated in experiential learning through various strategies. This included watching cooking videos on television and platforms like YouTube and Instagram, as well as browsing recipes on their smartphones. Patterns of learning were shaped by age and class: younger, higher-income women more often pursued paid courses, while older, lower-income

women emphasized experimentation and learning through more affordable mediums. Through these practices, women expanded what could be produced and sold from home, transforming inherited domestic skills into a broader repertoire of marketable expertise.

4.2.1 Courses and Professionalization

Seven of the women I interviewed pursued and accessed professional culinary or business courses¹¹. They were all younger (below 45) and predominantly had an upper-middle- or middle-income background (two had a *sha'by* middle-income background). Among these women, three specialized in selling baked goods and cakes (which required skills different from cooking daily dishes), so they took specialized courses. One of these women was Radwa, who was 38 years old, married, had three school-aged children, lived in a middle-income neighbourhood in New Cairo and held a bachelor's degree in Islamic studies. She initially worked as a teacher before deciding to stay home with her children because she found it challenging to manage her time between a full-time job and household responsibilities. In 2014, Radwa launched her home-based food project 'Fun Dough' after attending a cake decorating course and being inspired to turn these skills into an income-generating activity. She shared,

“I have always been interested in decorating and cooking. I met this friend of mine, who told me she decorated cupcakes and offered to take me to a course to learn how to do it. I didn't know that this course was for people who wanted to do this type of work. I went there to learn. I really liked it, and after you finish the course, they add you to a group where they start announcing the other courses available. The one after that was a wedding cake course, and when I saw that, I got so curious and really wanted to join. My husband kept telling me it's unnecessary and expensive. I thought about it for a really long time, and then I told him I could use this knowledge at work. People take these courses and then start their own businesses. He told me no one will buy from you, you are at home, but I told him I won't lose anything if I try. I took a three-day course, so not that long, but I learnt so much, lots of basics about cakes, and then I launched my project after that.”

Radwa's narrative reflects how her personal interest motivated her to take a professional course, which eventually gave her the confidence, skills and motivation to launch her food project. It also reveals some of the tensions around the material cost of taking courses and the perceived value or return on investment by others. Her friend supported her in pursuing the courses, while her husband

¹¹ These are in-person accredited courses that have a curriculum and provide a certificate upon completion, which is different than other non-accredited online courses that some participants pursued for learning and exploration.

was more hesitant; for Radwa, this encouraged her to pursue the learning experience and financially benefit from it.

The other five women pursued courses to explore skills and techniques that may not have been part of their intergenerational teachings. For example, Omniya was 35 years old, married, had two children (one in school and one in daycare), and was pregnant with her third child at the time of the interview. Omniya lived in a middle-income neighbourhood and held a bachelor's degree in law. Before launching her home-based food project, 'Mika's Kitchen', in 2017, she worked at a telecommunications corporation, where many of her colleagues, in fact, encouraged her to launch it.¹² When I asked Omniya where she learned cooking, she laughed and shared,

"I didn't know how to cook anything at all. But my mum had an accident, and she was in a cast for seven months, so there was no other option than actually to go into the kitchen. My brother and dad were there, and my mum couldn't move, so I had to figure things out. It was Eid Al Adha, and for the first time, I saw the meat being cut and the different parts. I would step outside the kitchen and ask my mum what to do. This was the beginning. And then I started watching the *Fatafeet* channel on TV, with people cooking. I felt like this wasn't enough. About three years ago, cooking schools started offering more courses, so I started thinking I should approach things more professionally. There must be specialized techniques beyond home-made food, so I started taking courses. I entered a competition and won third place."

In Omniya's narrative, we witness that professional training does not replace or dismiss family or traditional knowledge. Her account captures how courses become attractive not because domestic skills are absent, but because women perceive professional techniques and business competencies as offering a different form of knowledge, one associated with specialization, competition, and measurable improvement. Later in the interview, Omniya shares, "I decided after one Ramadan season that I needed to look seriously into my profit deficit, so I took a project management course, including how to price and budget items, and things started getting better after that." Women's pursuit of professional courses was therefore not limited to cooking but also included other skills necessary to sustain and manage their work. These non-domestic-based skills, such as accounting or project management mentioned above, were not commonly shared or transferred informally within households, which is why professional courses became complementary to their existing knowledge.

¹² This is a common experience shared by two other women (Rasha and Doaa H) who also worked in corporate settings and were encouraged by their colleagues to launch a home-based food project.

Another woman who pursued professional courses was Abeer, who launched her food project '*Akl beity hilw w madmoon*'¹³ in 2016 (currently called Happiness Kitchen). Abeer was 39 years old, married, and had two school-aged children. She lived in an upper-middle-income neighbourhood in New Cairo and held a bachelor's degree in commerce. Abeer had no prior work experience before this project, as she married at 21 and decided to become a stay-at-home mother. She shared that by the time her children grew up, there were limited employment opportunities for her, especially after the 2011 revolution and subsequent economic instability. When I asked Abeer what type of courses she pursued and why, she responded, "I am now taking courses on the basics of cooking, learning how to make sure I am not ruining food or wasting nutrients. I also like to learn new recipes, even if they don't directly benefit my work. I like to know the names of tools and skills like cutting and chopping." For Abeer, attending professional courses was for her personal and professional development, to expand and deepen her knowledge beyond what she learned at home. She shared,

"My grandmothers, both from my mum and dad's side, were amazing cooks, so I believe that part of it is genetic, and my mum also cooks amazing food. But they are all very conventional; they cook basic things like *macarona bachamel* (pasta) and *mahshy* (rolled vine leaves), and basic dishes. So, when I got married, that's all I knew (laughing). But I had a lot of passion. I liked watching cooking shows on TV; it was the beginning of these shows, with Chef Mona Amer and Osama Sayed. I had a notebook and would write things down and try them out. My husband would try, and my dad would support me all the time; he would tell my mum to make the regular food and to let me make the innovative dishes. I started spending more time in the kitchen, trying out new recipes and experimenting, so I found myself living there. I thought, what is something I love that I can work from home? It's the kitchen! I had the basics, but then I started searching and learning more. There was a channel called *Fatafeet* that I would watch on TV, and I started reading and browsing the internet, so I learnt how to make dishes I didn't know how to make or that aren't really common in our households. But actually, when I started working, I went back to the basics, which is what people wanted, the stuff I knew from my mum."

Abeer's account shows how courses can provide not only technique but also confidence to convert household-based skills into income, particularly in contexts where formal employment feels limited or inaccessible.

However, Abeer's narrative also makes it clear that professionalization extends beyond formal training. Much of her learning occurred through television, internet browsing, and trial and

¹³ Translates to "Home-based food that's tasty and reliable"

error, all of which were forms of household-based experimentation that enabled her to remain at home. Even as she expanded her repertoire through self-directed learning, she found that the market often pulled her back to familiar dishes associated with her upbringing. Her return to “the basics” points to how customer demand shapes what kinds of knowledge become economically valuable, a dynamic I return to later in the chapter when discussing how household labour is redistributed through women’s market relations. Abeer’s narrative offers a bridge to the following subsection, which examines experiential learning as an everyday practice through which women continually adapt, refine, and mobilize socially reproductive knowledges for economic ends.

4.2.2 Experiential Learning

Across the full sample, experimentation was widespread, even when participants did not label it as such. Ten women explicitly described “experiential learning” as essential to developing their skills, indicating that experimentation was not incidental but a necessary practice for improving quality and expanding menus. Even those who emphasized intergenerational knowledge or formal courses nonetheless described, throughout their interviews, how they researched, tested, modified, and refined recipes over time. Across age and class, women stressed that experiential learning was facilitated by the convenience of household-based resources (especially televisions and smartphones), which made experimentation possible without leaving home or paying for additional training.

Both younger women (30–45 years) and older women (45–60 years) were motivated to learn and explore, though the older group tended to experiment independently rather than enroll in courses. One example was Mona, who was 57 years old, married, had four children (all over 21), lived in a *sha’by* neighbourhood, and completed high school. Mona launched her home-based food project, “Mama Mona,” in 2016. Two years later, she rented an informal kitchen near her home and hired staff to support the growing business. I interviewed her in that kitchen and later returned there to conduct ethnographic research. When I asked Mona about her cooking knowledge, she shared,

“I learned from my mum, may she rest in peace, and then after my kids grew up, I had a lot of time on my hands. Before I felt like I was under a lot of pressure, but after they grew up, I had a lot of time to experiment and innovate (laughing)... I always loved the kitchen and loved cooking. I think the first book my dad bought

me was *Abla Nazira*'s cookbook¹⁴. I was eleven years old, and even though the book is torn up now, I fixed the cover and still have it with me, because it's from my dad."

Mona's narrative reflects how her capacity to experiment with cooking increased once she was no longer responsible for childcare or other household duties. It is interesting to note that she separated cooking basic dishes under pressure or out of duty from being more innovative or creative once she had more time to explore and experiment. Her account shows that learning depends not just on motivation or access to resources, but also on time as a socially reproductive resource that women must continually manage. This temporal dimension is central to how gig work is sustained within the household, a theme I return to in Chapters Five and Six, where I analyze hustling, coordination, and household negotiations.

Learning does not end at a specific moment; it continues in many forms and for many purposes. Sometimes these experiments became part of women's work practices and the dishes they prepared for customers. This was the case with one of the women, Zizi (nickname for Zeinab), who was 54 years old, married, had two children (both older than 21 years old), lived in a middle-income neighbourhood, and had a bachelor's degree in French literature (she spoke English and French). Zizi had previous informal work experience sewing clothes and selling them, as well as running a small bookstore. In 2011, during the revolution, her husband lost his job, prompting her to launch "Zizi's Kitchen" to generate extra income for the household. Zizi was one of the women who worked in an informal, rented kitchen near her home and hired staff to help her. Throughout the interview, she shared her passion for cooking from a young age and discussed how she was adamant about continually enhancing that knowledge.

"At the beginning, I learned all the basic homemade dishes and cooked them very well, then I started watching shows on TV and YouTube to learn new dishes like Chinese food. When people order healthy food, I look for healthy recipes and dishes with quinoa or chia seeds. But when I find a recipe, I never take it as is; if there is something I am not feeling, I modify or change it. Two to three years ago, I wanted to study this more formally, so I took online courses. But until this day, I don't mind hearing or watching recipes from someone who sells traditional dishes like *molokheya* and *fatta* (traditional Egyptian food). I also offer other dishes that aren't ours, like Chinese, Indian, and Italian. I had to innovate and introduce additional dishes to the traditional food we have."

¹⁴ *Abla Nazira* is a traditional cookbook published in 1941 and is known within Egyptian society for containing detailed recipes and information on nutritional value of ingredients, as well as cooking techniques and tips.

Zizi's narrative demonstrates how experiential learning is a process of continual expansion from traditional dishes to global cuisines and modifying recipes and courses rather than reproducing food verbatim.

Similar to Zizi, there was Manal, who was 56 years old, married, had two daughters (both older than 21), lived in an upper-middle-income neighbourhood, and held a bachelor's degree in French translation. Manal previously worked in translation at a bank and another company before deciding to stay home to take care of her children. Manal lived in Kuwait for a few years with her family and returned to Egypt in 2013, where she launched '*Fahita Cuisine*'. In the interview, Manal shared,

“As long as you love something, you have to keep learning. For example, I love baking and like learning new things. But I try to focus on things that I will benefit from in my work. Now courses are so expensive, so since everything is available online, I try to learn and experiment at home. In the past, I used to follow this Chinese chef, and he would use a specific knife to cut. I learnt different skills and how to cut things in different ways. Honestly, I make use of videos and knowledge on the internet that is free.”

Manal's reflections reveal her belief that experiential learning is a valid and legitimate way to develop skills and knowledge. Together, these accounts show experiential learning as a form of everyday professionalization, a process that transforms domestic knowledge into adaptable expertise through free or low-cost avenues.

The TV was mentioned by Roaaya, Sabah, Omniya, Abeer and Zizi as a household object that was not only used for entertainment but as an accessible medium to learn and practice new recipes and techniques from professional chefs without paying (extra) for courses. In addition, smartphones were another daily device used to access platforms such as YouTube and Facebook that featured cooking videos and recipes. These low-cost alternatives to formal training were championed by the women I interviewed, particularly those from *sha'by* and middle-income backgrounds who emphasized saving money and time. In this sense, the “digital” in women's learning often begins not with online platforms themselves, but with everyday household devices that make professional knowledge accessible from within the home.

One worker, who expressed this clearly in her interview, was Omayma, who was 54 years old, married, had one daughter (over 21 years old), lived in a *shabby*-middle-income neighbourhood and completed a commerce diploma. With no prior work experience and motivated by her passion for cooking, Omayma launched her home-based food project “Mimi's Kitchen” in

2015. I interviewed her in her household, where I learned that her cooking skills emerged from a young age and developed through experiential learning. Omayma shared, “I thought a lot about taking courses, but found that they won’t really benefit me. I can watch and look for things on YouTube if I am missing something. Courses just take your money.” Omayma’s reflection provides an example of how digital platforms such as YouTube served as a convenient alternative to paid, professional courses, challenging how knowledge or specialized skills are valued in relation to accessible information.

In some cases, people’s dependence on household media developed as a result of social isolation and limited connections within the community. For instance, Fatma was a 44-year-old married woman with two school-aged children. Originally from Upper Egypt, she lived in a *sha’by* neighbourhood in Greater Cairo with her family. Fatma had a commerce diploma and shared with me that she had prior informal work experience selling homemade detergents and clothing items in the neighbourhood and through social networks before launching ‘Fatma Catering’ in 2019¹⁵. Similar to Roaaya, Fatma found herself a newly married wife wanting to practice, experiment and learn cooking skills for the sake of her family. She shares,

“When I first got married, I didn’t even know how to boil an egg. My husband really struggled with me at the beginning. One time, I fried fish in a pan without flour or oil (laughing), and it got stuck. I don’t even know what happened. It was awful. My husband ate it, but I knew it was messed up. Although my husband really struggled with me, he never said anything that would hurt me. He would tell me, “It’s ok, it’s ok.” I started learning on my own. For me, I really wanted to make good food for *beity* (my home) and my kids. When I got married, I had a miscarriage, and it took two years until I got pregnant again, so I had a lot of free time, and my family wasn’t with me. There was no internet, and I only had the TV. I would wait for Chef Mohamad Fawzy, specifically. I learned so much from him, and I practiced all his recipes. I loved it. At first, I wasn’t really interested in cooking... In the past, I would tell my family no way, I don’t want to be in the kitchen or cook, but I changed after marriage. I now want to do so much for *beity* (my home) and my kids. When I see young women now who don’t want to cook, I say, let them be. When they get married, they will want to learn to cook and make the best food. I watched lots of TV cooking shows until I became Chef Fatma.”

As Fatma’s narrative reveals, what was originally a quest to independently learn cooking skills to fulfill household duties or family obligations eventually became a foundation for continuous

¹⁵ Fatma was one of the women I conducted ethnographic research with by spending a full working day in her home.

experimentation and practice that increased her confidence and ability to launch and grow a home-based food project.

Younger women also described experimentation as a persistent practice shaped by resource constraints. For example, Doaa H was a 40-year-old woman who was engaged, lived in a middle-income neighbourhood with her family, and held a bachelor's degree in art education. Doaa H previously worked in a corporate job before losing her job due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Around the same time, her colleagues at work encouraged her to start a home-based food project, and she launched her page, "Wow Food," in 2020. Doaa H had a passion for cooking, and when I asked her about it, she shared,

"I love watching cooking videos, not just Egyptian ones, but on YouTube, and I love to experiment and try. I have so many cooking books, all in English. I take recipes from them and try them. If I taste something at someone's place and I like it, I take the recipe and try it. Even if it doesn't turn out well on the first try, I keep trying until it does. I love cooking (laughing)."

Her narrative emphasized repetition and continuous trial, failure, and insistence, with the help of various learning resources.

Similarly, Yasmeen was one of the youngest women I interviewed (30 years old) and lived in a *sha'by* neighbourhood with her husband. Yasmeen was pregnant at the time of the interview and had decided to stay at home until she gave birth. She completed her primary education and had prior experience in home cleaning and cooking. Yasmeen was one of the women who cooked for her employer's household, not just her own, sharing that she used to offer cleaning services and that she enhanced her cooking skills while working there. Yasmeen began selling her own homemade food in 2012, but similar to Reda, she did not have a brand name. Yasmeen was hesitant to launch her own home-based project but was still determined to learn and enhance her skills using the resources and opportunities available to her. She shared, "I often find recipes on Facebook or YouTube and try to recreate them. Sometimes I can't afford to buy some of the expensive ingredients, so I buy cheaper alternatives, and I manage to make it work." In that sense, experiential learning also involved adapting knowledge according to material limitations or barriers by being creative and resourceful with the ingredients and resources used.

Another example was Doaa (35 years old), who used her mobile phone as an accessible, affordable device for experiential learning. Doaa was married, had two children (school age), lived in a *sha'by*-middle income neighbourhood, and completed a computer graphics college degree.

Before launching her food project (without a brand name) in 2017, Doaa worked as administrative support at a dentist's office. She initially partnered with her neighbour, and together they developed a menu, created a Facebook page and began promoting it to their social circle. Still, eventually she continued the project on her own. When I asked Doaa about her cooking skills, she shared, "My mum taught me, but now she would call and ask me for recipes. Sometimes I add or modify recipes from YouTube or TV, and I have to add my own touch." Doaa creatively adapted online recipes by merging her existing socially reproductive knowledge with her own experimentation. These accounts show experiential learning as a form of adaptive expertise since women do not simply reproduce recipes; they transform them through substitution, iteration, and personalization within constrained household conditions.

Socially reproductive knowledge is therefore dynamic and open to transformation, continually reshaped through practice, exploration, and the gradual integration of new skills. In this section, women's accounts show how ongoing learning transforms domestic know-how into economically viable expertise, expanding what can be sold from home. Here, 'stretching' social reproduction is visible as women extend household-based learning strategies (watching TV shows, browsing online videos, seeking informal advice) into marketable expertise without leaving domestic space. In turn, the boundaries between unpaid and paid work are blurred, because the labour of learning and refining skills inside the household becomes part of the conditions through which market activity and income are generated. The following section analyzes how, upon learning and adapting socially reproductive knowledges, women collectively share and sustain them beyond the household.

4.3 Reciprocal Knowledge Sharing, Community Building and Professional Development

This section focuses on how socially reproductive knowledge is collectively maintained, shared, and enriched within social networks that women draw upon for their economic activities. The narratives of women gig workers reveal that gaining and sharing knowledge is not a linear movement from "novice" to "expert," but an ongoing, reciprocal practice that involves sharing advice, exchanging recipes, supporting one another and building communities of practice. They believed that the knowledge passed on to them was meant to be shared, and they felt a duty to mentor and teach both their family members and interested customers. These reciprocal practices help integrate women's work from within the household through building communities of practice that blur the line between domestic relationality and market activity.

Women often described sharing knowledge as a form of community building rather than competition. For instance, one of the older women, Omayma (54 years, *sha'by*-middle income), found purpose and community by mentoring others in online groups. She shared, “The group is comfortable, it’s like my home, and I feel like everyone in it has a relationship with me, not only a professional relationship, but also a personal relationship. Whoever wants a recipe, I share it with them.” Omayma launched the home-based food project after her mother passed away, and her daughter got married and had her own child. The group represented to Omayma a space where she can share her socially reproductive knowledge with a broader network, while connecting and building a sense of community.

Posting content online extended beyond showcasing cooking and became an avenue for women gig workers to share personal stories and wisdom. Whether they offered cooking tips and tricks, cost- and time-saving hacks, or relationship and family advice, they wove everyday personal and communal issues and struggles into their narratives. For example, Rasha (35 years, *sha'by*-middle income) shared,

“My YouTube channel is not for advertising or promoting the home-made food, the purpose is to share recipes, that’s it. On YouTube, it’s called “Rasha and her mother-in-law in the kitchen” (giggling). They are simple videos, you know. I filmed and edited them. Do you know that I created a video on YouTube dedicated to those who want to start a home-made food project from home?”

After the interview, Rasha shared the link to the video with me, where she gives an overview of the steps and requirements to launch a home-based project, including tips on budgeting, helpful kitchen tools, how to connect with customers, how to buy affordable packaging materials, and advice on marketing and promoting the food. In that sense, Rasha, like Omayma, did not view knowledge as a finite source but as one that can transcend the family and benefit a wider community.

Communal knowledge sharing was reciprocal, as women workers not only gave advice and support but also received it. For instance, Radwa (38 years, middle-income), who specialized in cake decoration, shared how she benefited from being a member of a Facebook group,

“When I took the first course, I discovered pages on Facebook run by people who sell cake. They are all cake decorators, people who work like me. I connected with them and set up a Facebook account to observe, see the tools and suppliers, meet people, and learn new things. That was my goal. I started engaging with these pages and found that most of the conversations focused on pricing and new techniques. At some point, they organized in-person meetups.”

Radwa's narrative reflects how the online group gave her access to helpful information and tips on tools, techniques, vendors, and pricing, which directly benefited her work. In addition, she was able to meet people, expand her network, and integrate into a community of practice, where she was no longer isolated in her work but could stay connected to people with similar interests and goals. Reciprocity does not eliminate competition. Instead, it helps women stabilize their livelihoods within competitive informal food markets.

Women's accounts indicate that these exchanges sustain knowledge through reciprocity and use the communicative features of platforms and apps to create networking spaces that enhance online visibility, collaboration, and professional opportunities. For some women, community groups served as avenues to formalize and expand their projects. For instance, one worker, Doaa E, traced her catering work back to managing a neighbourhood Facebook group during COVID-19, where residents organized meals and mutual aid. Doaa E was 37 years old, single, lived in an upper-middle-income neighbourhood in New Cairo. She holds a bachelor's degree in commerce and has prior formal work experience in the corporate sector. Doaa E continued to work part-time as a human resources contractor while running her home-based food project "Food Stories Catering", which she launched in 2020. When we met, she explained to me that the inspiration for her project began with a Facebook community group she was managing during the COVID pandemic.

"During COVID, everyone had to sit at home and do nothing, so I was browsing online and found a post in our neighbourhood group on Facebook about someone planning to prepare meals for people who have COVID. I thought I could participate by volunteering to deliver food to people's homes. We took our precautions and sanitized everything, and in any case, there was no contact. After three days, I ended up running the group; I don't know how, but I started leading and managing everything. The group got bigger, and there were administrators, and so many people who wanted to donate and participate, so there had to be someone to organize all of this."

Doaa E explained that, after the pandemic, she was inspired to recreate an online catering group and deliver food for profit. She later rented a kitchen near her home and hired staff to help her cook and deliver the meals. Communal knowledge sharing, therefore, involved not only giving and receiving advice and tips on cooking skills and techniques but also supporting the growth of the food project and facilitating access to new professional networks and work opportunities.

Online networking also offered forms of professional recognition and connection that mattered even when financial gains remained limited. For example, Fatma (44 years, *sha'by* income) shared,

“People know me now, I have more followers and am meeting chefs and attending events. I get contacted by people and invited to attend events; this makes me so happy, more than 100 projects. My project has grown not necessarily in terms of money and profits, but in terms of networks and knowing professional chefs. Sometimes I cannot attend events because I don't have time, I have orders and customers I have to make food for. There is a lot that happens in this field. Many experienced chefs offer courses for a fee, and then I discover they're not that helpful. You can also now pay to be featured on TV for an hour, but why would I? I am working from home and profiting, even if it is not a lot; I am content with it. I have a YouTube channel and plan to grow it and pursue ads. I am taking a marketing and promotion course. My Facebook page was automatically connected to my Instagram, and at first, I wanted to cancel it, but I started getting orders through it; it's like somehow everything works out in the end.”

Fatma's narrative reveals the tensions and pressures of balancing time and effort among work, networking, and family duties. Like many other women, her experience highlights the diversity of digital platforms and their features, which are used to share knowledge, access opportunities and networks, connect with customers, and promote products and services.

Interestingly, the strategies that women used for experiential learning, such as watching cooking shows on TV or recipes on YouTube were also used to showcase their own work. For example, Huda (33 years, *sha'by*-middle income) shared, “The TV episode I featured in was good for me; more people got to know me and tried my food. There was also a magazine that posted two of my recipes. I also met people and networked with them online. Platforms helped me promote my work and learn about other cuisines.” Similarly, Abeer (39 years, upper-middle income) had two Instagram pages: one focused on promoting the food she sold, and the other on posting recipes and cooking videos. When I asked her about these videos, she shared, “I go back to these videos a lot. Sometimes I don't remember my own recipes, so I rewatch them. I post on both Instagram and YouTube, but I prefer Instagram more.” Instagram served as a platform for women to share communal knowledge through interactive content, including live videos and reels that showed them preparing or cooking meals.

Therefore, various social media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, offered distinct features and were not used by women in a standardized way. For instance, Rabab (33 years, middle-income) explained,

“Since I started using Instagram, it feels like people are engaging more with me. On Facebook, you could make a post and sit and wait next to it for one or two people to like it, wondering if anyone saw it. But Instagram is totally different, it’s another world, there are bloggers, there is more engagement, it has soul. I got exposed to so many people and I receive most of my customers’ orders from there.”

Rabab’s comparison of Facebook and Instagram highlights how platform affordances shape connection. On Instagram, interactive features make engagement feel more immediate and relational, supporting both community-building and customer acquisition. Women’s accounts further show that this “digital world” is largely created and sustained by women (both cooks and customers) through circuits of trust, recognition, and care that link households to broader economic networks. These interactions highlight how socially reproductive relationalities such as mentorship, emotional support, reciprocity, and accountability are being extended into the digital domain. While these communities of practice help explain how women integrate into gig work, they also foreshadow Chapter Six’s argument that participation is sustained through relational agency and recognition, especially under conditions of devaluation and isolation.

Women across class and age described platforms as spaces for reciprocal exchange and community building, where socially reproductive knowledge circulates beyond the household through networks of mentoring, feedback, and shared resources. These social networks do not remain “outside” the market; they become bridges through which women build reputations, gain visibility, and cultivate trust, shaping how customers discover, select, and remain loyal to them over time. In turn, the boundary between paid and unpaid work is blurred, as the unpaid labour of mentoring, advising, coordinating, and maintaining community ties becomes part of the conditions under which women’s paid economic activity is produced and sustained. The following section examines how women extend household-based practices of care and accountability into income-generating activities, thereby translating communal and socially reproductive relationships into customer engagement and market relations.

4.4 Relational Integration: Extending Socially Reproductive Relationalities into Market Exchange

This section examines the next layer of integration, where socially reproductive relationalities become the foundation of market-making (trust, discretion, obligation, coordination) and how platforms are used to extend them beyond the household. In practice, women used

platforms for three intertwined purposes: (1) customer entry and communication (receiving orders, responding to inquiries, confirming menus and quantities through WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and phone calls), (2) transaction coordination (agreeing on prices, negotiating payment (most commonly cash-on-delivery or pickup) and in some cases mobile transfers depending on customer preference and trust), and (3) circulation and delivery logistics (arranging pickup, coordinating drop-offs through family members or informal delivery services, sharing locations, and managing timing). These digital practices mattered not simply as “technology use,” but because they enabled women to stretch household-based routines into gig work by mediating trust, timing, and relational obligation across the boundary between home and market.

4.4.1 Relational Entry Points to Customers

This subsection highlights early customer acquisition strategies, showing how women initially connect with potential customers through their relationships and networks. These strategies include direct in-person outreach, expanding social circles, leveraging school and community ties, and forming collaborative partnerships. Eight of the 25 women launched their projects through direct, face-to-face interactions, often relying on word-of-mouth promotion within their social circles. Seven of these eight women came from *sha’by* backgrounds, where dense neighbourhood ties and everyday social encounters were central to building trust and reputation. Four other women launched their projects through direct digital interactions, primarily via instant messaging applications and private Facebook or WhatsApp groups. This group included two upper-middle-class and two *sha’by*-middle-class women, all of whom were approached and recruited online by elite customers. The remaining thirteen women launched their projects by creating Facebook pages, groups, or Instagram accounts, often with the encouragement and technical support of family or community members. These different entry points mattered because they shaped not only who women could reach, but also the terms of trust, engagement, and risk through which early transactions were negotiated.

Regarding direct in-person interactions, it was predominantly *sha’by* women who relied on this approach. For instance, Hanady (47 years old, *sha’by* income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared how the inspiration for her project came to her before she started her Facebook page.

“I started by creating a menu, a handwritten one, and photocopied it, of course, back then I didn’t really know much, and Facebook pages were not as common

and famous as they are now. I went to government offices and union offices in the neighbourhood here. I prepped small packages of food items in a big bag, carried it, and went over to women working in government offices to give them a package and the menu. Thank God, a lot of the people who tried the food would love it and call me. They would also tell their relatives and social circle, so I found opportunities really opening up for me. Bit by bit, I started going to private schools and selling to teachers.”

In *sha’by* neighbourhoods, these forms of outreach were rooted in dense, trust-based social networks where everyday interactions, reputation, and word of mouth shaped women’s economic participation.

Similar to Hanady was Naglaa, who was 39 years old, married, had four children (school-aged), lived in a *sha’by* neighbourhood and held a bachelor’s degree in psychology. Naglaa has worked since she was in elementary school, supporting her mother by providing cleaning and cooking services. In 2016, she launched her home-based food project in partnership with her sisters-in-law. Like Yasmeen and Reda, she had no brand and sometimes cooked at her employer’s home (where she also offered home cleaning services). Naglaa¹⁶ shared, “[I received orders] at first through social circles until I became known to people and they tried and liked my food.” Usually, these personal connections would then share and promote the workers’ contact information across their own networks, allowing women gig workers to expand beyond their immediate social circles. Both Hanady and Naglaa’s accounts show integration as a gradual process in which domestic skills are first converted into paid work through neighbourhood trust, and only later through online visibility as platforms become more common.

Elite women often approached women gig workers from *sha’by*-middle backgrounds to buy specific dishes from them and then resell these dishes within their own social networks. For example, although Doaa (35 years old) mainly used WhatsApp and private groups to market and sell her food orders, she also collaborated with other food vendors to increase her income and reach customers she would otherwise not be able to reach. Doaa explained, “I cook food for someone who has a large-scale food project. They either need someone to help them out with some food items, or they don’t have time or the ability to sit and make some of the food.” These relationalities created opportunities for women workers to gain extra income and expand into other networks they would not otherwise reach.

¹⁶ Naglaa was one of the women I conducted ethnographic research at her employer’s home.

Despite these digitally mediated work arrangements being useful for some *sha'by* women to access new markets or expand their network, there were instances where they became exploitative. For example, Reda (44 years) shared, “Someone started supporting me, this woman I was working for, but she ended up marketing the food in her own network. She has this project open on the backs of women like me. It’s her tools, and her home, but women like me are the ones who cook.” Reda’s narrative underscores how the physical and emotional burden of social reproductive labour can be transferred across class lines. What began as a collaboration evolved into dependency and exploitation, where upper and middle-class women outsourced time-intensive domestic and cooking tasks to working-class women while retaining the profits and fame of the enterprise. The material and bodily effort required to prepare food was thus reallocated downward, devalued, and underpaid.

Similar to Reda, Sabah (42 years, *sha'by*-middle income) was recruited by someone in a community Facebook group to prepare and sell her dishes, which took a long time to make. “There was a lady who contacted me and wanted me to make *mahshy*. She found me through an online group, and since I had recently moved to that neighbourhood, I didn’t really know many people. My social circle isn’t that big; I don’t really have a lot of friends.” Sabah’s narrative reveals how moving to a new neighbourhood with limited social connections left her in a vulnerable position. She later explained how the woman underpaid her and exploited her time and effort.

“She wanted to use me in any way possible, honestly. I started making baked goods, cheese, and pickled vegetables. Let’s say it costs me 50 pounds, and I sell it for 60 pounds, she gives me 40 pounds for it. She would give me only the cost of the ingredients. I had to say yes because my husband got very sick and we had no income at all, so I needed any money to be coming in. She would take a large quantity from me, like 10kg and tell me that half of it got destroyed.”

In contrast to this stressful and exploitative relationship, Sabah connected with other women in the community who offered her support and guidance. She further reflected,

“After a while, I met a lady who told me to stop working with the exploitative woman, she told me to do an Ad on Facebook groups. I had no idea that I could do this. I asked her how to get started, because I had recently moved to the area and didn’t really know much about the neighbourhood. This lady helped me a lot. She told me about the major Facebook groups, and she would mention me, so I started making ads on the page and thank God, I started getting orders.”

These experiences demonstrate power hierarchies that have long existed in Egypt’s modern state, with women across classes, and many elite or middle-class women shifting their social

reproductive tasks onto working-class or lower-income women, ultimately reinforcing the burden of unpaid or undervalued labour on them (Salem 2020; Taha and Salem 2019). These collaborations not only reflect the relational, networked nature of women's engagement with platforms, but also reveal the uneven terms on which that engagement is structured. For example, while WhatsApp messaging facilitates mobility and connection, it does not dissolve structural hierarchies. Instead, women's digitally mediated labour remains shaped by longstanding classed dynamics of gendered work, care, and value.

Although interpersonal and community networks carried risks of exploitation for some *sha'by* women, upper-middle-income women experienced these networks as more intimate and safer to use. For them, reaching out to customers within familiar social circles (such as parents' groups or school networks) blurred the boundaries between professional and personal life in ways that felt both familiar and trustworthy. For example, Samar (42 years, upper-middle income) shared,

"I had a friend who was my main support at the beginning; she put me on track. I was wondering where I would find customers and people; my friends told me they would be the first ones, and this is how it all started. Parents from my kids' school, my friends telling their mums or sisters, it's how it started, and still, mainly, that's how it is. Outsiders who became customers are still part of the network since they know people who know people; it is all part of a social circle."

Whether it was material support through investing or purchasing food orders, or emotional validation, women's socially reproductive relationalities with their family, friends, and acquaintances helped them promote their work.

In addition to interpersonal connections, women also found community groups helpful. One example was Nuha, who was 47 years old, married, had two school-aged children, lived in an upper-middle-income neighbourhood, and held a bachelor's degree in engineering (specializing in architecture). Nuha previously worked in a corporate full-time job before deciding to be a stay-at-home mother. After being encouraged by her friends and community from her kids' school, she launched her home-based food project 'Sugarette' in 2017 (specializing in cake decoration), which enabled her to combine her architecture knowledge, creativity and baking skills. Nuha shared,

"My orders come mostly through WhatsApp. At the end of the day, I become known when someone sees my work at a birthday party. The Instagram page is more of an album for me. You will even notice I don't have many followers, but they are all true followers. Sometimes I get Instagram orders, but word of mouth is more common. Usually, someone who attended or heard about my work

contacts me. Also, what helped was that here in New Giza, the community knows me now, and all the parents know me. There are groups here in New Giza that post pictures of my work and thank me, so people start reaching out. Even though I don't really know my neighbours, I got to know them through my work. So now I have become known to new people moving here."

Within gated communities like New Giza, word of mouth and personal connections were deeply rooted in physical proximity and community trust. Over time, platform features like WhatsApp messaging extended these dynamics into the digital space, letting women interact in ways that felt private, personal, and relational rather than commercial. For many women, the digital interface reproduced the warmth and familiarity of neighbourhood exchanges, where orders were not simply transactions but moments of conversation, recognition, and care.

Taken together, these cases show that home-based labour integrates into digitally mediated gig work through existing relations that initially provide routes to customers and then scale through digital practices on social media and messaging platforms. Rather than separating "home" and "market," this process stretches socially reproductive relationalities into customer exchanges, blurring the boundaries between unpaid relational labour (trust-building, care, reputation, boundary-work) and paid economic activity. The following subsection demonstrates how platforms enable women to sustain and deepen customer relationships, preserving the personal, care-based nature of their work while simultaneously extending beyond their immediate social circles.

4.4.2 Digital Extensions of Interpersonal Networks

Over time, women who once relied exclusively on in-person promotion gradually integrated digital platforms into their daily work. Neighbourhood-based exchanges expanded into WhatsApp messaging and Facebook and Instagram posts, where social trust and personal connection were rearticulated in digital form. Rather than replacing interpersonal contact, these platforms extended it, enabling women to maintain the sense of familiarity and care that had long characterized their offline interactions.

Women gig workers used platforms not simply as transactional channels but as a medium to foster trust, nurture personal connections, and expand their customer networks, especially since all the interactions were primarily virtual. In many cases, customers would recommend women gig workers' services to their own social networks, invite them to join closed neighbourhood online groups, or ask them to participate in local bazaars and events. For example, Roaaya (42 years,

sha'by income) was added to online groups of gated communities, where most residents come from affluent backgrounds, she shared, “My name and number got shared in the compound WhatsApp group, people were saying that I am the best chef. They would call me up and tell me they got my number through the group and that I am so famous and people speak so well of me.” These interactions reflect how trust-based networks enable women gig workers to navigate social hierarchies and access new opportunities.

While online groups offered a sense of intimacy and control, they remained confined mainly to familiar networks. To expand beyond these circles, many women began experimenting with more public-facing spaces, such as posting on Facebook pages and in public online groups. These digital practices provided greater visibility but also required new strategies for managing privacy, identity, and presentation. For example, Doaa H (40 years, middle-income, previously had a corporate job), described her careful navigation between privacy and promotion,

“I wasn’t advertising my personal identity on the Facebook page. I sent my page to my cousins, and they were the ones who shared it and increased the followers. After food orders started picking up, I began thinking about delivery and how the work would be divided and managed. All this was happening while I was still looking for a job. I started doing Ads on Facebook and started appearing personally and sending the page link to my friends and posting on public groups.”

As Doaa H.’s account suggests, women often gradually expand their online presence, initially relying on relatives to share content before appearing personally. In my interviews, many women described deliberately avoiding personal appearance and instead posting photos of their food or customer feedback. This mode of curation reflects gendered concerns with modesty and reputational safety, as public visibility as home-based workers requires an ongoing negotiation between exposure and discretion.

On the customer side, visibility was also negotiated, as many did not want to disclose to their own networks that they were buying food from someone else. For example, Abeer (39 years, upper-middle income) shared,

“There is one thing that I sometimes struggle with, when relatives order from me, like one woman and her mother-in-law or one and her sister or friend, they have a problem saying in front of people that they order their food from outside, so they would never leave a public comment online or write a review and take pictures. People send me on WhatsApp but ask me to keep it private. Sometimes my customer would be invited to another customer's home, and they would know I made the food and call to thank me (laughing). People are embarrassed to say they get food from outside; some women don’t even tell their husbands.”

Although Abeer recounted this with humour, her narrative exposes deeper tensions around visibility, gendered respectability, and the moral value attached to home-cooked food. The embarrassment customers felt about disclosing that someone else had prepared their meals reveals how domestic cooking remains tied to women's social identity, moral worth, and care responsibilities.

Women's work, therefore, often involved not only cooking but also exercising discretion by designing services to preserve the customer's perception of home-made food. For instance, Rabab (33 years, middle-income) explained,

“When someone asks me for a specific way to do something, I cater to their needs and take all their input. She is then amazed and tells me it's as if she made this food at home... Someone's mother-in-law might be visiting, so she would call me up and ask me to save her (laughing). I tell her, “OK, I will prepare everything, and I will deliver it in a way that her mother-in-law wouldn't even doubt that someone else made that food.” Some people take the food on my plate and then empty it into their own containers; they do this even with their husbands.”

Rabab's account shows how women's labour can substitute for customers' domestic obligations while preserving the fiction that care is produced “exclusively inside” the household. Therefore, even in digital spaces, women's work practices remain constrained by social norms that equate good motherhood and femininity with home production and conceal the outsourcing of care. These contradictions make it difficult for women like Abeer and Rabab to openly promote their work, as online visibility helps them generate income but also risks exposing their customers to social judgment.

Women gig workers' engagement with commercial food platforms reflects how they negotiate the commercialization of home-based food work. Some women who worked from informal rented kitchens near their homes sought to expand their online presence by hiring marketing consultants or listing their products on food delivery applications such as *Talabat* or *Mumm*. While these platforms offered exposure and access to new markets, women remained cautious about preserving the intimacy and authenticity of home-based cooking. For example, Zizi (54 years old, middle-income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared, “If you read the comments I get on *Talabat*, you will think someone is talking to his mum. They write things like ‘please add lemon and no black pepper, and please bring the soup really hot because I am sick.’” Zizi's reflection captures how digital platforms mediate, rather than erase, the affective and

relational aspects of women's work. The review and comment features became spaces where customers could make care requests.

The act of ordering homemade food often carries the intimacy of familial care, almost as if customers are calling upon their mothers for nourishment and comfort. Another worker who utilized formal food delivery applications, Mona (57 years, *sha'by* income), emphasized the continuity of personal relationships with her customers, "There are people who have been ordering from me regularly since the beginning. If they don't order when they usually do, I call and check on them. Maybe they are travelling or something, but they are happy when I ask about them." Personalized communication strategies provided customers with a non-commercial, genuine experience while allowing women to feature and promote their work professionally. This is also an image deliberately cultivated and socially constructed by the women gig workers, who mirrored their roles in providing, nurturing, and meeting their families' basic needs through the way they prepared, cooked, and served food to their customers.

These accounts demonstrate that platforms do more than mediate women's work. They also reproduce familiar social norms of care and respectability in customer exchanges and carry these norms into new contexts. Through their customer engagement, women 'stretch' social reproduction into the digital domain, ultimately blurring the boundaries between personal relationships and commercial transactions.

4.4.3 Household Routines as a Customer Strategy

Amid growing publicity, women remained invested in cultivating customer relationships through everyday practices that mirrored household coordination. This included planning menus around available ingredients, responding to special requests, maintaining regular communication, and seeking feedback. Rather than treating orders as one-off transactions, many women fostered loyalty by offering the kind of flexibility and attentiveness that distinguish home cooking from restaurants or catering companies. It also involved coordinating payments and delivery in ways that accommodated their customers and preserved the relational aspect of these economic transactions.

Although menus were posted online, women were open to customizing orders. Not only did this approach increase customers' trust, but it also gave the women gig workers greater freedom to experiment and diversify the dishes they made. One worker, Roaaya (42 years, *sha'by* income), proudly explained that one of her customers, who follows a strict diet, relies entirely on her to

prepare meals for the entire month. Roaaya was extremely passionate about providing her customers with unique tastes and special recipes. She shared, “There was a customer of mine who got diet food from me and was shocked that healthy food could taste so good!” By customizing meals and forging intimate connections with customers, women redefined their roles as both caregivers and entrepreneurs, leveraging their socially reproductive relationalities to create economic opportunities.

Women also used these platforms to routinize demand. One common strategy was to send daily, personalized messages and special offers to specific customer groups. For example, Doaa E (37 years, upper-middle income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared, “There are people who order in advance, but 90 per cent of people wait for the ‘*available today*’ message. Most people don’t really plan, so I send a message early in the morning when people are heading to work and another reminder around 12 pm. People ultimately end up ordering at that time.” These practices reflect how women’s digital engagement with customers mirrors the attentiveness, consistency, and emotional responsiveness often associated with mothering and care work. Their ability to anticipate customers’ needs, adjust to their schedules, and maintain daily communication reproduces the affective dimensions of social reproductive labour. Much like household cooking, the food prepared reflects not only preferences but also women’s ongoing adaptation and improvisation with the ingredients available. For example, Samar (42 years, upper-middle income) shared,

“I have a set menu for example, if someone is going to order something from this menu, of course I send this menu to everyone I have.... but every morning around 8 or 9 am I send an ‘*available today*’ message, which is food I have for the day, I use whatever ingredients I have at home and see what dishes I can make for the day. Let’s say I have minced meat, pasta, and vegetables, then I post and tell them I am making dishes that have those ingredients.”

Samar’s account highlights how this work depends on women’s ability to carefully and flexibly manage time, resources, and relationships.

Many women gig workers felt a strong sense of accountability and responsibility toward their regular customers, who often depended on them and ordered frequently. During the COVID-19 pandemic, women gig workers continued to receive food requests from their regular customers, which they saw as a sign of trust and confidence in the quality of their work and their personal cleanliness and health standards. Abeer (39 years, upper-middle income), for instance, created “COVID Meal Deals” during the pandemic, which her customers described as both humorous and

caring. “I would give them offers for that COVID menu, which was my own way of helping out the sick person. When the sick person healed, they would call me and thank me for the food.” These examples demonstrate how women gig workers used platforms to nurture care-based relationships that extended beyond economic transactions. Their work fostered a sense of community and continuity during times of crisis, but these relational ties were also sustained through everyday exchanges, trust, and mutual understanding.

Personal connections and demonstrations of care also made a tangible difference in sustaining customer loyalty. As Radwa (38 years, middle-income) shared,

“The relationship with customers has to have a bit of love in it. There are so many people doing this work now; I am not doing something rare, which means there is a lot of competition. Why would the customer favour me? For many reasons: the taste, the good treatment. This is something people love and always tell me: they feel like I am easygoing. Those are things that make people loyal to you and do not want to change and go to someone else.”

These forms of connection gave women a tangible edge in sustaining their businesses. This does not mean care becomes “fake” or purely instrumental; instead, it shows how care and professionalism converge in home-based gig work. The women’s ability to accommodate last-minute requests, remember preferences, and treat customers as friends made them stand out in a crowded market where food choices were abundant, but care was not. What distinguished their work was not just taste or price, but the affective and relational labour embedded in every interaction.

These trust-based relationships also shaped how women coordinated payments, turning money exchange into another arena in which familiarity and discretion mattered. One worker, Rabab (33 years, middle-income), shared,

“It’s as if I am dealing with my friends. I am even this way when it comes to money. If someone has a shortage at some point and tells me, of course, I have to trust and really know this person for years. I ask her to give me whatever she has now and then send me the rest through Vodafone cash¹⁷. These things happen with everyone, even me personally, so I must be considerate, to find those who would be polite with me too.”

Women rarely spoke of widespread non-payment by regular customers. When flexibility was offered, it was typically reserved for familiar clients, reflecting how trust is selectively extended

¹⁷ Vodafone Cash is an e-wallet feature that is offered by one of four major telecommunications companies in Egypt.

and managed as a strategy for customer retention. Payment practices were often coordinated virtually but completed through a mix of cash and transfers. Women typically confirmed orders, prices, and timing through WhatsApp or Facebook messages, then collected payment in cash upon pickup or delivery. In some cases (especially with repeat customers or larger orders), women accepted mobile transfers (e.g., Vodafone Cash), particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic normalized cashless exchange. Analytically, this shows that platforms mediate commitment and coordination, while trust in payment remains embedded in familiar relational modes of exchange.

Delivery arrangements were similarly shaped by trust and by women's concern with maintaining the quality associated with 'home-made' food. For instance, Rabab shared, "For delivery, I count on people I can trust, who work in the delivery sector, but no delivery company delivers food, and the food can get there all messed up. The most important thing is for the customer to get their food exactly how it came out from my home." Depending on distance and time, women organized pickup by customers, delivery by relatives, or delivery through couriers/drivers contacted through WhatsApp messaging or local delivery apps/services. One worker, Rasha (35 years, *sha'by*-middle income), explained that delivery workers often handled money exchange and circulation, "The delivery person comes and pays you in advance, they take the order and deliver it to the client, and they take their delivery fee from the client."

However, delivery and payment practices differed and shifted over time. For instance, Roaaya (42 years, *sha'by* income) explained, "At the beginning, the delivery used to take the money and bring it, because he was trustworthy. After COVID, Vodafone Cash was better, and it's still better and easier than anything. This was how the mobile phone became really important in my work." As for women working from informal rented kitchens, delivery could also be coordinated through apps in moments of urgency. For instance, Doaa E (37 years, upper-middle income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared, "Honestly, what really saved me is mobile applications, 90% of the time I have regular delivery personnel, but in case of emergencies, I open up the application right away and contact a person from *Marsool*." These cases show delivery not as a neutral logistical add-on but as part of a customer strategy in which women coordinate circulation to protect trust, quality, and household time. Together, these practices show how household routines become the mechanisms through which women integrate their home-based work into the digital domain.

This section demonstrated how customer relationships evolve into ongoing exchanges of care, recognition, and mutual reliance, revealing integration as a process of ‘stretching’ social reproduction across the boundary between household life and market exchange. Instead of separating between paid and unpaid work, digitally mediated customer engagement makes the labour of care, reassurance, reputation-building, and relational maintenance inseparable from production and sale. In the conclusion to this chapter, I synthesize the foundations and mechanisms through which women integrate their home-based work into the gig economy, drawing on knowledges and relationalities embedded in social reproduction, as well as on the use and adaptation of platforms within the household.

4.5 Concluding Analysis: Stretching Social Reproduction in the Digital Domain

Throughout this chapter, I argue that women food vendors integrate home-based work into the gig economy not by exiting the household or separating work from everyday life, but by extending social reproduction into the digital domain. This integration rests on foundations often invisibilized in dominant neoliberal discourses on platform work and women’s economic participation, namely intergenerational teaching, experiential learning, reciprocal knowledge sharing, and relational networks. These practices are not separate from work; they are unpaid forms of labour through which economically valuable skills and capacities are transferred, adapted, and shared within and beyond the home.

The chapter traces this process of integration across four linked mechanisms. First, women’s intergenerational learning and domestic skill acquisition (4.1) show that cooking knowledge is transferred through unpaid observation, correction, and caregiving relations, which are forms of social reproductive labour that become directly convertible into income generation. Second, women adapt and professionalize these skills (4.2) through courses, experimentation, and self-directed learning enabled by household devices and platform-based content. This learning expands what can be produced and sold from home, though it remains constrained by time, cost, and customer demand. Third, women sustain and enrich knowledge through reciprocal community networks (4.3), where mentoring, feedback, and shared resources circulate through relational circuits of trust and care. These interpersonal relations are central, rather than peripheral, to market participation, shaping how women build reputation, legitimacy, and continuity in informal food markets. Finally, integration is not solely a market-centred process but also a relational one (4.4), in which trust, reputation, discretion, and obligation are actively generated and sustained. It is

therefore facilitated through the household, a space that neoliberal “digital inclusion” narratives commonly dismiss as irrelevant or confine to the private realm.

The chapter also shows that integration is not experienced uniformly. Women’s pathways into home-based gig work differ across class dynamics, shaping what “integration” means in practice. For some, cooking is narrated as passion, self-development, and self-branding, and gig work appears as a flexible supplement or backup to formal employment. For others, cooking is learned and mobilized as a necessity and survival skill tied to provisioning, crisis, and household responsibilities. These differences shape access to learning opportunities (through paid courses, professional networks, or low-cost experimentation), the ability to absorb risks and costs, and the conditions under which women can expand their work. Integration is thus not simply a matter of “adopting platforms,” but a relational process structured by unequal access to material resources.

Viewing integration from the standpoint of home-based informal work complicates dominant policy and neoliberal narratives that frame “integration” as a top-down pathway into formal markets, measurable inclusion, or standardized entrepreneurial upgrading. Accounts from women workers point to a different analytical starting point in which integration is a bottom-up, locally grounded, micro-level, daily relational process unfolding within invisibilized and marginalized spaces such as the household. This does not mean that women are positioned outside markets. They are still producing value, earning income, and participating in economic life, even when this occurs through home-based or informal work. What is different is the way they are linked to markets: not primarily through formal job contracts, recognized businesses, state regulation, or employer-provided benefits and infrastructure, but through the household and social reproduction. In this sense, women are in the market, but their pathway into and through it runs via the home and caring responsibilities rather than through the formal channels that development and labour policy typically privilege.

Read through Social Reproduction Feminist (SRF) and Social Reproduction Theory (SRT) debates, these findings clarify what is at stake. SRF scholarship (De Angelis 2019; Federici 2012) highlights how unpaid social reproductive labour in the household, produced by the gendered division of labour under capitalism, confines women to domestic spaces and devalues their work relative to waged “productive” labour in the market. SRT extends this analysis by showing how the privatization and commodification of care under global capitalism systematically

marginalize reproductive labour within dominant economic frameworks (Bhattacharya 2017). The narratives of home-based women gig workers reveal how difficult it is, in practice, to treat the “household” and the “market,” or “reproduction” and “production,” as distinct spheres. Building on SRF and SRT, the notion of ‘stretching’ social reproduction reframes these realms as interdependent and fluid rather than separate. It captures how women actively blur and negotiate the constructed divide between unpaid and paid labour as they coordinate learning, production, transactions, and care from within the household.

The chapter also contributes to feminist digital labour scholarship by centring informal, home-based, digitally mediated work that is not necessarily platform-dependent, in a Global South context where livelihood practices rarely map neatly onto formal gig categories. While feminist scholars have examined how platforms intersect with social reproduction (Flanagan 2019; Wallis 2021; Webster and Zhang 2020), much of this work continues to focus on formalized gig labour, even when it takes place within the home. The narratives of women workers clarify that gig integration does not equate to platform-based employment. Although women use platforms and apps, their work rarely aligns with the dominant category of “working for platforms.” Instead, platforms are woven into social relations and household routines as flexible infrastructures for visibility, communication, coordination, and discretion. Importantly, platforms do not merely mediate work; they are also shaped by women’s practices, comfort levels, and material access. The women I interviewed relied on different combinations of Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, YouTube, and delivery applications, with varying degrees of public exposure and different strategies for managing privacy and reputational safety. This variability highlights that the “digital” is not a single pathway but a plural set of everyday arrangements that women adapt to fit their daily lives, within platform environments that are themselves historically shifting rather than fixed endpoints.

This chapter responds directly to the first research question by showing that the integration of home-based labour into the gig economy is not a shift from unpaid domesticity into paid digital work, but a process of ‘stretching’ in which unpaid learning, coordination, and reciprocity inside the household become continuous with paid economic activity in the digital domain. Rather than producing a clean boundary between “home” and “market,” digitally mediated gig work reconfigures this boundary through socially reproductive relationalities that extend outward: intergenerational bonds become sources of expertise, community networks

become professional circles, and customer relationships become ongoing exchanges of obligation and care. Here, the binaries of paid and unpaid work are blurred not because everything becomes paid, but because the work of sustaining skill, trust, time, and relationships remains unpaid while serving as the foundation for income generation. While the specific skills at stake are culinary, the analytic point is broader: gig integration can be enabled by socially reproductive knowledges, relationalities, and household routines that are often misrecognized as “non-economic.”

Finally, the chapter shows that integration does not necessarily enhance the “market value” of socially reproductive labour. Remains informal and feminized, women’s home-based gig work is often marginalized and undervalued even as it sustains households. This is why “counting” and researching it matter, not as a technocratic move toward formalization, but as an analytical and political move toward recognition. Doing so makes legible the diverse forms of women’s economic participation that narrow definitions of work, productivity, and digital inclusion routinely exclude. Recognizing socially reproductive labour as valuable work allows us to better see and analyze the full range of women’s economic participation beyond formal labour markets and platform-centric understandings of gig work.

Taken together, these findings unsettle the presumed separation between production and reproduction that underpins many economic framings of labour and participation. Rather than a pre-economic “private sphere” from which women exit to work, the household emerges as a site where skills are produced, time is organized, reputations are built, and market exchange is made possible. This calls for a broader analytic shift in how we understand women’s gig participation: we must examine how household dynamics, market relations, and state frameworks intersect as a relational field that structures what becomes possible, livable, and legible as “work.” I develop these connections more directly in the chapters that follow by analyzing how women navigate the conditions of home-based work. The next chapter examines how women experience and navigate economic precarity in informal, home-based gig work. I examine household-embedded financial practices and resource management strategies to show how social reproduction shapes survival, stability, and resistance within informal household economies.

Chapter Five - Navigating Precarity through Household Hustling Strategies



Image Two: Photo taken by the author outside a home-based kitchen in downtown Cairo

“When I first started, I told you I used to make food for only two people, so they would tell me to buy all the ingredients and make the food, and then I would charge them. Now I calculate the cost of each dish in detail, including all ingredients, and then add a profit margin. I stayed like this for three years, then, when prices rose sharply with inflation, I increased the profit margin a bit; it was still below the inflation rate.... I am trying not to upset customers while also avoiding losses. Once, I calculated that I spent more on an order than I got out of it. Even my husband told me I should stop working if that is the case, but I told him I will figure it out. I can’t take the step of raising the prices and making a new menu even though everyone sees and feels that prices have really gone up.” (Abeer, 39 years, upper-middle income)

“I considered taking a loan, but then I felt it was haram (sin). I don’t want debts, and what if I can’t pay them back? All these things require guarantees, what if anything goes wrong, what would happen to my family?” (Sabah, 42 years, sha’by-middle income)

Together, Abeer and Sabah show that precarity cuts across class, but it does not take a single form. It moves through numbers and menus, but also through fear and moral obligation; through the question of what can be risked, what must be protected, and how much the household can absorb. Their narratives also point to a broader problem in how precarity is usually defined and addressed in the informal economy. Precarity is often reduced by state policies and neoliberal development discourses to a regulatory status (unregistered work, no contract, no benefits), so the

implied solution becomes formalization. However, for home-based gig workers, precarity is lived and layered: it is experienced through inflation and price volatility, irregular income, operational pressure, exclusion from formal support systems, and the embodied toll of sustaining food work through women's health and exhaustion. Rather than treating precarity as a fixed condition of informal work, this chapter responds to research question two: How do women experience and navigate precarity in informal home-based gig work?

Building on Chapter Four's argument that home-based gig work is enabled by socially reproductive knowledges and relationalities, I argue that women navigate precarity by mobilizing these same knowledges and relational ties as *household hustling* strategies. These strategies include practical ways to manage money, time, resources, and trust that keep work possible even as the economic terrain shifts daily. I use *hustling* not as a celebratory label for resilience, but as an analytic for how livelihoods are sustained under conditions of uncertainty. *Hustling* is a term often used in the context of the digital economy to refer to gig work, but it also emerges in other contexts of informal labour. In this dissertation, I draw on Tatiana Adeline Thieme's (2018) work, which uses the concept of hustling to analyze informal labour in Kenya. Thieme (2018) argues that informal economic practices function not only as survival strategies but also as expressions of aspiration, creativity, and collective care. She conceptualizes informality as a relational condition produced by uncertainty and, at the same time, as a space that enables the emergence of new economic subjectivities and possibilities. Rather than romanticizing hustle, Thieme (2018) foregrounds its contradictions, including its entanglement with both marginality and possibility, and urges us to read it as a logic of everyday life that disrupts linear narratives of development, formal employment, and adulthood. This framing is particularly useful for understanding women's home-based gig work in Egypt, which likewise exists in an ambiguous space between social reproduction and economic production, and between the household and the market.

In the data *hustling* is enacted through four interlinked strategies: 1.) moral and spiritual grounding (*rizq*) that provides resilience amidst instability; 2.) informal and community-based financial practices that offer alternatives to formal financialization and debt based solutions; 3.) household resource management through low-capital operations, relational sourcing networks that stabilize costs amid price fluctuations; and 4.) logistical coordination and advance planning to stabilize workflow amidst work and non-work responsibilities within the household. The chapter begins by defining precarity for women as a lived and material condition, including its economic,

operational, institutional, and embodied dimensions. Then it examines how women navigate these conditions through household-embedded hustling strategies.

5.1 Precarity as Lived: Structural and Material Constraints on Home-based Gig Work

Home-based food vending offered women a pathway to income generation within the household, but it also placed them in a lived economy defined by uncertainty and pressure. In women's accounts, precarity did not mean occasional difficulty; it described a material condition in which ingredient prices fluctuated rapidly, income was irregular and unpredictable, and everyday operations required upfront spending without stable cash flow. These challenges were compounded by informality, which limited access to formal business or state support, financing, and legal protections. Women also described precarity as bodily since the ability to continue working was repeatedly framed as dependent on health, stamina, and the capacity to stand, lift, and cook for long hours. In this sense, precarity shaped women's decisions, rhythms, and capacities to sustain and grow home-based work.

5.1.1 Price Volatility and Inflation

Women consistently identified inflation and price volatility as the most serious challenges to sustaining their businesses. Instead of experiencing "rising prices" as a distant macroeconomic trend, they described the daily labour of sourcing ingredients amid constant fluctuations. For instance, Zizi (54 years, middle-income, operates an informal rented kitchen) explained,

"With the current rise in prices and inflation that's going on every day, unfortunately, I had to find alternatives and look for someone who will give me a lower price, even if it is five or two pounds less, so this current period is so exhausting when it comes to purchasing ingredients. Prices are changing every day, so I can't buy from the same person I have always been buying from; I will have to look for cheaper alternatives, while trying to maintain the same quality as much as possible."

Zizi's narrative shows how daily and weekly shifts in ingredient costs forced constant recalculation while she tried to protect quality and customer trust.

Across interviews, women emphasized that this volatility undermined the bare possibility of setting stable menu prices. Doaa E (37 years, upper-middle income, operates an informal rented kitchen) described the anxiety of pricing under currency instability,

"With prices rising, it becomes difficult for people, they want to save and spend as little as possible. Every day you hear that the currency is falling and the dollar

is rising, even I am becoming afraid of this. Every day I go to the market, and I see prices rising and fluctuating, daily, not just monthly. How much am I going to sell for? What prices can I charge? I can't keep raising the price too much, or I won't be able to sell."

This pressure produced a double bind. If women raised prices, they risked losing customers in a contracting market. If they absorbed costs, they risked eroding already-thin margins and exhausting household resources.

The tension intensified as women observed a decline in purchasing power. For instance, Samar (42 years, upper-middle income) shared,

"Things are becoming more expensive every day, and costs are increasing. Honestly, profit now is different than a year or even two years ago. No matter how much you raise prices, people's ability to order food has become a luxury, and it's much lower now. Inflation and prices are high, it's worldwide, and it's impacting people who are trying to manage their finances better and spend less. Some people used to take food from me every day; now, only once a week, and they tell you that's what their budget allows. I feel bad for people, honestly."

Inflation, therefore, reshaped not only women's costs but also demand patterns and the social meaning of "home-made" food. The comparative affordability that once made home-based meals attractive could no longer be assumed, and women had to justify prices while preserving a moral economy of care and quality attached to their work. These conditions of constant recalculation also fed directly into a second dimension of precarity that women repeatedly emphasized, which is the unpredictability of income.

5.1.2 Unstable and Non-fixed Income

Women consistently described their earnings as unpredictable. Periods of abundant orders were often followed by times with very few, making it difficult to plan household expenses or accumulate savings. While income volatility is often associated with gig work, women described it as especially acute in home-based food vending, where demand shifted with seasonality, household budgets, and everyday social rhythms. Doaa H, (40 years, middle-income, previously had a corporate job) reflected,

"The problem with working from home is that you don't have a fixed income, which is the most worrying thing. You could have no orders for a week, and then the next week you have four or five orders. For example, in Ramadan it was so good, then after Ramadan things really slowed down, so you don't have a stable income that you can depend on or rely on."

Similarly, Samar (42 years, upper-middle income, previously had a corporate job) articulated this clearly as a contrast with the security of a fixed wage, “I am now in a very precarious situation, it’s unknown. If there is work, I have money; if not, then I don’t have money. So, of course, if I get offered a fixed monthly salary, then I will take it.” For women like Doaa H and Samar who have prior experience working in the formal corporate sector, this volatility felt like a sharp downgrade from wage security and predictability, intensifying the sense that home-based gig work was necessary yet difficult to rely on.

This “unknown” income shaped how women evaluated opportunity, risk, and the limits of household endurance. Many described being unable to save because earnings were immediately absorbed by basic needs, making home-based work feel simultaneously necessary and unstable. For instance, Abeer (39 years, upper-middle income) shared, “When someone asks me about this project, I tell them it is risky because there is no fixed income. During the summer, profits are usually much less; it is different than winter, when more people are sitting at home, so it is tough to save or buy things in installments.” Precarity here was experienced not only as low income, but also as non-guaranteed income and work that cannot be relied upon, even when women are constantly available to perform them. Similarly, Omniya (35 years, middle-income) shared, “When market prices were lower, yes, there was profit. However, currently, of course, not, there is no saving; whatever money is coming in will be spent and used up.” Without savings or reserves, women remained vulnerable to shocks and unable to invest in business improvements that might stabilize income.

Unpredictable income not only destabilized earnings but also household planning, including what could be bought, when, and for whom, turning income volatility into a daily social reproductive problem. This volatility also shaped day-to-day operations, because food work requires spending upfront on ingredients, packaging, and sometimes delivery before any payment is received, and because cancelled or delayed orders translate directly into household losses rather than being absorbed as business risk. The following subsection further examines these cash flow and operational pressures.

5.1.3 Cash-flow and Operational Pressures

Women workers faced a structural cash flow problem since food production required purchasing ingredients before receiving payment, often without deposits or advance transfers. This was especially challenging for *sha’by* women who had less capital or disposable household income

to fall back on. As Sabah (42 years, *sha'by*-middle income) explained, “The only issue is knowing how many orders I will be getting, and whether I will be able to deliver them or not. What really made me think about leaving the home and working outside was the lack of resources. No one pays in advance for their food orders, so I have to put all the money in first, then get paid after.” This meant that women carried the financial burden of uncertainty upfront by buying supplies, investing time, and coordinating delivery before knowing whether the transaction would be completed. In practice, the household operated as a credit system, allowing women to draw on household money, labour, and time without any guarantee of return.

Operational precarity was therefore both liquidity-based (paying upfront without deposits) and risk-based since fake orders, non-responses, and delivery disruptions could quickly turn time and ingredients into loss. For instance, Fatma (44 years, *sha'by* income) shared an early experience, “When I first started, I received a five kg food order, and I called the customer to confirm. She lived really far away, and my husband was delivering the food and calling her, but she wouldn’t pick up. This never happened to me again, but I got so upset. Allah was really testing me; I practiced lots of patience.” Though infrequent, these moments were far from minor inconveniences. They led to wasted ingredients, lost time, and disruptions to household schedules.

Across socioeconomic backgrounds, women’s need to maintain quality while staying competitive amid inflation created further operational dilemmas, especially in a saturated market where competitors could lower prices by cutting ingredient quality or labour time. For instance, Hala (39 years, upper-middle income) shared,

“The competition in Egypt is really high, especially in the food and beverage business, where everyone has different recipes, and prices vary. There are vendors who just want to feed people and don’t care about prices, so they use lower-quality ingredients. Some customers want to eat good food and are willing to pay more. It depends on your target audience.”

Hala’s account highlights how operational pressures were not only economic but also moral, as women had to continually balance the promise of “good quality home-made food” with the practical demands of speed, affordability, and customer retention.

In informal settings, these pressures become even more difficult to manage. Women are forced to absorb risk without the legal and social protections, financing, and institutional support from the state, businesses, or civil society that could stabilize cash flow. In the next section, I address these systemic and structural barriers.

5.1.4 Systemic and Structural Barriers

Women's precarity was also shaped by the informal status of their home-based work, which restricted access to formal business resources and legal protections. Several women described bureaucratic barriers, corruption, and exclusion from state or institutional support. One worker,¹⁸ from a *sha 'by* background, explained,

“I have my ID and project, why can't the government make things easier for me. They want something that is up and running, but not at home. Even though I have my project running, it's visible online, and I have customers, they refused to give me a loan. It is all lies, by the way. All the small business development projects designed to support women workers to improve their quality of life are just talk. Even when you apply, they expect a formal project, or you have to pay a bribe. They take away from the money they give you in addition to interest payments, so you end up paying back more money.”

Rather than functioning as a safety net, formal support systems appeared to many women as conditional and extractive, requiring paperwork, “legitimacy,” or informal payments that home-based workers could not meet. The inability to access financing due to businesses being unregistered, home-based, or not recognized as “valid” reinforced the cycle of precarity.

These constraints also shaped the scale of women's work. Women repeatedly framed “growth” not as a simple matter of entrepreneurship, but as a capital-intensive transition that required licenses, rented spaces, and hired labour, all of which were out of reach or not worth the risk under instability. Naglaa (39 years, *sha 'by*-middle income) explained, “It would require a large sum of capital to get a license, and also to get a license, I have to rent a place and hire employees. I decided it was enough for me to continue working from home and still be able to make a profit and be able to live.” Naglaa's decision shows that “staying small” can be a strategic choice rather than a sign of limited ambition. While formalization promises market expansion, it also requires additional resources, exposes women to new forms of surveillance and costs, and shifts risk onto them without guaranteeing stability. In this context, the household emerges as a key site of production that makes their work possible in the first place. I elaborate on this point in section 5.4, where I develop the concept of strategic informality.

In the context of the food tech economy, women's exclusion from formal systems also limited their ability to use commercial delivery platforms to reach broader customer bases. Several

¹⁸ I intentionally keep this quote anonymous to protect the worker since it includes a direct critique of the government.

women described platform listings as a potential pathway to expansion, but one effectively blocked by registration requirements. As Sabah (42 years, *sha'by*-middle income) noted, “They told me I had to have a business and tax license and to have the business registered.” This exposes a central contradiction in “digital inclusion” narratives in the national development strategy and in state-supported, corporate-funded initiatives, which portray platforms as lowering barriers to entry. In reality, access to platform-based markets is often restricted by documentation and compliance requirements that informal home-based workers cannot easily meet.

Women also critiqued “women’s empowerment” initiatives and small enterprise programs as performative. Rasha (35 years, *sha'by*-middle income) described her attempt to engage these programs, “These are useless. I tried to connect with one of them. I was with my sister, who also has her own project. No one responded or got back to us. These things don’t exist in reality, although it’s supposed to be straightforward to access.” Rasha’s account highlights how neoliberal empowerment narratives can serve as symbolic inclusion without providing material support, leaving women to navigate precarity through household resources and informal networks rather than through institutional pathways. In this sense, precarity is not only market volatility; it is also produced through administrative absence, selective recognition, and unequal access to the very state or private programs that claim to support women’s livelihoods.

Finally, home-based work was shaped by women’s constrained “outside options” in the formal labour market. Abeer (39 years, upper-middle income) captured the difficulty of re-entering paid employment after years of caregiving amid political-economic disruption. She shared, “By the time the kids had grown up and started going to school and daycare, I took courses to return to work. The revolution happened in 2011, and by 2013, when things had calmed down, I was 30 years old. By then, employers either wanted to hire fresh graduates or experienced professionals. I was neither, so I felt very defeated and frustrated.” For women like Abeer, home-based gig work emerged as a pragmatic response to exclusion from formal employment, offering flexibility and income within the household, but without the wage stability and protections that formal jobs might provide. I return to these gendered constraints on labour market participation in Chapter Six, where I examine how household responsibilities and social norms shape women’s participation in home-based work.

These systemic and institutional barriers not only constrained women’s ability to formalize or scale their enterprises, but they also determined where risk was ultimately absorbed. In the

absence of accessible financing, insurance, and regulatory support, the costs of volatility are neither borne by firms nor cushioned by institutions. Instead, they are displaced into the household and absorbed through women's unpaid labour, strained household budgets, and, crucially, women's bodies. As a result, precarity manifests not only in prices and paperwork but also in the physical endurance required to continue working under conditions of ongoing instability.

5.1.5 Health and Physical Exhaustion

In women's narratives, precarity also emerged as an embodied condition. Home-based food vending demands long hours of standing, heavy lifting, exposure to heat, and constant multitasking. Consequently, women described exhaustion, pain, and deteriorating health as part of the everyday cost of earning an income within the household. Many framed the effort they exerted in their work as *maghood*, an Arabic term derived from the word *gohd*, which means the need to keep exerting effort continuously and striving to improve. For example, Samar (42 years, upper-middle income) shared, "I do everything, so that's a lot of *maghood* [effort]. But I got used to this. I am like a machine now, although I still get exhausted." Samar's phrasing reveals a central contradiction that even when household efficiencies reduce some costs, the work remains profoundly bodily.

When I asked women whether they planned to continue this work or what might lead them to stop, many framed their responses not in terms of profit or growth, but in terms of bodily capacity: whether they could "stand on [their] feet," remain "healthy," and keep going. Maryouma (49 years, *sha'by* income, operates an informal rented kitchen) framed continuity as directly dependent on health, "I will not stop the food project, as long as I have good health, I will keep doing this work." Similarly, Omniya (35 years, middle-income) tied her ability to continue working to her physical stamina even during pregnancy, "As long as my health is good and I can stand on my feet and work, then I will keep going. I am currently pregnant but still working." These accounts show that women do not experience home-based food work as a flexible or "light" alternative to formal employment, but as labour that extracts from the body while remaining necessary for household survival.

In the accounts of older women, health became especially visible, as age and physical well-being shaped both their work capacity and their sense of uncertainty about the future. Omayma (54 years, *sha'by*-middle income), for example, tied her decision-making to untreated or postponed medical needs: "I have problems in my knees and need to do an operation. I am concerned that

doing this will make it difficult for me to keep working. It's hard for me to take that step." Her hesitation reflects a structural dilemma whereby taking time to heal can threaten income continuity, while continuing to work can worsen physical strain. In this way, women's bodies become the unseen foundation of home-based gig work, particularly home-based cooking that relies on stamina and endurance. They absorb the costs of long hours, standing, and repetitive labour without the protections to buffer injury, pregnancy, or ageing and that typically accompany intensive physical labour. This embodied dimension points to the absence of adequate social protection and health insurance for informal, home-based workers. Because this work is not treated as "legitimate" or formally protected labour, women's capacity to sustain it becomes tied to personal endurance rather than collective guarantees. Precarity is therefore lived not only through prices and irregular income, but through the question of whether one's health can hold long enough for the household economy to continue. As the following sections show, women respond to this embodied uncertainty through hustling practices that manage not only money and resources, but also pace, fatigue, and the physical limits of everyday work.

Taken together, this section demonstrated how precarity is a lived condition produced through the intersection of macroeconomic instability (inflation and currency volatility), irregular and non-guaranteed demand, operational risk, and structural exclusion from formal support systems. These pressures are not only economic; they are also socially reproductive and embodied. Because home-based food work draws directly on household budgets, household time, and women's bodily capacity, instability is absorbed inside the home long before it appears as a "business" problem. Precarity, then, is not reducible to informality alone as it is intensified by crisis conditions and by gendered labour market barriers that limit women's alternatives at different life stages, while also leaving health, injury, and exhaustion largely unbuffered.

The rest of this chapter moves beyond defining precarity to explore how women navigate it through household hustling strategies grounded in socially reproductive knowledge and relationality. I begin with sustenance through spiritual grounding (*rizq*), showing how women render economic uncertainty morally and emotionally livable by sustaining patience, effort, and ethical orientation when prices fluctuate, incomes are unpredictable, and outcomes exceed their control.

5.2 Sustenance through Spiritual Grounding (*Rizq*)

“I carried a backpack and would pass by all the local government offices to sell food to the employees. It was tiring, but you must put in the effort and work hard to pursue *rizq*.” (Hanady, 47 years, *sha’by* income, operates an informal rented kitchen)

Women’s accounts show that navigating precarity was not only about “managing money” but also about confronting emotional, moral, and spiritual uncertainty. A central concept they used to make sense of unstable income, rising costs, and unpredictable demand was *rizq* (sustenance). Explicitly mentioned by eight of the 25 women, *rizq* functioned as a spiritual–moral economy that grounded financial decision-making and sustained them through periods of stress. Through *rizq*, uncertainty was refigured as a condition of living in a world where outcomes are not fully controllable, yet effort, intention, ethical practice, patience, and humility remain central to “deserving” and receiving provision. Women described *rizq* as something pursued through work that is often tiring, repetitive, and marked by uncertain returns, yet still necessary and meaningful. Hanady’s image of moving through government offices with a backpack shows that “home-based” gig work is not always still or contained; it demands physical and emotional endurance. In this sense, pursuing *rizq* was not passive waiting but active striving in the face of uncertainty, where effort itself becomes morally charged and spiritually recognized.

Rizq also shaped how women interpreted unstable demand and irregular earnings. Rather than fixating on profit calculations as the only rational way to proceed, women described an orientation that balanced planning with faith. For instance, Hanady shared that her husband used the concept of *rizq* to help ground her when she was thinking about her work. She shares, “At first, I didn’t know when someone would make a food order, and I would sit and calculate the potential profits. But my husband told me that this is wrong, this way you are cutting into your *rizq*, leave it to Allah.” Here, *rizq* does not eliminate calculation, but it limits the anxiety of trying to control what cannot be controlled. As Hanady put it elsewhere, “Nothing is fixed, *rizq* is in Allah’s hands, today maybe I get 10 or 15 orders, or I might get two or three or even just one, nothing is fixed.” This framing allowed women to continue working even when orders were unpredictable or financially risky.

Across interviews, women explained that God would bless and reward them with *rizq* if they had good intentions, acted with an ethical conscience, and made a sincere effort. For them to

deserve and receive this *rizq*, they had to actively practice patience during times of distress, remain humble when they succeed and grow, and strengthen their faith in what God has in store for them in the future. In times of precarity or financial stress, belief in *rizq* was a means of resilience and perseverance. For example, many of the women workers shared stories of unforeseen issues they faced, such as their food orders being destroyed during delivery, market vendors suddenly raising prices, or not having enough capital to pay for ingredients. Ultimately, what reassured and encouraged them to overcome these challenges and continue working was the belief that they would eventually gain the *rizq* they deserved. For instance, one of the workers, Maryouma (49 years, *sha'by* income, operates an informal rented kitchen), who was the sole income earner for her household described this as a recurring pattern, “You know sometimes I wouldn’t have the money to pay rent and then at the end of the month Allah’s *rizq* comes and I get a big catering order that pays the rent off.” Similarly, Sabah (42 years, *sha'by*-middle income) framed *rizq* as something she actively asks for in relation to everyday caregiving responsibilities and household spending, “I always pray that god sends me *rizq*, for example, my son tomorrow has a private lesson, I pray that I have the money for it.” These accounts depict *rizq* as inseparable from social reproduction. It emerges through children’s needs, rent, household obligations, and the emotional weight of providing.

Finally, this spiritual-economic logic shaped how women positioned themselves within competitive markets. Instead of treating knowledge as scarce property, several women explicitly linked reciprocity to *rizq*, arguing that helping others does not reduce one’s provision. For instance, Omniya (35 years, middle-income) described mentoring another woman who reached out after seeing her Facebook post, “Let us just agree that *rizq* is from Allah. I posted a recipe on Facebook, and someone asked me how I take my pictures, so I gave her some advice. She told me she is working on her project and started asking me about my packaging and pricing. I told her everything. She said I cannot believe you are telling me everything, I told her why not?” Fatma (44 years, *sha'by* income) echoed this directly, “I never hold back, I always give people recipes and teach them how to make things, like my neighbour, I teach her so many things, why would I hold back, she will not take away from my *rizq*. On my Facebook page, I send people recipes. Why wouldn’t I tell people?” Building on Chapter Four’s discussion of reciprocity and communal knowledge-sharing, *rizq* helps explain the moral logic behind these practices. Omniya and Fatma’s narratives show how *rizq* becomes a language for resisting competitive scarcity, a refusal that is

actively mediated through features like Facebook posts, comments, and direct messages. Through these channels, recipes, advice, and business “tips” circulate beyond the household, transforming everyday online interactions into forms of mentoring and mutual support. In this way, digitally mediated spaces do not simply market women’s work; they also extend a moral economy of *rizq* into wider networks of learning and survival.

This section demonstrates that women navigate precarity not only through technical budgeting, but through a spiritual–moral economy embedded in everyday socially reproductive knowledges and relationalities. *Rizq* helps women endure volatility by grounding their efforts, reshaping how they interpret unpredictability, and sustaining perseverance during periods of acute financial stress. At the same time, spiritual grounding is not the only way women manage uncertainty. If *rizq* enables women to endure precarity, the following section examines how they also address it through informal, community-based practices that operate outside formal banking, debt, and “empowerment” programs.

5.3 Informal and Community-Based Financial Solutions

Precarity was exacerbated not only by unstable income and cash-flow pressures but also by the market-oriented “solutions” promoted by mainstream women’s empowerment initiatives. These interventions were ultimately rejected by the very women they sought to target. Instead of treating financial precarity as a problem to be resolved through formalization or financial inclusion, women’s hustling strategies reveal how it was mediated through the household, which functioned as a financial institution that absorbed risk, produced discipline, and sustained work through collective and moral economies.

The spiritual–moral logic discussed in the previous section was central to how many of the women evaluated formal credit. Across interviews, they described deliberately avoiding loans and debt-based models, not only because they feared repayment, but also because interest, guarantees, and institutional conditions felt like an added layer of pressure in an already volatile economy. As Mona (57 years, *sha’by* income) put it, “Loans are bad omens, and I can’t handle the pressure that comes with that, and interests and all that.” In Mona’s framing, debt is not a neutral solution for growth; it is an emotional and moral burden that can deepen precarity by tying survival to repayment schedules, interest accumulation, and the constant fear of falling behind. Similarly, Reda (44 years, *sha’by* income background) reflected, “I thought about getting a loan for small businesses, but these things have a lot of requirements. Also, I am afraid of loans; I feel like these

things are misused.” These accounts highlight how women’s rejection of loans was often rooted in mistrust, anxiety, and the sense that formal credit could become a trap rather than a support system, especially amid inflation and unpredictable demand.

Alternatively, the women relied on collective financial practices like *gam’eyas*, which are rotating savings and credit associations developed through social networks and relationships, in which community members commit to contributing a fixed monthly amount to a shared fund, which is then distributed each month to one member (Agha 2019). The *gam’eya* is usually led by a reputable woman in the community who is trusted and respected by her network, and its members are bound by social codes of respect, honour, and trust (Agha 2019). This system challenges microloan initiatives championed by the state and neoliberal development agendas, in which women are bound by formal financial contracts and pressured into debt and interest payments (Federici 2018b; Olmsted 2020; Salem 2020). Read as a whole, women’s avoidance of loans and reliance on *gam’eyas* also complicates the “financial inclusion” and microloan fixes that often dominate empowerment discourse. Microcredit assumes that women’s economic lives are stable enough to absorb repayment schedules, interest, and paperwork as the price of “access.” However, home-based gig work is driven by irregular orders, rapid price shifts, and cash-flow gaps in which inputs must be paid before income arrives. In this context, taking on debt does not simply “support entrepreneurship” as it can compound volatility by turning uncertainty into a fixed obligation.

Many *sha’by* women workers relied on *gam’eyas* to secure capital to launch their projects, especially to buy ingredients or extra tools. For example, Maryouma (49 years, *sha’by* income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared, “I had a *gam’eya* of 3000 pounds, I paid the rent and then got some pasta and rice and a few things that I kept at home.” Here, the *gam’eya* is not a business investment in a narrow sense; it is a survival mechanism that stabilizes the household while keeping the work possible. Sometimes the *gam’eya* was used to expand and grow their food projects. For example, Hanady (47 years, *sha’by* income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared, “My son was in a *gam’eya*, and we started with that money, we bought fridges. I had a deep freezer that I put downstairs and my cooking tools and pans, a bit from my end and a bit from his end, and we managed to put together the kitchen downstairs.” What this shows is that ‘growth’ happens through household pooling and interdependence, not through formal expansion pathways. The household is both the site of production and the source of financing.

There were also examples of women choosing to grow their projects by purchasing new household items that would benefit both their work activities and their family needs. For instance, Fatma (44 years, *sha'by* income) shared, “I saved in a *gam'eya* for a while, it was a good work season, and I could afford to. When we got married in this apartment, we had nothing, and over time we bought more things, like extra fridges. I store a lot of pre-prepared food items in these fridges now, so they are useful for my work.” The fridge here is not a “business asset” in the formal sense; it is a household object repurposed into income generation. Fatma’s narrative, like Maryouma’s and Hanady’s, demonstrates how this approach provided financial stability without the extractive pressures of formal credit, offering support rooted in long-standing social networks.

Women from upper-middle- and middle-class backgrounds, even those with personal bank accounts, still preferred to manage their work finances informally, using their phones to track orders, costs, and savings. Several women also described preferring to “save” through a *gam'eya* rather than through a bank account, because it offered them a reliable bulk sum at the end of a cycle that could be invested in work or household needs. For example, Abeer (39 years, upper-middle income) shared, “I pay the *gam'eya* so I can later buy extra tools for my work or home, things that would benefit the project but also for my actual home.” She later added, “Every year I dedicate some money from the household income to a *gam'eya*, this way by the end of the year I have a bulk amount of money to buy something that would help me in my work, like a new food processor or oven to make things faster for me.” Abeer’s reflections reveal how the *gam'eya* offered her a sense of long-term financial security by providing a buffer of money on the side as a safety net to invest in her work or household needs. This reliance on *gam'eyas* highlights the importance of socially reproductive relationalities, whereby financial decisions are shaped by trust-based communal practices rather than formal institutional frameworks.

Moreover, while some of the women were open to using e-wallets, most remained hesitant to open official bank accounts or to use debit or credit cards for their financial transactions. For instance, Rabab (33 years, middle-income) shared, “I prefer *gam'eyas* because you are pressured to commit. The bank isn’t that reliable; the visa card is always available, and if you are stuck, then you will eventually use it and spend your money.” This is less about “relational obligations” and more about financial discipline through constraint since the *gam'eya* locks money away through commitment. At the same time, cards keep money “too accessible,” making spending easier in moments of pressure.

This section has shown that women navigate precarity primarily through informal, trust-based financial practices (especially *gam'eyas*) and by avoiding debt-based models. Rather than relying on formal market-centric financial solutions, they stabilize cash flow and build financial buffers through social networks, household pooling, and collective accountability. In other words, women do not simply “cope” with precarity; they reorganize financial life through the household, effectively ‘stretching’ social reproduction into a form of informal financial management. Their engagement with formal and digital finance platforms remains cautious and selective, with work money often tracked informally on phones and bank cards used with skepticism. If these informal community-based solutions help women manage volatility without compounding risk through debt, the next section shifts to how women manage the material side of precarity by provisioning, sourcing, and minimizing costs through household-embedded resource strategies.

5.4 Household-based Resources and Time Management

Women navigated precarity not only through financial practices but also through household-based resource management strategies, including running low-capital operations, minimizing fixed costs, and stabilizing provisioning amid inflation. Across socioeconomic backgrounds, women treated the household as an economic and adaptable site that could absorb risk, store supplies, redistribute costs, and sustain production without the burdens of formal expansion.

5.4.1 Low-capital Household Operations

For many women, launching and sustaining their home-based food work depended on keeping operations small, flexible, and low-capital, not as a temporary phase but as a deliberate strategy for surviving volatility. Rather than making upfront investments in equipment or rented commercial spaces, women described a model in which purchases were tied to confirmed orders and aligned with daily household shopping routines. For example, Rasha (35 years, *sha'by*-middle income) shared, “The best thing about the project is that you don’t need capital. At all. You look at what the order needs, go down and buy it, make it, and on the same day, you get your money back and the profit. So, you don’t need a lot of capital. Plus, you can increase the quantity of the food you are making and eat from it in your own household.” Her account shows how home-based projects minimize financial risk and enable women to navigate material barriers to entry by leveraging existing household items and daily consumption cycles. This approach reduces loss

exposure and allows women to expand or contract production in line with cash availability and demand.

Similarly, Doaa (35 years, *sha'by*-middle income) framed home-based work as an extension of everyday provisioning rather than a separate commercial enterprise, “Licenses are needed when it is a large-scale project. Let us say I have a big kitchen; I will need that, but now I am just working from home. I am making food and selling it to people as if I am doing this for my relatives. I go to the market as if I am buying ingredients for my own home, I simply buy more quantities for the food order I am making.” Operating from home blurred the distinction between domestic and commercial space and made gig work feasible in conditions where capital, stability, and institutional support could not be taken for granted. Doaa’s framing also positioned the project as domestic and small-scale, a characterization that becomes central to the strategic informality discussed in the following subsection.

By transforming their homes into workspaces, these women significantly reduced fixed costs such as rent, utilities, and commercial equipment, allowing them to save on both direct and indirect expenses. For example, Abeer (39 years, upper-middle income) shared, “I am already living at home, so I don’t have to pay rent and other expenses for the kitchen. At home, I am only buying and selling, but outside the home, I will have more financial obligations.” Abeer’s narrative demonstrates how women used everyday household objects as economic tools in their work, reducing the need for extra capital. Even when cooking took place in an informal rented kitchen outside the home, women did not invest in advanced machinery or tools and preferred to maintain the appearance and scale of a home kitchen. For example, Doaa E (37 years, upper-middle income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared,

“Almost a year ago, I moved from my home to another place that’s five minutes away from my home, and my dad used to come with me to this workplace. I rented this apartment and prepared the kitchen, like a home kitchen, not a restaurant. Back when I went to check out professional kitchen stuff, it was so costly and needed a much bigger space than a home, and you needed things for safety, it was too big a deal. When I moved to this new place, it was still like working from home.”

Women minimized the need for costly investments in commercial spaces or equipment by mirroring the feel and scale of the home kitchen.

Keeping operations low-capital involved more than minimizing rent and equipment costs; it also required affordable connectivity. With customer relations, orders, and advertising taking

place primarily over the phone and online, internet access became a basic operating expense that women had to factor into their household budgets. For instance, some women from *sha'by* backgrounds who faced financial constraints shared that access to internet connections or up-to-date technologies was not always feasible or guaranteed. To overcome these material barriers, they strategically incorporated mobile and landline internet costs into household or personal expenses. For example, Rasha (35 years, *sha'by*-middle income) shared, “Things were financially tough after getting married, so we used to charge our mobile credit and use our mobile internet. The signal was also so weak, so I had to stand by the window to get a good signal to make a post or respond to a client. It was much later that we got internet for our home.” For many women, internet access (whether via mobile data or home Wi-Fi) served both as a personal necessity and as an essential part of their professional infrastructure.

Even upper-middle-income women described it as part of everyday household use rather than a business expense. When I asked whether internet costs were included in their project budgets, Hala (39 years, upper-middle income), for instance, replied, “Honestly, no, because it is all from home. If you worked in an office, it would be different.” By framing digital access as a shared household utility rather than a business cost, women effectively merged personal and professional expenses. This blurring of boundaries allowed them to sustain their work without formally accounting for or justifying additional expenses. In practice, resource management in this context operated through social reproductive negotiation. Women reframed these expenses as indirect or domestic costs, thereby redistributing financial responsibility within the household, often shifting it to husbands or other family members who covered the internet bills.

These operating costs mattered because they influenced how women framed their projects as “home cooking” rather than formal enterprises. By keeping their work small-scale and channelling it through household expenses, women were able to avoid bureaucratic demands they viewed as financially unrealistic.

5.4.2 Strategic Informality and Selective Compliance

Women often described the process of formalizing their work through licenses, inspections, safety rules, and taxes as a big financial barrier. It demanded more money and investment than was realistic for small, home-based businesses. For example, Hala (39 years, upper-middle income) shared, “The license needs a budget, and the market is dead now, so it’s honestly on hold until I have profit to invest. The money required is a lot, it’s a lot for a start-up, it’s not even a start-up,

it's a project from home." Such narratives illustrate how upper-middle-income women strategically presented their work as modest, home-based projects rather than professional start-ups. This framing allowed them to position themselves outside formal economic classifications that require licenses, inspections, and tax payments, helping them avoid additional financial burdens while preserving flexibility and control over their work.

At the same time, women did not necessarily reject all forms of accountability. Instead, a pattern of selective compliance emerges. Rather than formalizing the business or workplace, some women pursued legitimacy through their personal identity and reputation. For example, Rasha (35 years, *sha'by*-middle income) described obtaining health certificates, "The only thing I got is a health certificate, to make sure everything is ok, but licenses we didn't... You just go to the hospital, they run a few tests, then give you a card, and you are good to go. Even my husband, we made him get one." Rasha's narrative shows how "regulation" is displaced from the enterprise onto the body, so that cleanliness and safety become matters of personal responsibility rather than institutional accountability. This form of legitimacy protects and reassures customers, but it leaves workers exposed. Illness, injury, pregnancy, and long-term bodily strain remain privately managed, without insurance or institutional responsibility. In other words, accountability is enforced while protection is not; its costs are shifted onto women's bodies rather than secured through labour rights or workplace safeguards.

By keeping projects within a household scale, women reduce fixed costs and postpone the costs of formal compliance, but they cannot escape inflation. The question then shifts from whether to formalize to how to provision, including securing ingredients, maintaining quality, and protecting margins when prices change daily.

5.4.3 Provisioning under Price Volatility: *Balady* Sourcing and Relational Supply Networks

In the face of daily price shifts, women described provisioning as a constant practice of saving, substitution, and relationship-building. Cost-saving strategies included seeking discounts, buying items on sale, purchasing packaging materials in bulk from wholesale suppliers, and making informal deals with local vendors to negotiate discounts on expensive items such as meat and chicken. However, women's most durable resource strategy was relational sourcing, which involved building trusted supply networks that stabilize price and quality.

Using *balady* (local) ingredients was a way to save money, as they were more affordable, accessible, and healthier for their customers. For example, Rabab (33 years, middle-income)

shared, “Everything I use is *balady* and fresh. Chicken, I never buy from the supermarket; I buy it from the poultry shop, just like home. It’s exactly like what we do at home, as if mum made it at home. The meat comes fresh from the butcher; he cuts it and cleans it and everything in front of me.” Under inflation, “*balady*” was not simply a taste claim; it was a pricing strategy that helped women keep food “home-like” without losing customers.

Across age and socioeconomic backgrounds, there was a shared belief that *balady* products were fresher and of higher quality than imported or preserved ones. For instance, Mona A was a 56-year-old married woman with four children (all over 21), living in a middle-income neighbourhood, and holding a commerce diploma. She had previous work experience as a trainer in a women’s gym, but for the most part, she was a stay-at-home mum. In 2019, she decided to launch her home-based project ‘Monmon’s Kitchen’ in partnership with her daughter Aya, who recently graduated from university. Mona A explained, “We make our regular Egyptian food. We use fresh ingredients and focus on delivering authentic Egyptian flavours. Our food is already all vegetables and healthy. We use *balady* (local) butter and natural oils, which are what we use to make our own food at home.” While taste and authenticity matter here, the economic point is that *balady* sourcing is also a way to manage costs under high inflation, while maintaining a moral economy of quality and care. As Naglaa (39 years, *sha’by*-middle income) shared, “I focus a lot on health because for me it means *tawfeer* (saving). When I make healthy food, I will not be using a lot of oil, which means I am saving money.” Such practices show how women’s financial and moral reasoning were intertwined. Choosing *balady* products was not only a strategy for material savings but also a form of care and accountability toward their customers, extending socially reproductive relationalities into the market.

The decision to use local ingredients drew on inherited teachings about how food should be sourced and prepared, transferring embodied know-how across generations and directly influencing their sourcing practices. For instance, Huda (33 years, *sha’by*-middle income) continued to uphold these teachings, “I always like to buy *balady* meat, this is how I grew up and always thought that *balady* food is the best, even though most people around me use imported meat.” Buying from familiar neighborhood markets provided freshness, trust, and cost efficiency, where quality assurance, accessibility, and affordability were all closely linked.

Affordability was not achieved through ingredients substitution alone, but through relationships. Many *sha’by* workers leveraged relational networks to access affordable resources

and financial support. For instance, they preferred buying their food ingredients from local market vendors, since it was more affordable and accessible, and to support these local businesses, which their neighbours often owned. Many of the women gig workers from rural backgrounds had family connections in regions outside of Cairo, which gave them access to rural food vendors who sold meat, dairy products, and fresh produce at lower prices than in urban city centers. One example was Huda (33 years, *sha'by*-middle income) who explained, “As you can tell, the prices now are unpredictable. I buy chicken and meat from the *balad* (rural village) in bulk and store it at home. I trust vendors there more. As for vegetables, I go to a local market where I live.” These practices reveal how women’s socially reproductive relationalities extended across geographic scales by linking rural kinship networks with urban livelihoods.

As discussed in the previous chapter, such networks demonstrate how family ties and economic collaboration blur the boundaries between domestic and market spheres. Through these connections, women integrated care, kinship, and work, transforming familial reciprocity into a form of economic resilience that sustained both households and communities. Huda continued to reflect, “In the *balad* (rural village), they know about my project, and they always let me know when they have fresh ingredients available. In the *balad* things are much cheaper, so I pay less than I would here in Cairo. In rural areas, all families know each other, and they know who I am, and they want to help me out and support me.” These relational economies exemplify socially reproductive relationalities, wherein women’s connections with vendors extend beyond transactional exchanges to foster communal support.

The women’s relationships with local vendors extended beyond material transactions to include exchanging favours, supporting one another, cooperating, and striving for mutual benefit. Many women described how their regular vendors, from whom they frequently purchased ingredients, provided valuable information on market trends and price fluctuations. For instance, Maryouma (49 years, *sha'by* income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared, “The guy selling us tomatoes would call and say he has tomatoes with good prices today and that prices will go up tomorrow. He always sends fresh tomatoes for less money because he knows I use large quantities for the food orders.” For many women, this reliance on local vendors was not a sign of dependency but rather a form of communal connection, in which these vendors played an integral role in their success. Similarly, Roaaya (42 years, *sha'by* income) shared, “There is a butcher that I made a deal with. If I want anything, he makes it available to me. I don’t freeze meat because the nutritional

value falls, and it doesn't taste good. For every order I get, I ask the butcher for the specific meat piece that works well for that dish, and he brings it right away." Women gig workers deliberately build relationships with trusted local vendors to ensure access to high-quality ingredients at affordable prices. These connections act as informal safety nets, stabilizing their supply chains amidst price fluctuations.

This section shows that women navigate precarity through household-based resource management, not only through "financial practices." By keeping operations low-capital (buying to confirmed orders, relying on household objects, folding connectivity into everyday budgets), women reduce risk and avoid the fixed costs and bureaucratic exposure of formal expansion. What emerges is strategic informality and selective compliance. Some forms of legitimacy are pursued through the body (health certificates) and moral claims of "home cooking," even as protection and risk remain privately managed. This section also highlights provisioning and coordination as survival work under inflation. Women stabilize price and quality through *balady* sourcing and relational supply networks (kin ties, neighbourhood markets, trusted vendors). However, provisioning is only one part of keeping the work going. Once ingredients are secured, women still have to fit orders into household life by coordinating shopping, cooking and delivery in ways that prevent the household from becoming unlivable. This is where logistical coordination and advance planning become central.

5.5 Logistical Coordination and Advance Planning

Where women's income depends on fluctuating orders and their days are already structured by care, cooking, and household obligations, the central challenge is not simply how to "earn more," but how to make paid work fit within a livable household rhythm. In this subsection, I show how women navigate precarity through logistical coordination and advance planning. These practices do not eliminate precarity, but they make it more manageable by establishing rhythms of readiness and endurance in conditions where prices, demand, and household needs shift daily.

One common practice amongst the women workers was taking orders at least a day or two in advance to plan and organize ahead of time, for instance, Roaaya (42 years, *sha'by* income) shared, "Saturday customers can send in their requests on Thursday so that I can prepare on Friday, and then on Saturday, I finish up and send out their orders. I like to give myself time. That way, I know my customers and their days, and they also know when to send me their food orders." This approach reflected forms of planning and coordination deeply rooted in women's socially

reproductive relationalities, similar to how mothers would plan weekly household meals to distribute labour across the week. Here, planning serves to manage uncertainty, transforming unpredictable demand into a schedule that can be integrated with cooking, childcare, and other household responsibilities. It was different sometimes for the women who worked in an informal rented kitchen, since more people were available to support, and it was easier to prep things in advance and on a larger scale. For instance, Zizi (54 years, middle-income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared, “Habiba [daughter] calls me Mama McDonald’s. I had a company that held an event and ordered through the website for 15 people. In two hours, all the food was delivered. Everything is half-cooked or cooked and frozen and ready.” Such accounts reveal how women’s labour extended across long and fragmented hours of the day, from early morning meal prep to late-night deliveries. Across home and rented kitchens, the point is not coordination for its own sake, but making demand predictable enough to be absorbed alongside household obligations.

Other planning strategies used by women gig workers included buying kitchen tools and appliances that made preparation easier, or keeping key ingredients such as soup stocks, tomato sauce and breaded chicken prepped and stored in the deep freezer for quick access. For example, Sabah (42 years, *sha’by*-middle income) shared, “I buy extra ingredients for items that get ordered regularly. When tomatoes are cheap, I buy them in bulk and prepare and freeze the sauce. This way, I save time and can then do other things around the house.” What Sabah describes is a temporal strategy that is also an inflation management strategy: she converts a moment of lower prices into stored ingredients and stored labour, reducing future exposure to price volatility while freeing time during peak demand.

In this way, advance planning is not only about making work faster; it is about lowering risk and protecting the household from the daily instability of markets. Sabah went on to explain, “If you make an order for grilled meat, then I plan ahead and make sure I add a bit extra to the dish and feed my family at home the same dish, that way I am standing in the kitchen making food both for the customer and my family at home.” Sabah’s narrative reveals how she fulfilled both work orders and household needs while saving time and money, ensuring nothing went to waste. Similarly, Rasha (35 years, *sha’by*-middle income) explained, “I can increase the quantity of food I make so we can also eat from it at home, so in a sense you have saved money because you don’t have to repurchase food for the home, so your profit is in the form of food.” Rasha and Sabah were like other *sha’by* women with young children and limited household support who relied on

constant multitasking and temporal efficiency as everyday survival strategies. Their ability to synchronize paid and unpaid labour shows that coordination is not only about arranging “work tasks,” but also about preventing duplicative cooking labour across the household and the market.

This coordination also relied on everyday devices that enabled planning, documentation, and customer communication without increasing capital costs. Smartphones became indispensable multi-purpose tools through which women managed orders, recorded details, coordinated deliveries, and posted pictures and online content to keep customers engaged. As Manal (56 years, upper-middle income) shared, “Now I use a notebook application on my mobile phone where I write down the customer’s name, date, and items, and I also ask them to send me the details on WhatsApp so it’s documented in writing.” For Manal and many others, the phone served as a device for record-keeping, photography, and marketing. As she explained, “I use my mobile phone to take pictures, and most of the time I don’t edit them; my food already looks good, so I don’t want to add anything extra to it. I choose good lighting, and I use nice plates and nice settings.” Like Manal, across the interviews, women described using their phones to photograph their products rather than invest in professional cameras or hire photographers. Smartphones were therefore considered worthwhile investments because they could be used in multiple ways, allowing women to keep their projects small-scale and low-cost.

Taken together, these accounts show that navigating precarity involves more than financial tactics; it also requires making work possible through household-based coordination. Women use advance planning, batching, and systematic documentation to absorb volatile demand and price instability without expanding into formal business structures. Logistical coordination thus becomes a mode of resource management, transforming the home kitchen, freezer, phone, and household routines into material supports that sustain income generation amid institutional and systemic exclusion. I conclude this chapter by framing these household-based strategies as hustling, not a celebratory tale of resilience, but an analytic account of how women create livable conditions under uncertainty through moral economies, informal financial solutions, and the everyday reorganization of resources, time, and effort.

5.6 Concluding Analysis: Household Hustling Strategies to Navigate Precarity

This chapter shows how women navigate precarity through household hustling strategies that sustain everyday survival. Hustling refers to the practical logics through which women transform instability into workable routines, without reducing their actions to mere “coping”

strategies. Rather than treating home-based gig work as an individualized “entrepreneurial choice” or a temporary survival mechanism, the data demonstrates that women sustain work under chronic instability through moral economies, informal finance, household resource management, and logistical coordination. Through these strategies, precarity is not only something women endure; it is something they actively work through by making volatility manageable within the household when income is non-fixed, inputs are unpredictable, and institutional support is absent or inaccessible. In answering the second research question, this chapter argues that women navigate precarity by ‘stretching’ socially reproductive knowledges and relationalities into everyday hustling practices that make household life and income generation workable under conditions of volatility.

Read together, sections 5.2–5.5 show that the household is not merely the site from which gig work is performed, but also the practical system that makes such work viable amid shifting economic conditions. *Rizq* provides an ethical and affective orientation that sustains perseverance, alleviates anxiety about uncertain outcomes, and legitimizes reciprocity and non-competitive knowledge sharing. Community-based financial solutions such as *gam’eyas* create buffers and discipline without converting uncertainty into debt obligations, thereby challenging microloan and “financial inclusion” discourses that presume stable income and predictable repayment capacity. Household resource management keeps operations low-capital and flexible, while relational provisioning networks (kin, vendors, *balady* sourcing) stabilize cost and quality in the face of inflation. Finally, logistical coordination creates rhythms of readiness and endurance (through advance orders, batching, and freezing) that enable women to integrate paid production into the household day without duplicating cooking and care labour.

Bringing this analysis into conversation with the state clarifies both what hustling responds to and what it exposes. In the introduction (Chapter One) and methodology (Chapter Three), I showed how national state and global neoliberal development narratives frame women’s “economic participation” through digitization, training, financial inclusion, and the formalization of micro and small enterprises. In Egypt, these policy logics are articulated through national strategies that celebrate women’s entrepreneurial activity, promote digital upskilling, and present flexible or home-based work as a mechanism of inclusion (Olmsted 2020; Salem 2020; Taha and Salem 2019). However, when read through the lens of women’s everyday labour, these frameworks

appear less as protections than as scripts that assume the problem is limited skills, limited finances, or limited flexibility.

The state is not absent from this chapter's story; it appears in what is delegated, displaced, or withheld. Women's accounts show that workability depends on privately managing risks that state protections might otherwise buffer. Where formalization regimes and regulatory frameworks exist, they are often inaccessible, costly, or poorly aligned with home-based work, producing selective, uneven compliance. Volatility does not disappear; it is rerouted into household budgets and women's bodies. Centring hustling, therefore, does not sidestep the state but reveals how women's informal strategies are shaped by state-led models of participation that promote market inclusion while shifting the costs of instability onto individuals and households.

Framing women's strategies as hustling challenges dominant neoliberal development and "women empowerment" narratives that treat precarity as a deviation from formal waged labour. Rather than addressing the structural roots of precarity, many development initiatives reproduce hierarchies of value that prioritize productivity, profitability, and measurable outputs, while marginalizing the relational, embodied, and socially reproductive forms of labour that sustain everyday life. By equating empowerment with formalization and entrepreneurial success, these frameworks overlook how precarity in informal home-based gig work is actually lived, through inflation, cash-flow pressure, irregular demand, and the household's role as the primary shock absorber.

Women's narratives show that precarity is layered and embodied, and how it is often navigated through moral economies, communal circuits of support, and everyday coordination rather than through employment contracts. This perspective complicates feminist economic frameworks that prioritize formal labour rights, wage equality, or state-led protections as the primary terrain of politics, by demonstrating that economic life is also shaped by the affective, communal, and spiritual dimensions of survival. In women's accounts, *rizq* is not merely religion added onto labour but a practical moral economy through which decisions about risk, timing, reciprocity, and endurance become thinkable and bearable. This intertwining of spirituality and livelihood resonates with Indigenous feminist thought, which similarly foregrounds the deep connections between spiritual teachings, relationships to the land and sustainable economic practices (Simpson 2017; Smith 2012; Starblanket and Stark 2018). By drawing this parallel, I do not claim a direct equivalence between Indigenous and Global South contexts; rather, I highlight

a shared critique of capitalist economies that invisibilize the ethical, relational and spiritual labour that sustains life.

These findings sharpen this dissertation's conceptual intervention of 'stretching' social reproduction. Women's hustling strategies 'stretch' social reproduction by showing how household-based knowledges, relationships, and material arrangements are mobilized to sustain income generation under crisis conditions. Dominant neoliberal discourses describe these practices as "informal coping," but in reality, they are a set of strategies women use to renegotiate the boundaries between production and reproduction. Household budgets function as revolving credit and savings systems; fridges, freezers, and kitchens become productive assets; kin and vendor relationships stabilize supply chains; and women's ethical and spiritual commitments shape pricing, risk, and reciprocity. Here, the productive and reproductive realms are not simply blurred but actively reorganized, as socially reproductive labour becomes a condition for market participation and a means of protecting household continuity.

Precarity cuts across class, but the strategies for navigating it are unevenly resourced. For some, *gam'eyas* and bulk purchasing are urgently needed survival mechanisms; for others, they double as tools for longer-term planning and selective investment. This chapter also highlights a central contradiction: the very practices that enable gig work also intensify the privatization of risk. When regulatory protections, formal financing, and social insurance are inaccessible or extractive, volatility does not disappear. Instead, it is displaced onto households, where women absorb it through unpaid coordination, emotional labour, and bodily endurance. Selective compliance can preserve flexibility, but it also shifts accountability onto women's bodies without ensuring rights, safety, or long-term protection. Household hustling, therefore, does not eliminate precarity; it redistributes its costs and extends the time over which it can be endured.

Finally, this chapter contributes to scholarship on women's informal economies in Egypt and the region (Agha 2019; Cook 2021; Malak and Salem 2017; Salem et al. 2018;) by extending analyses of cost-saving, resource management, and social networks beyond rural settings and into localized urban household economies shaped by digital mediation. While access to capital and platforms is often framed as a barrier to participation in the digital economy (Flanagan 2019; Wallis 2021; Webster and Zhang 2020), women's accounts show how connectivity, devices, and platform features are folded into household budgeting and provisioning and made workable through the same socially reproductive negotiations that sustain food work more broadly. In other words,

“digital opportunity” is not simply accessed; it is financed, maintained, and stabilized through the household. Taken together, these findings redirect analyses of precarity in the gig economy from a narrow focus on platforms and contracts toward the household conditions that make platform labour possible in the first place.

If Chapter Five shows how women sustain work under conditions of uncertainty, the next chapter explores how gendered household duties, moral expectations, and temporal juggling shape women’s participation in home-based gig work. It demonstrates how the household operates at once as a site of value, agency, and possibility, and as a space where the burdens of crisis are unevenly experienced, negotiated, and (re)imagined.

Chapter Six – Negotiating Terms of Participation: (Re)defining Value and Relational Agency



Image 3: Photo taken by the author in a research participant's home in Greater Cairo during ethnographic work

“I love my home, and when I got the opportunity to work and do this project from home, it motivated me to start. After people get their food orders, I hear good words and prayers from them, which keep me going. One message keeps me going, even though it's very tiring and exhausting, your hands hurt, and you could get injured. I make delicious chicken skewers, the '*nafas*' (embodied talent) really makes a difference... I prepare cabbage so it's easy and convenient for a woman to roll. When a working woman comes back home after a long day and wants to prep food for her kids, she would want everything to be ready, including the tomato sauce, which I also prep and the vegetables and everything.”

These were Fatma's reflections when I asked her why she decided to launch her home-based food project. Fatma was one of the *sha'by* women who was married and had two school-aged daughters. While her response is full of seemingly random details, it demonstrates the interconnections among her purpose, talent, spiritual grounding, and efficient resource management, which are embedded in her everyday life and carried into her work practices.

Fatma was one of four women who participated in my ethnographic research. I spent an entire day with her in her home kitchen, where we prepared batches of cabbage leaves for freezing. I walked into the kitchen at 9 AM. It was winter, and Fatma told me I was lucky because the kitchen in the summer is hot and humid. She had already bought ten cabbages from a local market vendor in her neighbourhood, who sells them to her at a discounted wholesale price. Fatma tells me that when it's cabbage season, she buys almost 100 at a time from this vendor, so she is used to selling it in bulk. We begin by peeling the outer leaves of the cabbage, and Fatma instructs me

to put them all in one bag, since she usually gives these leaves to the local butcher, who feeds them to his sheep. *“Nothing goes to waste in this kitchen!”* she laughs, as she points towards stale bread on the counter, letting me know that she will crush it later instead of buying ready-made breadcrumbs from the store.

Fatma asks me to fill two large pots with hot water from the bathroom tub, as her kitchen sink is too small and the water is too cold. We place the pots on the stove and wait for the water to boil. Earlier in the interview, Fatma shared,

“I do all sorts of dishes and food orders using my stove with only four burners, to this day. I rearranged things around the home and got lots of cooking tools. I bought aluminum pans, and I took out the pots and pans my mum got me for my wedding. I bought bigger tools for my work, different than home tools, because I am making meals, so I need bigger tools. But still it wasn’t costly, for people who want to start this project from home, it’s not costly, one can start with pots and pans from home.”



Image 4: Photo taken by the author in a research participant’s home in Greater Cairo during ethnographic work

Image 5: Photo taken by the author in a research participant’s home in Greater Cairo during ethnographic work

My thoughts are interrupted by Fatma’s mobile phone ringing; she picks it up and places it between her headscarf and her ear, and, with her hands free, she begins removing the boiled cabbage leaves from the pot onto a large tray. Fatma comforts her sister on the phone about some family issues she was having, while she pulls a small folding table from behind the fridge and places the tray on it. After hanging up, she asks me to pull up chairs from the living room so we can sit and cut the cabbages.

After she shows me how to layer and cut the cabbage leaves with minimum waste, she takes out tomato sauce and chicken stock from the deep freezer in the living room. She tells me, “There is no space in the kitchen for this extra freezer, but it’s so important for my work, so I had

to buy it and put it in the living room.” Fatma begins to prepare the cabbage mix, explaining that she was lucky enough to buy the rice before its price started rising so much. Soon after, Fatma pulls out a small scale, and we begin packaging the cabbage leaves in Styrofoam containers. She explains that the most important things in her work are ethics, a clear conscience, and making sure her customers get exactly what they need. She mentions that she buys these containers in bulk from a wholesale seller in downtown Cairo and that her daughters and husband usually help her with the packaging. *“Sometimes it’s a cabbage party in this house!”*

At this point of the day, I had lost track of time, but Fatma didn’t. Without a clock on the wall or a watch on her wrist, Fatma knew that her children were on their way back from school and that it would take 10 more minutes for the cabbage stuffing to cook. Indeed, within 10 minutes, her daughters knocked on the door and joined us as we began rolling the cabbage. Fatma and the girls complimented my rolling skills; I laughed and told them that during the COVID-19 pandemic, I spent a lot of time with my best friend rolling cabbages! Fatma was impressed, since many of her customers, who were working women or came from an upper-middle-income background (like myself), considered rolling cabbages or vine leaves a time-consuming and complicated task. She told me that, for her, rolling cabbages was easy, and that she would often do it while watching TV at night or while her daughters were sitting by her doing their homework.



Image 6: Photo of the author at a research participant’s home in Greater Cairo during ethnographic work

Image 7: Photo taken by the author in a research participant’s home in Greater Cairo during ethnographic work

On that note, her daughters left us to do their homework while we placed the cabbage on the stove to be cooked and began cleaning the kitchen. In the meantime, Fatma pulled out the marinated chicken that she had cooked the day before and began reheating it. She told me that she always made sure there was something pre-cooked or leftovers that she could heat and feed her family, especially on a busy day. Once the food was ready, we all sat down together on the floor of the living room and ate from a large tray. Before leaving, Fatma gave me 50 Egyptian pounds, and although I resisted, she told me I must get paid for the hard work that I had done. She then gave me a package of cabbage leaves and told me this was a gift so that I could roll them for my own family.



Image 8: Screenshot of a research participant’s Facebook post on the ethnographic experience

Fatma’s day makes visible the research question (no.3) that this chapter responds to: in what ways does home-based gig work shape women’s agency and economic participation? What enables Fatma’s “participation” is not simply an individual decision to work or a market opportunity she enters as an entrepreneur; rather, it is the ongoing negotiation within and transformation of household life. This matters because dominant development and policy narratives frequently link women’s empowerment to formalization, entrepreneurship, and financial (and now digital) inclusion, a market-based imaginary that critical scholars describe as market feminism (Coburn 2019; Federici 2018b; Price 2019; Wilson 2015). Within this logic, empowerment is often represented through the figure of the *femina economica*: a self-reliant, competitive, profit-oriented woman whose “success” is measured through market participation and separation from household life. Fatma’s account (and women’s narratives across the data) complicates that image. In this context, economic participation emerges not from abandoning

social reproduction, but from working through it. Women's experiences show how the home and market, family and customers, and paid and unpaid labour converge rather than remain neatly divided.

Building on Chapters Four and Five, which established the household as a key site through which social reproduction is 'stretched' into digital and economic life under precarity, this chapter argues that home-based gig work expands women's economic participation by transforming the household into an economic site and work-space, while simultaneously making participation conditional on gendered moral expectations and social norms that can invisibilize and devalue women's labour. Women draw on culturally grounded definitions of value to respond to these conditions and sustain their participation through forms of relational agency embedded in social reproduction.

This chapter first outlines the terms of participation that emerge when home-based gig work is routed through household life, emphasizing how proximity, household routines, and moral self-regulation shape when and how work happens, and at what cost. I then turn to the value of participation, tracing how women articulate legitimacy and meaning beyond market credentials through *nafas* (embodied talent). Through *kayan* (being/becoming) and *istiqlal* (negotiated independence), work is framed as more than mere survival amid uncertainty. Finally, I examine relational agency as the everyday practices that sustain participation: mobilizing kin networks, redistributing labour, managing risk through trust, and securing recognition that counters shame, isolation, and devaluation.

6.1 The Terms of Participation: The Home as a Family and Work Space

Home-based gig work reshapes women's economic participation by enabling paid production within the household rather than outside it. Participation is fostered through proximity and sustained attentiveness by being present with children, monitoring the home, responding to shifting needs, and coordinating multiple timelines at once. Home-based gig work is therefore not just about the convenience of location. Rather, household routines function as production logistics, and socially reproductive labour becomes the very condition of possibility for earning an income. At the same time, this participation is conditional. Women's ability to "work" depends on maintaining domestic order, managing moral and social expectations around marriage and motherhood, and absorbing the costs of "balance" through self-regulation and exhaustion. The home is therefore not only what enables participation; it also sets the terms under which women's

work remains acceptable, recognizable, and sustainable, often demanding strategic invisibility that both protects and devalues women's economic contributions.

6.1.1 Conditions of Participation: Entanglement of Work and Household Routines

Daily household routines shape the conditions of participation by determining when and how food-related work can occur. As a result, women organize production around the rhythms of household life, including children's school schedules, quiet moments in the home, cleaning and laundry cycles, and the ongoing demands of caregiving. Cooking for customers is rarely separated from cooking for family; instead, women 'stretch' one work cycle across multiple obligations, moving in and out of tasks as household needs arise.

Women's participation in home-based gig work was largely shaped by household roles and kin relations: 22 of the 25 women were (or had been) married, and 14 of them had children in daycare or school. These biographies matter because they clarify what "economic participation" looks like in practice. The decision to work from home was shaped by the convergence of economic need with the practical or emotional difficulty of being away from home for long hours. For instance, Sabah's (42 years, *sha'by*-middle income) decision to work was motivated by her husband's sickness and their financial need,

"I had to stay at home for my kids. I got married and stayed at home. You asked me why I started doing this work now. Well, we went through tough financial and economic conditions. But it was hard for me to start working as a mother of four; leaving home was really difficult. My twins were three or four years old. I started thinking a lot about what I can do and how I can bring in more income."

Sabah's narrative captures the tension between economic necessity and the social reproductive responsibilities of remaining emotionally and physically present for her family. She explained, "When you are outside the home, you are missing almost 90% of what is going on at home, you are completely disconnected and unable to focus. It's different when you are at home, and everything is in front of your eyes, you are working and still managing your home." Her reflections illustrate how women organized their households as both living and working spaces, merging income-generating activities and household chores into the same temporal and physical setting. It also clarifies why women's participation is so deeply tied to the household since the work is structured around staying connected to children and domestic life rather than separating from them.

Sabah's daily coordination practices make this dynamic concrete, "I wake up early and do everything I need to do when my kids are still asleep. Sometimes, at night, when the younger ones

are asleep, my older daughter or son helps me with some chores. One day, if I don't have work orders, then I do a big clean up and everything else I need to do." Her account reveals not only multitasking, but the transformation of the household day into a production schedule. Work stretches into the "in-between" hours of early mornings and late nights, while domestic maintenance is redistributed across the week according to order volume. Other women with school-aged children described similar patterns. Doaa (35 years, *sha'by*-middle income) shared, "Sometimes I would be standing in the kitchen cooking, and my son would be studying. I would wash my hands and go help him out. I could be doing something in the kitchen and then forget that I had to clean or organize a room inside, so I leave it and go do that for a bit." These accounts highlight how paid production is organized through the socially reproductive coordination of time and space. "Working from home" is not simply a matter of convenient location; it is a mode of economic participation that relies on women's ability to juggle overlapping tasks (such as cooking, cleaning, supervising children, and managing the household atmosphere) without the clear separations assumed by formal employment.

One of the most important household responsibilities for women was childcare and being available at home when the kids were not in school. This was articulated by Naglaa (39 years, *sha'by*-middle income), who showed that childcare is not only a responsibility to be "handled," but also the core reason home-based work becomes viable. Describing why she started the project, she emphasized the significance of remaining present,

"We started off feeling scared and anxious and didn't really know what to expect, and whether we would grow and profit or not. But it didn't really matter to us because we were in our own space, our home, we were not going outside, we were all sitting at home, and none of us were working, so we were all available, as if we were making extra food for the kids to eat. The kids are around us, and they are in front of my eyes, they are upstairs, I am downstairs, they are studying upstairs, I am close to them, in that sense, I can balance between working, making a profit and giving them a good life while they are still in front of my eyes and studying. I can observe and see what they are up to. So, I gained two things: my kids and the fact that I can work while still being with them and seeing them. I take them to school in the morning, then come back and work, then go to school and pick them up, then come back and continue. Everything is in front of my eyes."

Naglaa's narrative reveals that caregiving was not a task-oriented or temporary practice, but an ongoing presence and engagement in her children's daily lives. When I spent a workday with Naglaa, I noticed how devoted she was to her children; she was constantly checking on them,

texting or calling in the moments between cooking and cleaning. Naglaa repeatedly joked that, whatever task she was doing, her kids were always on her mind, and that she was always juggling multiple thoughts and ideas. This highlights a central condition of women's economic participation, which is the ability to earn an income without being absent from family life.

At the same time, the household entanglements that constrain participation can also generate possibilities. In some cases, women's caregiving role became the very foundation for imagining new forms of work altogether and launching their projects. For instance, Rabab (33 years, middle-income) shared,

“I have two kids, a boy and a girl, he is six years old, and she is one and a half years old. I felt like, as a working woman who comes home at 6 pm, I really scramble to make dinner for my family and that I have to prep for the whole week in advance. I felt like this is a struggle many other women also experience; of course, it's not only me, but they are also going through these issues. So, I started thinking more about the project. My husband is in marketing, so he helped me research and think through my competition.”

Rabab's narrative illustrates how shared experiences of care and constraint became the basis for collective identification and creativity. Her project was not only an economic endeavour but also an expression of solidarity by supporting other women facing similar challenges while generating income from practices already embedded in her daily life.

These dynamics cut across class lines, even as the terms of participation shift. For instance, Samar (42 years, upper-middle income) shared that hiring help was not always feasible, both financially and emotionally. When I asked her about balancing work and household duties, she shared, “I don't have a maid; no one comes to my place because this is an extra financial expense for me, so I do everything myself. I have to take a day off work to clean the home, do laundry, and everything. If I have work every day and leave things until Friday, I am dead tired by then. When I have money, I call someone to come clean.” Her account underlines how the ideal of the self-sufficient, ever-productive woman transcends class boundaries, as middle- and upper-income women also struggle to uphold the moral and material expectations of domestic work.

By contrast, women whose children were older often experienced less stress in balancing their household and family responsibilities with their work. For example, Mona (57 years, *sha'by* income) shared, “Household responsibilities are not a lot. Usually, making food takes the most time, and I send them food from the kitchen here anyway. At night, I turn on the washing machines and finish anything that needs to be done. Plus, my kids are now all much older.” Mona's reflection

highlights that cooking takes the most time, which she can fulfill through her home-based work, and that the remaining tasks are just a matter of organizing time. Both Samar's and Mona's accounts show that participation is built through household coordination, but it is experienced differently. Differences in life stage and material resources reshape what can be absorbed, what can be delegated, and how exhaustion accumulates. Nonetheless, across these variations, the moral and social expectation that women remain competent managers of household life persists.

This subsection demonstrated that women's participation in home-based gig work is enabled by proximity, multitasking, and household coordination. Since this work is embedded in household life, it must remain socially and morally acceptable within it. The next section examines how women manage this acceptability through moral self-regulation and the everyday labour of preserving marital harmony, even as they pursue income generation.

6.1.2 The Social Acceptability of Participation: Moral Self-regulation and Marital Harmony

Women's home-based work was often enabled by moral expectations of being a "good wife" and a "good mother," as well as by the everyday labour of sustaining household harmony. For many of the *sha'by* women, this moral obligation towards care and marital harmony coexisted with economic necessity. The decision to work was not only about earning income but also about preserving their role as caregivers and moral anchors within the household. For example, Rasha (35 years, *sha'by*-middle income), who previously worked full-time in a corporate job, shared how marriage impacted her work decisions, "A few months before getting married, I took a break from work to focus on marriage, and then after I got married, I noticed that it wasn't easy for me to go back to work with all the responsibilities at home, and I didn't want to drop the ball." For her, marriage was a turning point that created a sense of moral obligation towards household duties. Later in the interview, I asked her how she aligned her work and household chores. She explained,

"In the morning, my husband is at work, and that is when I also work. Before my husband comes back from work, the home has to be clean and smell good. I have to consider these things, not because he is easygoing, supportive, and accepts my work, but because I don't force this on him all the time. The home doesn't have to smell like food all the time. I have to consider him and take care of him."

Her reflections show how moral obligations to household duties intersect with emotional needs and internalized expectations of being a "good wife." For Rasha, caring for her husband's needs and feelings involved staying alert to how her work affected him and their shared space. This is more than a question of "balance"; it is a form of moral self-regulation in which women's ability

to participate in paid work is conditioned by domestic femininity and by the insistence that his need for domestic order comes first. The household thus becomes both the place that sets the terms of participation and the site that reinforces a hierarchy of whose comfort and labour count most. The work of “removing evidence” of cooking and cleaning before he comes home maintains the domestic conditions that allow men to center their identity as breadwinners. Meanwhile, women’s income generation remains secondary and often recedes into the background.

Similarly, Huda (33 years, *sha’by*-middle income) was adamant about maintaining a good relationship with her husband and involving him in her work. She shared,

“I try to organize my week. On Fridays, we have breakfast as a family and spend the day at my mother-in-law’s home, and then on Saturdays, we go to my mum’s. The rest of the week is spent at home, and dedicated to the kids and work, that’s it. At home, when the kids go to sleep, I can start prepping. I don’t like sacrificing time with them or quality time with my husband, so if I were to pressure anyone, it would be me. I always try to balance work and my life. When the kids sleep, I spend time with my husband, and I let him know that I have to prep things and ask if he wants to help me out.”

The expectation that women maintain a clean home and keep their husbands content underscores the centrality of marriage in their lives, positioning care and domestic order as both emotional and moral labour. These practices are not only about fulfilling the social ideal of being a “good wife,” but also about nurturing household harmony. Yet the “balance” Huda describes relies on pushing her paid work and rest to the margins of the day: she spends weekends visiting in-laws and her mother, reserves weekdays for childcare and housework, and only starts preparing orders once everyone else is asleep. As a result, her gig work must remain largely invisible and non-disruptive within the household. Although Huda narrates this arrangement as a source of satisfaction and harmony, it also shows that women’s economic activities are organized around the needs of husbands and children, rather than the other way around. The tension between feeling anchored by care and bearing its costs in her own time and body is central to how home-based gig work is experienced and justified.

These pressures were heightened by the moral expectations placed on mothers. Many women chose to work from home, driven by fear and anxiety that they might fail to meet what they saw as their moral and emotional responsibilities to their children. For example, Yasmeen (30 years, *sha’by* income), who was newly married and pregnant, shared, “I have been waiting for a long time to have a home and family... If I feel like my work is impacting my son, then to hell

with all the work. I am not better than a minister who left her job for her kids.” Yasmeen’s words reflect the deep emotional weight attached to motherhood, where being a good mother is seen as the ultimate moral commitment, one that justifies setting aside personal or professional ambitions for the well-being of her children. These tensions were not only experienced by *sha’by* women but also across socioeconomic backgrounds, as social norms around motherhood were upheld and transmitted across generations, often transcending class boundaries. For example, Radwa (38 years, middle-income), who left her work as a teacher to stay at home with her children, explained,

“I am always surprised by working mums, I never understand how they can find balance. I am not blaming her, but if she works until 5 pm, when does she find time for her kids? Then, when she spends time with them, she isn’t able to give her full attention; of course, she is tired and wants to rest. I see people who can do this, but I can’t imagine it. During the period when I worked, I decided that it wasn’t for me.”

Radwa’s narrative reveals how caregiving responsibilities are framed as inseparable from her role as a mother and from her ability to remain emotionally and physically present for her children. Her reflections highlight the moral pressure many women internalize to prioritize social reproductive roles. Working outside the home, or being unable to give their children undivided attention, is often accompanied by feelings of selfishness, guilt, or inadequacy. This sense of shame shows how deeply caregiving and motherhood are embedded in women’s moral identities, where the roles of “good mother” and “good worker” are not mutually exclusive, yet are often experienced in tension with one another.

These narratives show that for women, economic participation must remain socially acceptable within the household even as it shifts toward market-oriented work. Women are not simply “working from home”; they are continually negotiating the coexistence of home and market, mother and worker, domestic femininity and income generation. By ‘stretching’ social reproduction, they gain conditional access to the gig economy, expanding their economic roles while staying accountable to gendered expectations that both enable and constrain their participation. In practice, this often means carefully managing the household atmosphere so that work can continue without disturbing marital harmony or dominant norms of mothering. The following subsection examines how women negotiate these moral terms of participation through flexible schedules and strategies to balance multiple tasks and roles.

6.1.3 Flexibility and the Balance between “rest” and “idleness”

Balancing paid and unpaid work carried significant physical, emotional, and mental burdens for many of the women. The overlapping demands of caregiving, household management, and customer orders often left them exhausted, stretched thin, and with little time for rest. These pressures reveal how women internalize social expectations of care and responsibility, taking it upon themselves to sustain both their families and their work. For example, Rabab (33 years, middle-income) shared,

“I am a very detail-oriented and particular person, and I am passionate about everything I love. I love working; you can’t tell me to just sit at home and raise the kids. I will raise the kids, but I will also work while doing that... This usually takes a toll on me, but I don’t mind exhausting myself because I love it. If I don’t do all these orders, then people will stop ordering from me. If I decline every time, people will look for someone who is regularly available. So, I pressure myself a lot to balance everything, and I am all over the place. I would work on a design, go into the kitchen to check on the food, and then sit with the kids. In the end, I do feel like I burden myself a lot.”

Her words reveal how women’s commitment to balancing family, social reproductive responsibilities, and income generation is often framed as a personal ethic rather than a structural demand. The drive to “do it all” is internalized as moral strength and self-worth, even when it leads to exhaustion.

This sense of pressure also appeared among women with more resources, including those who could partially delegate domestic labour. For example, Manal (56 years, upper-middle-income) explained,

“Because I am a woman, I have to pay attention to certain things, without pressuring myself or neglecting the household. But at first, I put a lot of pressure on myself to manage the home and be there for my daughters, but as they grew up, it became a bit easier. When I have a lot of orders, though, and I still have to cook for my home and husband, then it’s different. There are priorities, so I organize my time differently to make sure I get up early, finish the basic work tasks, succeed and fulfill my duties, and also see what responsibilities I have towards the household. I was keen on organizing myself because I didn’t want my hard work and effort to go to waste, but I also didn’t want to neglect my household needs or let problems arise. That is why I hire a housekeeper to clean the home, which helps save time for me to focus on other things.”

In Manal’s case, over time she continued to fulfill her moral and emotional responsibilities to her family, but she also learned to manage her time more effectively and to rely on paid support for

household chores. As a result, some social reproductive tasks were temporarily transferred to other women through paid work. Nevertheless, her participation remains conditional on not “neglecting the household,” and the responsibility for coordination still falls on her.

Nuha (47 years, upper-middle income) made the contradiction especially visible. On the one hand, she describes the toll of sustaining work alongside family obligations, “Sometimes I have to pull all-nighters to finish work after visiting my parents. There are many times when I find myself so tired that I have a cup of tea and try to relax before starting again. It’s overwhelming. Also, I have to make food. Maybe the thing that doesn’t get done is laundry; there is no time for it. I tell my kids to hang their own clothes.” Yet Nuha also expressed her comfort with feeling free and able to control her own schedule,

“The benefit is that you are in control of your time. I can do whatever I want whenever I want... This flexibility isn’t available in other jobs; you can’t just get up and leave and do other things. I really felt that when I was doing that interview, I realized I would be giving up this advantage if I worked from 9 am to 5 pm. If I want to do anything else during the day besides work, I wouldn’t be able to. I manage my own time; I can pull an all-nighter and cram to run an errand during the day, for example. Another advantage, which could also be a disadvantage, is that you don’t really need to get dressed and commute and so on.”

These two moments illustrate what this chapter calls conditional participation: flexibility is real, but it is often secured at the cost of women’s exhaustion. Sleep is sacrificed, rest is postponed, and household schedules are recalibrated to keep both work and family life running.

A major advantage of working from home and connecting with customers virtually was the time and effort saved. For many women, commuting was experienced as a form of depletion that threatened the feasibility of paid work altogether, particularly under conditions of gendered mobility constraints, long travel times, and the physical strain of moving through crowded spaces. For instance, Yasmeen (30 years, *sha’by* income) shared the challenges and limitations she faced as a single woman commuting from a *sha’by* neighbourhood in her earlier employment outside the home, “My home was really far from the restaurant I worked in, and I had to commute. I had to take multiple modes of transportation, I would get home really late, and that wasn’t comfortable for me as a single woman; it was frowned upon to come home late.” For Yasmeen, avoiding the commute was not just a matter of convenience; it was a way to navigate gendered expectations and social pressures around time, mobility, and respectability.

This was echoed by Sabah (42 years, *sha'by*-middle income), who shared, “I am comfortable being with my kids and managing my home. My kids are right in front of me, and I can take care of them. I am not going outside and struggling.” This implies that Sabah associates her home-based work with dignity and respectability, whereas work outside the home is equated with hardship and struggle. Similarly, Naglaa (39 years, *sha'by*-middle income) articulated this as a redistribution of time and energy across the household day,

“Working from home helped because now I had more energy and effort. If I give my work four hours, I am giving my home another four hours. If I am working from home, then I don’t waste time commuting. You know the roads here in Egypt are crowded and busy, so you spend three hours commuting and get home so tired you just want to sleep and not do anything. Also, when I am making food, I make extra food for my kids, so it’s *tawfeer* (saving) in time and expenses.”

Naglaa’s reflection, like Yasmeen’s and Sabah’s, captures how commuting becomes a structural barrier to labour market participation, not only because it consumes hours, but also because it drains the bodily capacity needed to sustain both paid and unpaid work. Home-based gig work does not remove the burden; rather, it reallocates effort away from commuting and toward the household, enabling one cooking cycle to serve both customers and family.

Women frequently described this flexibility using the word *berahty*, which broadly translates as 'free' but also conveys a sense of comfort. For example, Doaa E (37 years, upper-middle income, operates an informal rented kitchen) who was managing her food vending project alongside a part time remote corporate job, shared, “No one is controlling you, and you are not committed or obliged to wake up early, I work *berahty* and divide my time and work freely, it’s different than working for someone.” Working from home, therefore, gave women greater control over their own rhythms of life, allowing them to resist the rigid structures of formal employment that often overlook women’s social reproductive responsibilities.

Women’s experiences reveal a tension between their inability to rest and their discomfort with being idle. Balancing household, motherhood, and paid work responsibilities often comes at the expense of rest or leisure. Women with younger children, in particular, have less free time because they feel obliged to attend to their children’s needs. Consequently, they experience their time as not entirely under their control. For example, Radwa (38 years, middle-income) shared, “I prioritize the home, which means I sometimes must pressure myself and work extra at night or when the kids go to school. This means I have less time to sleep or rest, but still, it’s better than laziness. I don’t like just sitting around and doing nothing, even for a few days. I get bored and

feel like I must do something.” Despite the physical burden, women gig workers felt uncomfortable when idle and were moved to work by their restlessness. However, this discomfort must also be situated within broader discourses that frame idleness as failure and valorize productivity, especially for women of the Global South. For many, the desire to ‘not sit around’ reflects not only personal drive but also internalized moral and racialized pressures to be constantly active and useful. Zizi (54 years, middle-income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared, “My kids tell me they want me to rest. I told them that if you think that not working will help me rest, you are wrong. If you tell me to sit, it’s like you are sentencing me to death. I won’t be able to.” As such, these narratives reveal a tension between exhaustion and the affective demands of being perceived as productive.

Although most women struggled with feelings of idleness during slower work periods, many intentionally used that time in meaningful ways. They rested and reset, spent time with family, traveled when possible, or simply disconnected from the daily routines of household and paid work. This subsection illustrates that flexibility is indeed real, but it is constantly negotiated through sleep, self-imposed pressure, and moralized ideas of productivity.

This section demonstrated how “working from home” is not simply a convenience or a location; it is a mode of economic participation that depends on women’s capacity to remain continuously available while holding together overlapping responsibilities without the separations assumed by formal employment. This is ‘stretching’ social reproduction in action since participation is enabled through proximity (being present for children), everyday flexibility (working around school and sleep), and the performance of household harmony (cleanliness, smell, emotional attentiveness). However, this participation is conditional since women’s work is continuously negotiated within gendered expectations that can invisibilize and devalue it. It is from within these constraints that women articulate what makes participation valuable and worth sustaining. In the next section, I examine culturally grounded concepts embedded in women’s daily lives that they use to define legitimacy and meaning on their own terms.

6.2 (Re)defining the ‘Value’ of Participation: Legitimacy and Meaning of Home-based Work

This section shows how women explain the value of home-based work on their own terms. Rather than starting from formal credentials, professional kitchens, or narrow ideas of “entrepreneurial success,” women repeatedly returned to concepts that helped them name what makes their work real, meaningful, and legitimate. *Nafas* captures how value is felt and recognized

through taste, care, and a distinctive touch. *Kayan* captures how work becomes tied to purpose and feeling “alive.” *Istiqlal* captures how income matters because it creates room to act under uncertainty without constant dependence. Together, these concepts show how women ‘stretch’ social reproduction into a site of value and meaning, where legitimacy is built through embodied skill, everyday recognition, and household realities.

6.2.1 Embodied talent and legitimacy: *Nafas*

“When someone does something while feeling content and happy, things turn out to be tasty, even if it’s leftover food. It’s all about *nafas*.” (Reda, 44 years, *sha’by* income background)

Reda’s reflection demonstrates that she was evaluating her cooking skills based on non-material, emotional factors, embodied in what she calls ‘*nafas*’. The Arabic word *nafas* literally means “breath,” but people commonly use it to refer to a person’s distinctive “touch” in cooking. Across interviews, *nafas* was explicitly mentioned by 12 of the 25 women, across age and socioeconomic backgrounds, as a way of naming the non-measurable, quantifiable, unique talent they embody in the act of cooking. In this section, I analyze how women define and embody *nafas* in home-based gig work, and how it becomes a pathway into participation by producing legitimacy, differentiation, and value on terms not reducible to market credentials. While Chapter Four demonstrates how domestic competence serves as the foundation for income generation, this section goes further. It shows how *nafas* is about the ways women name and define value, authorize themselves as capable, and enter the market without conceding that legitimacy must come from formal certification, standardized expertise, or platform logics.

For many women, *nafas* was not a decorative description of skill; it was what made participation feel possible in the first place. Women repeatedly narrated *nafas* as “how it all started,” where recognition by others became the condition for trusting their own talent enough to sell food. For instance, Maryouma (49 years, *sha’by* income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared, “People started tasting my food and smelling it, they would tell me you have very good *nafas*. They would say, ‘No way home food could taste this good. Your food is amazing.’ They were amazed by my food and its cleanliness.” Similarly, Hanady (47 years, *sha’by* income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared, “Anyone who tries my food really enjoys it. I have very good *nafas*, and that is how it all started.” In both Maryouma’s and Hanady’s cases, *nafas* was a skill they embodied and could use to earn income and support their families. Maryouma had

completed a middle school degree, and Hanady had a commerce diploma, which limited their work opportunities in a competitive economy that prioritized hiring higher-education graduates and younger workers. As women describe it, *nafas* reframes cooking not as repetitive domestic labour but as a creative, embodied, and value-generating skill. In both cases, participation is driven not only by necessity or the pursuit of “balance,” but is also enabled by recognition and social validation. Here, standards of value are socially shared rather than rooted in institutional certification.

Women also used *nafas* to convey that their work holds value in a competitive food economy without relying on standardization. Samar (42 years, upper-middle income) captured this clearly, “Even if you sit all day and watch what people do, at the end, there is something called *nafas*, which means that you are not just copying what you see, you have to add your own touch.” *Nafas* names what cannot be copied simply by watching tutorials or following recipes, since the personal and embodied element is what makes food distinctive. This is why Fatma could say, “I didn’t taste other people’s work, but when I attend courses and taste the food, I feel like it’s basic. When I come back and make it here at home, I feel I have better *nafas*.” Amid a competitive food-tech economy and a global array of cuisines with diverse recipes and options, women had to find ways to navigate these pressures and remain grounded in their talent. This was echoed by Omayma (54 years, *sha’by*-middle income), “The internet is full of recipes, so it’s ok if I share with people, it’s not about the recipe, it’s about how the food is made and the *nafas*, that’s what determines how good it turns out to be.” Omayma’s reflection reveals how *nafas* gave her the reassurance and motivation to share her knowledge without fear of competition. Once again, it was a talent they felt belonged to them, not dictated by the rules of the market. Taken together, Samar’s, Fatma’s and Omayma’s accounts demonstrate a different way of thinking about competitive advantage. *Nafas* becomes a language of differentiation that refuses the idea that value is produced only through professionalization, certification, or standardized expertise. Women position themselves in the market through quality, authenticity, and a personal touch, using a language of talent that is difficult to quantify, compare, or fully commodify.

Nafas is not a static talent, but one that constantly evolves and is nurtured through creativity, exploration and sensory learning. For example, Rabab (33 years, middle-income) shared, “I have powerful taste buds, so I try to taste everything and determine the different flavours and then add them to my cooking. This is how I started learning more, in addition to my existing

experience and my mum, of course, God bless her, she taught me so much. People say I took my mum's *nafas*.” Rabab’s reflection demonstrates that her senses were an essential component of her ability to draw on her existing knowledge and inherited talent. Similarly, Huda (33 years, *sha’by*-middle income) shared, “I have really good *nafas* and love to innovate and create new food and put my own touch”. For Huda, cooking tapped into her passions and interests, but her *nafas* also encouraged her to explore further and innovate. In this way, *nafas* becomes a form of experiential learning, a process through which women experiment, sense, and refine their craft beyond formal training or certification. Within their home-based work, women were claiming expertise even when formal labour markets dismissed domestic competence as ‘unskilled’.

Nafas was embedded not only in socially reproductive knowledges but also in relationalities, where many women referred to it as a criterion for deciding whether to collaborate or seek advice. Doaa (35 years, *sha’by*-middle income) explained, “I have a sister and niece who have very good *nafas*, and I want them to be with me, also my neighbour or my mum. I want to find people who love food, not just those who work for money, no, I want people who love the food they make.” Similarly, Rasha (35 years, *sha’by*-middle income) linked her entry into home-cooked food to her mother-in-law, “What encouraged me to pursue home-cooked food was my mother-in-law. I always used to see international recipes, I would translate them and try them out, so I was interested. But her *nafas* is amazing, and she encouraged me, then she and I started cooking for customers together.” These reflections reveal how women’s creative and emotional investments in their work also shape their market relationships and decisions around collaboration. For many, *nafas* was not just a personal skill but also a criterion for whom they trusted to work with, support, or recommend. Rather than seeking formal credentials, women often chose to collaborate with others who demonstrated *nafas*, a love for food, an attention to detail, and a commitment to nurturing others.

Read together, these accounts show that *nafas* is not simply “skill.” It is a culturally grounded standard of value, and a pathway through which women claim legitimacy within the constraints outlined in Section 6.1. *Nafas* offers a (re)conceptualization of talent beyond material skills and abilities that can be quantified and measured. What is valued in the home when preparing food for loved ones is also valued by customers, but women do not enter the market by leaving household life behind. Instead, *nafas* shows ‘stretching’ social reproduction in action, whereby women transform socially reproductive knowledges into income-generating activities, maintaining

value as grounded in the person, the process, and the relationships that make this work recognizable.

At the same time, *nafas* should not be romanticized as pure freedom. It can be a source of confidence and legitimacy. Still, it can also intensify expectations to always “produce quality,” to endure, and to keep giving, especially when women’s participation remains conditional on household responsibilities and moral acceptability. *Nafas*, therefore, does not erase the constraints of household life; instead, it operates within them. The following subsection remains with the theme of value by turning to two concepts women used to describe what work does for them beyond income: *kayan* (being/becoming, purpose) and *istiqlal* (negotiated independence). Together, these concepts show how economic participation is pursued as a source of meaning-making and security within household relations, rather than as detachment from them.

6.2.2 Pursuing Purpose and Negotiated Independence: *Kayan* and *Istiqlal*

“This project is my *Kayan*, it makes me feel like I am alive, that I have a purpose.”

- Omayma

“I feel I have purpose. I don’t only work so that I can make my own money and buy what I want. I feel free and happy because I am doing something for myself.”

- Nuha

Omayma (54 years, *sha’by*-middle income) and Nuha (47 years, upper-middle income) come from very different backgrounds, in terms of age, class, education, and family life. One has young children; the other lives alone. Their household needs and skill sets differ. However, what brings them together is a shared desire to feel a sense of purpose and fulfillment in their everyday lives. Despite differences in social and economic backgrounds or prior work experience, the women I interviewed shared a common motive for launching their food-vending projects: to use their time in ways that felt meaningful, valuable, and self-affirming.

Within this context, I draw on a concept that women explicitly used, *kayan*, which literally translates as ‘being’ and derives from *kwn*, meaning ‘building’ or ‘becoming’. Women described their work as a means of strengthening their *kayan*, not only as income generation, but as a process of constructing a purposeful and fulfilling life. *Kayan* captures the emotional and existential dimensions of women’s economic lives, revealing a sense of being “alive,” of growing, and of becoming more fully themselves through their work. *Kayan* was reinforced as women expanded

their customer base, learned new techniques, and experimented with services and presentation, cultivating self-actualization grounded in passion, care, and belonging.

Closely connected to *kayan* was the concept of *istiqlal*, or independence. As Huda (33 years, *sha'by*-middle income) reflects, “In my opinion, a woman must be independent and have her own *kayan*. We do not have to assume the worst, but nothing in life is guaranteed. If my husband has financial problems, then I can support him.” Women’s sense of purpose wasn’t just emotional or psychological; it depended on real, material conditions. In a very unstable economy, women tied their everyday material situation to their sense of independence (*istiqlal*) to gain more space to act and make decisions within the household. Huda further reflected, “Something was missing inside me, I had to do something, I can’t just sit like that. Now I am happy because I can do anything I want. Suppose I want to join an event or buy something for someone, I can, without pressuring my husband or burdening him. It feels very nice to have *istiqlal*.” In this sense, *istiqlal* is less about separation from the household and more about reducing dependency and expanding decision-making capacity, enabling spending, supporting, and planning without constant negotiation or fear of burdening others.

Istiqlal offered women a sense of control and financial security while remaining embedded in family networks. This was especially clear in accounts where *istiqlal* was described as avoiding debt, meeting household needs, and not having to ask others for money. Naglaa (39 years, *sha'by*-middle income) explained, “We were able to spend money for the kids to go to school, for us to spend on food, and for me not to have to borrow money. That was the most important thing for me: I wouldn’t need anyone or ask anyone for anything, not even my husband. I have what I need and what is enough for me and for my home, to live.” Naglaa’s reflection shows that *istiqlal* was not a direct struggle for power but a way to reduce dependency, manage household needs, and make decisions without waiting for approval or financial help. This was echoed by Fatma (44 years, *sha'by* income), who shared, “Amin [husband] works, but we are all in this together. My main goal is to provide what my kids need. I am standing by him and supporting him, and the money goes into the household so I can buy something for my kids or myself.” Naglaa’s and Fatma’s accounts reveal that men were still expected to remain the primary financial providers. At the same time, women’s earnings and efforts enhanced the household’s overall financial security and enabled them to offer tangible support.

In many cases, women gig workers used their income primarily to cover family needs rather than personal luxuries, yet they also took pride in reinvesting in their own work. Their satisfaction came not only from earning money but also from directing it toward their projects, reinforcing a strong sense of ownership and achievement. For example, Doaa (35 years, *sha'by*-middle income) shared, “I renovated my kitchen and bought a deep freezer from my own work money. I was so happy and proud, even though my husband wanted to give me money for it, but I refused and told him I wanted to buy it with my own work money.” For Doaa and others, financial independence did not mean separation from household responsibilities, but rather strengthening their ability to contribute, support, and grow alongside them. The personal, family, and work spheres were not experienced in opposition but rather as overlapping and mutually reinforcing.

Kayan and *istiqlal* were not pursued in a social vacuum. Women repeatedly described how independence had to be negotiated inside gendered norms of provision, respectability, femininity and, for some, inside histories of violence and fear. Zizi (54 years, middle-income, operates an informal rented kitchen), for example, described women’s work as threatening gender roles and marital life:

“I think women should get a good education, but this whole thing about equality and all this, I don’t support. After I go out and I work, I lose my womanhood and femininity; I told you I don’t exist. Why should I be equal to a man? Allah has a system in place; the man should be responsible for me, I shouldn’t be responsible for him or partner with him. I should be a partner when it comes to the home, kids, and raising them. When I leave this part behind, who am I leaving it to? When I tell a man I am just like you and help him, will he help me in return? After working, my femininity will go away. He wants to come back home at the end of the day and find a woman there, and you are no longer that woman.”

Zizi’s reflection illustrates that for some women, the gendered division of labour was not necessarily perceived as something to be challenged or overturned. Instead, her account reveals how women’s social reproductive labour remains meaningful and morally valued, shaping the terms on which *istiqlal* can be pursued.

Yasmeen (30 years, *sha'by* income) shared a perspective that demonstrated a different kind of negotiation, where financial independence is desired, but also carefully managed to avoid men becoming dependent and to protect women’s safety.

“When you have money, you can control things in your life, you will increase your income not just to buy more food, drinks and clothes, no, you feel like you have money and you have a *dahr* (backbone). Honestly, I am not going to be spending money on the household, so my husband doesn’t get used to this idea.

But if I find that my son may want something that costs a lot of money, no way I'll have the money for it and hide it. This way, increasing my income benefits my kids and me. It's not about greed. My husband is good and kind, thank God. But still, I am talking about other people's stories, including one of my sisters who got divorced because of such problems, because he was dependent on her work, she worked as a tailor and was good at what she did, and when she stopped working, he beat her up. When a man depends on you to have the money, that's it. When he sees me working for extra income or for my children, he'll be happy, but I still don't want him thinking it's the main source of income. I want to invest in a project or in my kids' school. What I wasn't able to do for myself, I want to do for them. I worked when I was twelve years old so my sisters could go to school. My parents got divorced early on; my dad refused to provide for us, and my mum was at home. We used to eat cheap food; you don't want to see your kids go through the hardships that you went through."

Yasmeen's narrative reveals the complex negotiations women face between aspiration and constraint, balancing their pursuit of independence and self-fulfillment with fears of disrupting social expectations around gendered roles and provision. Her reflection also exposes the emotional and physical forms of strain and violence that women experience under conditions of poverty and precarity.

These contrasting accounts reflect not only differing viewpoints but also distinct generational positions and life-course trajectories, rather than fixed attitudes toward gender or work. Zizi's narrative, shaped by a long marital history and entrenched expectations around provision and femininity, represents a generation for whom women's labour was closely tied to moral respectability and domestic presence. In contrast, Yasmeen's account is informed by early entry into paid work, exposure to economic precarity, and direct experiences of family breakdown and violence. For younger women like Yasmeen, *istiqlal* is pursued in pragmatic and defensive ways, calibrated to secure material stability and personal safety without destabilizing household relations. In this sense, generational location shapes how gendered norms are taken up, negotiated, and reworked as women navigate shifting economic conditions, changing marital expectations, and continuing insecurity. These accounts show that women evaluate "good participation" primarily in terms of moral safety and household stability, rather than earnings alone. Rather than functioning as an automatic source of empowerment, *istiqlal* emerges as a negotiated practice, oriented primarily toward avoiding conflict and harm. Situating these experiences within Egypt's gendered division of labour highlights how women's contributions to household survival coexist with persistent risks of control and gender-based violence. At the same time, research indicates

that participation in paid work can strengthen women's bargaining power and influence in family decision-making, which may in turn reduce their vulnerability to violence (Abouelenin 2022; Sadania 2016).

Tensions often existed between social norms that positioned men as the sole income earners and the value women placed on earning their own income and affording personal items. Many women described ways to balance and negotiate these expectations. For instance, Hanady (47 years, *sha'by* income, operates an informal rented kitchen) explained,

“*Hamdolah* (thank God), my husband never deprived me of anything. I got whatever I wanted, but for you to work and hustle and exhaust yourself and find in return for this work money in your hands, that's an entirely different feeling; it has a new taste to it. My son's bride wants to work, and he is saying no, but I am on her side. If I had a daughter who is educated and able to work a respectable job, then, of course, she should work. It builds a *kayan*, or entity, for her; she is able to have an opinion and a say in things, and to have her own money that she can use to drink, dress up, or do whatever. This is my advice as a mother, ofcourse finish your studies and work, even if you are married to a millionaire, you have to work, your entire *kayan* and life is in your work.”

Hanady's reflection underscores how women framed work not only as income, but as a foundation for selfhood, voice, and legitimacy. Here, *Kayan* is framed as something built through practice, effort, and recognition.

Taken together, *kayan* and *istiqlal* show that women's participation is evaluated on more than income alone. Women undertake paid work to cultivate selfhood and purpose while also securing room to maneuver amid volatility without constant dependency. Yet these pursuits remain constrained and continually negotiated within gendered norms of provision and respectability and, for some women, exposure to control or violence. *Kayan* and *istiqlal* thus clarify why “independence” cannot be read as a straightforward story of empowerment; rather, it is a conditional, negotiated capacity to act from within household relations.

This section has shown that women do not primarily understand participation as entrepreneurial “success,” but as meaningful value-making: embodied skill and care, a sense of purpose, and material space to act amid volatility. This is ‘stretching’ social reproduction in action. Women convert socially reproductive knowledges and moral worlds into income-generating practices while keeping value rooted in the person, the household, and the relationships through which legitimacy is recognized. Yet these forms of value do not automatically yield sustained participation. Participation must be maintained within the household through negotiation,

coordination, and labour redistribution. The next section, therefore, shifts from value to relational agency: the everyday practices through which women mobilize kin networks, manage risk and respectability, and secure recognition so that home-based gig work can endure and grow.

6.3 Relational Agency: Family Networks, Collaboration, and Recognition

This section shows that women's agency and economic participation are sustained through family and community networks, where support is both material (labour, time, outsourcing) and also moral/affective (encouragement, pride, validation). Relational agency captures the everyday practices that make women's participation both possible and worthwhile: redistributing labour, managing risk through trust, and securing recognition that counters shame, isolation, and devaluation.

6.3.1 Family Support and Redistribution of Labour to Sustain Participation

Home-based gig work is often portrayed as "flexible" simply because it occurs within the household. Yet women's continued participation depends on more than just where the work is done. It is sustained through relational agency, the everyday ability to mobilize support, redistribute labour, and draw on trusted kin networks to keep work possible under conditions of time scarcity, bodily exhaustion, and uncertainty. Across interviews, women described how participation depends on others stepping in, sometimes for work tasks (deliveries, troubleshooting orders, cooking help, social media posting), and sometimes for non-work tasks (childcare, household duties). These accounts reveal that "working from home" is not the privatized solution it might seem to be. Rather, it is a mode of economic participation that is collectively organized and relationally sustained.

Several women described spousal support not simply as "help," but as a strategy that keeps the home-based project functioning. For example, Rasha (35 years, *sha'by*-middle income) explained that she intentionally involved her husband in her everyday decisions so that work problems could be solved quickly without escalating household stress.

"I ask my husband for his opinion all the time. Even if there is a problem in an order, he tells me what to do, if there is a late order he figures out a way or someone to deliver it, if I need something from outside and he can't bring it then he finds a way, if I get a late night order then he goes out and gets the stuff I need. Honestly, he really supports me and helps me."

Rasha's account shows how women's participation is sustained through continuous negotiation of household relations, where support is not guaranteed but cultivated through involvement, communication, and everyday reciprocity. Huda (33 years, *sha'by*-middle income) similarly framed her husband's support as both practical and affective,

"My husband values me, and he sees that I work hard and am exhausted, so he looks out for me and offers to help me out with work or household duties. Sometimes he cooks with me. His support makes me feel mentally and emotionally at ease, and I can rest without feeling pressured. We are all able as a family to take care of each other and offer comfort and support."

Both Huda and Rasha's narratives show that participation is not simply a woman "balancing" two spheres. It is a household-level reorganization of labour that sometimes blurs gendered boundaries, not necessarily through direct contestation, but through pragmatic adjustments that keep household life functioning while work expands.

Women's preference for kin-based support also reveals why trust matters to the organization of labour in informal home-based enterprises. Because the workspace is the home and because reputation, cleanliness, and moral boundaries are integral to legitimacy, many women preferred family or neighbours over hiring paid workers. Reda (44 years, *sha'by* income background) explained this clearly, "When I am pressured, I can ask my sister to come help me out. But I don't like any strangers to work with me." Here, kinship is not only economic pragmatism; it is also a strategy of risk management. Bringing "strangers" into home-based work can threaten intimacy, safety, and control. Trust preserves the moral boundaries of the household while also ensuring that labour and income circulate within relations that feel safer and more dependable than those of the external market. This becomes especially visible in delivery work, where many women relied on husbands or male relatives rather than couriers. For instance, Huda (33 years, *sha'by*-middle income) shared,

"My husband is the one who delivers, so I prepare everything, and we have the delivery bag for him to be able to take the orders and deliver them. We count this delivery cost as another source of income for him. My husband sees how tired I am and how much effort and energy I put into the work all night, so he is always keen on delivering things carefully and for things to have a good appearance when they reach the customer."

Huda's account reveals how family labour extended the ethics of care into the marketplace. Her husband's participation ensured that the work remained within trusted domestic relations while transforming delivery into an additional source of household income. In this sense, agency is

exercised not only through “doing more,” but through governing who participates in the labour process, how risk is managed, and how value circulates inside the household.

Intergenerational support, especially from mothers, was another recurring condition for sustaining participation, particularly after marriage and motherhood. Rabab (33 years, middle-income) reflected on her mother’s continued presence as what allowed her to manage high seasons and moments of overwhelm,

“At the beginning, I used to run into problems when it came to balancing my work, household and the project. My mum honestly helped me a lot. Until now, Mama has been with me on the project, so thank God she is carrying a lot of my burden. Sometimes I am under a lot of stress and unable to manage everything; she covers for me and helps me. During high seasons, we hire people to come help us.”

Similarly, Omniya (35 years, middle-income) emphasized that both economic limits and moral caution shaped her reliance on her mother,

“I work alone, but when I have a lot of work and am under pressure, my mum helps me out. She asks me to tell her what to do. I don’t like to bring in someone I don’t know to work with me. First, the profit isn’t big enough for me to afford to pay someone else. Second, you know when you really care about something, you are more cautious about your decisions.”

In both Omniya’s and Rabab’s cases, their mothers’ involvement was rooted in trust and shared expertise, making their collaboration both practical and affective. At the same time, these examples highlight a key tension of relational agency: women often sustain their participation by relying on the unpaid labour and time of other women in the family, particularly when market alternatives (such as hiring help or outsourcing) are financially out of reach or perceived as morally risky. As a result, “support” operates as both care and extraction, illustrating how home-based gig work ‘stretches’ social reproduction by further intensifying the circulation of labour within kin networks.

As children grow older, the direction of care can shift as well. Reda (44 years, *sha’by* income background) described how her sons took on household responsibilities in ways that reduced the daily burden of domestic labour, “My sons are cooperative when it comes to the household. I don’t like laziness, and they know this. Whoever eats washes his dish afterwards, or washes his own clothes, or cleans his bed. I clean my home once a week.” Reda’s narrative reveals how socially reproductive relationalities within the family are not fixed or linear but evolve. As women age and their children grow, care is renegotiated through reciprocity, responsibility, and love, which is another way participation is sustained through redistributed domestic labour rather

than individual endurance. At the same time, the language of “cooperation” points to the gendered politics of household work, in which boys’ contributions may be framed as voluntary “help.” In contrast, girls’ contributions are more often naturalized as duty. These differences matter because they shape whose time becomes available and whose labour becomes expected as women’s projects grow.

Finally, family support extended beyond cooking and household chores. It also shaped women’s ability to use digital platforms, particularly when age, limited exposure, or socioeconomic barriers undermined their confidence in posting and uploading content on platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. Mona A (56 years, middle-income) described her reliance on her daughter Aya to manage social media, including moments when her own attempts went wrong, “Aya encouraged me by posting content and engaging with customers. Until now, I don’t really know how to manage online posts. I am not even an admin on the page, and I mess things up. One time, she [Aya] was with her friends and had to come back quickly to delete posts I made.” Mona A’s narrative reflects how intergenerational knowledge transfer facilitates women’s engagement with technology, blending traditional and digital practices. Her acknowledgement of a learning curve and her willingness to develop technical skills highlight that her work was rooted in established, trust-based forms of expertise and collaboration. Similarly, Zizi (54 years, middle-income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared how her daughter encouraged her to expand her online presence,

“At one point, all orders were through the mobile phone, word of mouth and people telling each other, but it wasn’t enough and social media started becoming more popular, so we started a Facebook page. Then Habiba [daughter] told me that not everyone uses Facebook and that Instagram also has many potential customers, so she created the Instagram account. I personally don’t use it.”

These accounts show that digital engagement is not simply an individual “skill.” It is a relational form of access in which trusted kin networks and intergenerational knowledge transfer mediate women’s participation in platform spaces.

Another example was Roaaya (42 years, *sha’by* income), where her digital participation was also affective. Her daughter’s encouragement helped her overcome her fear and hesitation about online visibility and market exposure,

“My daughter Koky was the one who told me we want to do YouTube videos and that she will take videos of me. But I am afraid, what if I say something wrong, or something doesn’t work out? But she tells me no. She is comfortable with being

on camera and wants to start a channel for me. She tells me you can make so much money out of it. She tells me I will be a blogger. They are always on YouTube. I will try, I will make videos, and I will upload that content at some point.”

Across these examples, platform use emerges as a shared relational grounded in care, interdependence, and trust. This digital labour is frequently gendered, whereby daughters, nieces, and younger women are commonly positioned as default “helpers,” extending feminized care work into the business's administrative and promotional tasks. Men and sons also participate, but more often in roles framed as management, logistics, or “the business side” (as with Hanady’s son), highlighting how digital work is unevenly valued depending on who performs it.

There was only one woman, Naglaa (39 years, *sha’by*-middle income), for whom this digital support took a more explicitly reciprocal and compensatory form, in which younger kin’s digital labour was paid and framed as income-generating for them as well. Naglaa shared,

“My husband’s niece was good at taking pictures, and she was professional in using the internet. I am not. I am not really into the internet; I am old (giggling). But she knows, and she takes good pictures and knows how to post online. We would give her money in return for her work, and she benefited from that since she was a university student, and this helped her earn income alongside her studies.”

Naglaa’s account is notable because it makes compensation visible. It shows that although kin-based labour is often unpaid and framed as “help,” it can also become explicitly transactional under certain conditions. This is especially true when the helper is a student, the labour is time-intensive, or extended kin rather than immediate family members are involved.

Importantly, these dynamics extend beyond married women or mothers. Single women also described family relations as shaping what kinds of online visibility and work practices were possible. For instance, Doaa H (40 years, middle-income) shared how her parents were hesitant about her inviting food bloggers to her home,

“My parents were not OK with the influencers coming to film at home, in the first place. They were like, 'How can we let people into our home to film our kitchen?' My mum and dad were objecting, but my fiancé was supportive. I told him I was worried; he would tell me, 'No, you can do this.' Then I told them, 'Listen, they are coming on that day.' Even in the video, he wanted to film my mum, and she hid her face and didn’t want to be featured (laughing).”

By contrast, Doaa E (37 years, upper-middle income, operates an informal rented kitchen) was another single woman who received support from her family to launch the project, with her mother

sometimes supporting her in cooking and her sister promoting her work to her own social network. She shared, “My sister only orders food from me now, because she works full time and always used to order food from someone, so now she orders from me. She pays like any regular customer, by the way, it’s very professional.” Doaa E’s narrative highlights the multiple positionalities that family members can hold within women’s work, from sources of constraint to forms of care and support.

This subsection has shown that home-based gig work is collectively sustained: women remain economically active not solely through individual choice, but through redistributed labour, trust-based collaboration, and intergenerational support that together uphold economic participation within the household. Women’s agency is relational as they ‘stretch’ existing networks of care, labour, and support from their everyday lives into their work activities. Family support not only makes participation practically possible; it also shapes whether participation feels worth sustaining. In the next subsection, I examine how collaboration and recognition (being seen, encouraged, and affirmed) help women overcome shame, isolation, and the emotional costs of home-based work, and how reciprocity becomes central to their imagination of growth and success.

6.3.2 Emotional Support and Recognition

If the previous subsection showed that women’s economic participation is materially sustained through redistributed labour, this subsection shows that participation is also emotionally and morally sustained through relational agency, where women negotiate shame, recognition, pride, and visibility. In a context where cooking remains culturally coded as “domestic” and therefore easily dismissed, women’s ability to persist depended on whether their labour could be recognized as meaningful, respectable, and worth sustaining.

In several cases, women described receiving encouragement from older female relatives who recognized the value of work for self-worth and independence. Rasha (35 years, *sha’by*-middle income), for example, explained how her mother-in-law supported her in learning and launching her project, which is an important form of validation in a context where women sometimes felt embarrassed or judged for doing home-based work, especially when their families valued formal or professional jobs more highly. She shared, “I faced a problem with my family. I used to work for a company and drive a car, and my parents were proud of me and spoke highly of me, but now I have left all that and am sitting at home cooking. It was really hurtful, but I

managed to overcome it.” Such reflections highlight the tension between the social prestige of formal employment and the moral and affective value of home-based work, particularly cooking, which remains seen as a domestic, undervalued activity. This sense of shame was prevalent among women from upper-middle-income backgrounds who had previously worked in corporate jobs. For example, Doaa E (37 years, upper-middle income, operates an informal rented kitchen) shared,

“Mum helped me at the beginning, but her famous words are always that this project isn’t for me (laughing). It’s not that she is bringing me down, but she knows the level of *maghood* (effort) that I put in, and it’s a lot for me. I started complaining about how exhausting it is. She is objecting to the idea of being in the kitchen, so she wants me to hire more people to do that work.”

Doaa E’s narrative reflects how mothers often wanted what they believed was “better” or more comfortable for their daughters, protecting them from physical exhaustion or the stigma associated with kitchen work, which is manual work after all, despite the importance of creativity and *nafas*. These intergenerational conversations reveal how women continuously renegotiate what counts as valuable, respectable, and fulfilling labour.

At other moments, women’s relational agency took the form of actively seeking (or being surprised by) affirmation. For example, Radwa (38 years, middle-income) shared,

“Honestly, I personally thought my family would disapprove of this project. My dad and mum are bank managers, and my brother is an engineer. We do not have anyone in our family who does similar work. I thought that when I told them that, they would not talk to me again (giggling), but I found them all encouraging and motivating, which was strange. Everyone told me to go ahead, and they were the first to get me customers. My mum was the first one who got her friends to order, and my sister’s friend ordered a birthday cake, even my in-laws, and of course, my husband, he said OK, of course, go ahead. Everyone was happy.”

Radwa’s reflection demonstrates how women valued their family’s opinions and perspectives, and how socially reproductive relationalities shaped their work decisions and how they felt about the project. It was meaningful for women gig workers when their family members were proud of them. For example, Abeer (39 years, upper-middle income) shared, “Seeing my kids proud of me makes me really happy, for them to watch me on TV and give me great feedback, it made me feel like I am doing something that matters.” Here, agency was not only personal but also relational, sustained through networks of affirmation and recognition embedded in socially reproductive relationalities within the household.

At the same time, several women described how home-based digital work can intensify social isolation. The market relationship is mediated through screens, limiting everyday social contact and amplifying the sense of invisibility. Hala (39 years, upper-middle income) reflected, “Because my work is from home, I am on my own, and the consumer is behind a screen, and I barely interact with them, only when I hand over a product, so there is no social life.” Manal (56 years, upper-middle-income) echoed this loss of rhythm and social presence, “Working from home is not always nice though because I love meeting and socializing with people, I like to dress up and go to work and come back from work, but now I wake up and go to the kitchen.” At the same time, these accounts also point to how class shapes the meaning of visibility in home-based work. For women like Hala and Manal, many of whom had previously moved through professional workplaces, the commute, the office, and even the routine of “getting ready” were not only logistical; they were forms of public presence. Leaving the house to work conferred a recognizable social status, daily interaction, and a sense of being seen as someone who has a job. When work is relocated to the kitchen and mediated through a screen, that public recognition can disappear, even when the labour itself is intense and time-consuming.

In this sense, isolation is not only emotional but also social since work can be intense while remaining socially unreadable. It is within this gap between labour and recognition that women begin to describe not only isolation, but marginalization. Huda (33 years, *sha’by*-middle income) reflected, “What is challenging about working from home? We feel marginalized; no one really pays attention to us, cares about what we do, or takes it seriously. People may see it as only a source of income, and that is it, but there are also ambitions and dreams and a lot more going on.” These accounts show that relational agency is not only about “support” in the narrow sense. It is also women’s ongoing negotiation of the affective costs of participation, such as loneliness, invisibility, and the sense of being reduced to “extra income.”

This pursuit of validation extended across households, neighbourhoods and local markets, where many of the women expressed pride and determination to continue their projects based on their customers’ feedback. For example, Roaaya (42 years, *sha’by* income) shared, “When someone loves the food and comes back and orders again, it fulfills me, I am happy, and it increases my self-confidence. It is what gives me the power to continue what I am doing and to know that I am doing what is right. The proof is that I am being interviewed by you right now.” Similarly, Fatma (44 years, *sha’by* income) shared, “One good word after the orders get delivered really

keeps me going, '*teslam eedik*'¹⁹ the food was great. This keeps me going.” This validation is one of the key motivations for women to continue working despite the physical burden they sometimes feel. Success thus encompassed more than financial gain; it reflected an emotional and moral sense of fulfillment, confidence, and purpose. For these women, achievement was measured not only in profit but in the feeling that their work mattered, that it was seen, valued, and celebrated by others.

Women’s emotions and feelings towards their work shaped how they navigated structural and social pressures, as well as their hopes and visions for the future. I asked every woman I interviewed how she envisions her project in the future, and many said they wanted to expand and grow their home-based kitchen and reach more customers. Omniya (35 years, middle-income) shared, “I really want to have a project that brings together women who are divorced or widowed or facing social problems. To have a big kitchen for all these women, and for us to be vending to restaurants and hotels even.” Her words stayed with me because her vision was rooted in her lived experience as a divorced woman navigating social pressures. She showed how women’s sense of purpose is tied not only to personal fulfillment but also to the work of extending care, knowledge, and opportunity to others.

Women’s sense of purpose was inherently relational, rooted in reciprocity and collective wellbeing, and grounded in the socially reproductive knowledges and relationalities that shaped their everyday lives. For instance, Sabah (42 years, *sha’by*-middle income) shared, “If I have money, then I would make goodwill meals, I hope I can have a big place and give out food for the poor.” The desire to contribute to and give back to the community was common among many of the women, alongside the hope that their children would succeed and live well. Beyond work-related or family-centred hopes, I asked them what they would do if they had the chance to do one thing other than work. Every single woman said they would travel and relax. While this might seem like a simple coincidence, it points to something more profound: that amidst precarity and constant responsibility, women’s aspirations are often centred on a modest yet powerful wish, the freedom to *be*.

Taken together, this section shows that participation is sustained through relational agency: the everyday practices through which women mobilize kin networks, redistribute labour, manage risk through trust, and secure recognition that counters shame, isolation, and devaluation. Family

¹⁹ The Arabic saying *teslam eedik*, which roughly translates to “bless your hands,” is used to express appreciation and gratitude for the food they make.

support keeps home-based gig work viable, whether through deliveries, childcare, digital posting, cooking help, or emotional affirmation. At the level of endurance, this is ‘stretching’ social reproduction in action: instead of leaving household life behind to become economic actors, women transform the household into a site of value and agency by reorganizing relations of care, obligation, and reciprocity around income generation. At the same time, this ‘stretching’ reveals its limits, since participation often depends on unpaid family labour, gendered expectations, and the unequal distribution of burdens, even within supportive households.

Next, I conclude this chapter by drawing these threads together to show how “participation” is both made possible and constrained by the socially reproductive relationalities that sustain it. In doing so, I frame the household as a site where value and agency are negotiated, narrated, and unevenly borne.

6.4 Concluding Analysis: Social Reproduction as a Site of Participation, Value and Agency

This chapter set out to explain how home-based gig work shapes women’s participation and agency in response to the third research question. I argue that women’s “economic participation” in home-based gig work is not best understood as entry into a market sphere outside the household, but as the ongoing reorganization of household life as the material and moral conditions of work. Participation is made possible through proximity, attentiveness, and the constant layering of timelines, including children’s schedules, household routines, customer demands, and kin obligations. In this sense, women’s paid labour does not displace social reproduction; it is routed through it. However, the same routing also produces the chapter’s central empirical puzzle: participation expands, but it remains conditional, governed by gendered moral expectations (motherhood, marital harmony, domestic order, respectability) that often require strategic invisibility and self-regulation. What emerges is not a clean story of “empowerment” or “entrepreneurship”, but a landscape where women’s capacity to work is continually negotiated through household hierarchies and emotional labour.

This chapter, therefore, challenges dominant nation-state development strategies and neoliberal policy narratives that cast women’s participation in the digital economy primarily as a matter of individual upskilling, formalization, and “inclusion” (Gamal Al-Din 2021; Hassan 2023; Nasr 2010; Olmsted 2021; Rizk and Rashed 2019). Such frameworks assume that barriers to participation lie in individual deficits (skills) and external constraints (finance, childcare, patriarchal cultural norms), and that women’s agency is best measured by visible market

participation and professional credentials. The data, however, point to something else: women's economic activity is sustained by socially reproductive knowledges and relationalities that neoliberal scripts typically relegate to the status of background "constraints." In other words, what market feminism casts as an obstacle (the household, care, moral obligation, domestic time) is also the condition of possibility for participation. This condition, however, comes with terms. Women's labour must remain compatible with the household's social order and is commonly subordinated to the expectation that women will remain primary caregivers and managers of domestic life (Atallah and Hesham 2024; Barsoum 2019; Zeitoun et al. 2023). Home-based gig work is not merely flexible work "for women"; it is participation structured by gendered responsibilities and often comes at the cost of women's exhaustion.

This chapter explores how "digital" is not merely an abstract concept outside the household but a set of daily practices that reshape participation. Messaging platforms like WhatsApp or Facebook Messenger allow women to coordinate orders and provide customer care alongside activities like childcare, cooking, and household chores, making participation possible through proximity. The way women negotiate their visibility through posts, photos, or the management of online pages influences how they are recognized as workers. However, this recognition depends on respectability and household boundaries, such as who can be filmed, what can be shown, and how reputation is protected. Additionally, because customers are often "behind a screen," these online marketplaces and interfaces can deepen feelings of isolation and render women's work socially invisible, despite its exhaustion and regularity. Thus, social media apps and smartphones do more than integrate women into markets; they also embed digital platforms into everyday household routines. In doing so, they shape moral expectations about what counts as "acceptable" participation, while helping to manage the costs of constant coordination and continuous availability. At the same time, they foster trust, obligation, and recognition, which are crucial elements to sustaining participation. Consequently, women's labour mediated through digital platforms is not simply about using devices or apps; it is integrated into cultural and socially reproductive practices that uphold their work under precarity.

The chapter shows that women reject participating solely on market terms. They instead root their work in culturally specific concepts that legitimize them as workers beyond certification and platform logics, sustained through the mundane, mediated routines of everyday life. *Nafas* functions as a language of embodied legitimacy and differentiation. It makes skill felt, recognized,

and socially shareable, while rejecting the idea that value must be proven through standardized expertise. At the same time, *nafas* circulates through digital practices such as posting photos and videos of food online, messaging customers, and participating in the everyday feedback loops of WhatsApp and social media, allowing “good hands” and “good taste” to extend beyond immediate kin and neighbourhood ties without being reduced to formal credentials. *Kayan* frames participation in terms of purpose, aliveness, and self-making, positioning work as a source of being and becoming rather than simply income. Within this framing, platforms function as infrastructures of relational visibility. They enable women to maintain a presence, narrate themselves as workers, and keep the business socially alive through continuous interactions that are woven into care, household rhythms, and intimate obligations. *Istiqlal* names the material room to act under uncertainty, not a fantasy of individual independence from family, but a negotiated capacity to support, decide, and endure without constant dependency. This capacity is also shaped by household routine and digitally coordinated activities (including managing orders, timing production with childcare, arranging delivery and payment, and sustaining trust with customers), so that “independence” becomes an everyday practice of holding the household and the market together. Together, these concepts show that women ‘stretch social’ reproduction into both income generation and value-making, transforming the household into a site where legitimacy, purpose, and survival are narrated and defined beyond market credentials. In this sense, ‘stretching’ shows how culturally grounded forms of value (*nafas/kayan/istiqlal*) become durable economic relations through digital practices woven into the everyday work of sustaining household life.

Most importantly, this chapter reframes agency as relational. Moving beyond binary understandings of resistance versus oppression, I draw on postcolonial feminist critiques that theorize autonomy as relational and grounded in embodied, emotional, and communal experiences of survival and self-making (Agathangelou 2004; Bengezi et al. 2023; Mahmood 2006; Salem et al. 2018; Taha and Salem 2019). Here, women’s agency is not primarily about individual choice, entrepreneurial self-fashioning, or detachment from household relations. Rather, it is the ongoing work of sustaining participation from within those relations: mobilizing kin networks, redistributing labour, managing risk through trust, and securing forms of recognition that counter shame, isolation, and devaluation. Relational support is both practical (deliveries, childcare, packaging, digital posting) and also affective (encouragement, pride, validation). These forms of relational agency echo Chapter Four’s analysis of reciprocal knowledge sharing and relational

integration (Sections 4.3 and 4.4), showing that integration into gig work and participation within it are sustained through the same relational economies, as an ongoing and active practice rooted in social reproduction.

At the same time, relational agency is not inherently emancipatory as it can intensify the circulation of unpaid labour within kin networks, reproduce gendered expectations (who “helps” and who coordinates), and keep women’s work dependent on household permission and harmony. The point is not to romanticize interdependence, but to show analytically that participation and agency are produced through it and that any account of empowerment that ignores these relations misrecognizes how women actually live and sustain economic life. This is ‘stretching’ social reproduction in action at the level of participation itself. Socially reproductive relationalities are not only sites of extraction or burden; they are also the ground on which participation is organized, and the relational resources through which women craft workable economic lives under volatility while still bearing unequal costs.

From this perspective, the household functions as an invisible but essential infrastructure for the gig economy. It quietly supplies the resources that platforms assume workers already have, such as workspace, equipment, storage, energy, and the ongoing coordination of care. At the same time it absorbs the time, emotional effort, and organisational labour needed to make gig work viable over the long term. Following Star and Ruhleder (1996), this infrastructural role sinks into the background and is rarely acknowledged precisely because it appears as ordinary private or family life. Yet as platform activities become woven into everyday domestic routines, including constant messaging, ordering, posting, and coordinating deliveries and payments, the boundary between household and platform infrastructure becomes increasingly blurred. In this process, women’s socially reproductive labour is extended into market participation: their unpaid work of caring, maintaining, and organising the household underpins digital gig work but remains largely unrecognized and uncompensated. This is what I mean by ‘stretching’ social reproduction: not simply that women work from home, but that the home itself becomes a socio-technical precondition for gig work, even as the associated costs, including unpaid labour, dependence, risk, and moral obligations, continue to be unevenly borne within the household.

This analysis also connects to social reproduction scholarship that casts the household primarily as a space where capitalism offloads crisis and extracts unpaid labour (Federici 2012; Bhattacharya 2017). Building on those insights, and resonating with arguments that households

are politically charged spaces of endurance, negotiation, and sometimes resistance (Mezzadri 2025; 2021), the data shows the household as simultaneously a site of constraint and a condition of possibility for gig work. Women sustain their participation in the digital economy not by exiting domestic life, but by transforming domestic space, time, and relationships into the material and moral conditions of work. In doing so, they demonstrate how participation occurs through the overlap of socially reproductive and income-generating labour rather than through their separation. Conceptually, ‘stretching’ social reproduction reclaims the household not only as a site of crisis management but also as a feminist terrain where participation, value, and agency are negotiated and at times reimaged.

In contrast to neoliberal narratives, the experiences of women gig workers reveal how the home is (re)envisioned as a space for paid labour and transformed into a site of production, while still serving as a place for family needs and social reproductive activities. Conceiving the household as an economic space reshapes the very notion of ‘work’, disrupting binaries between formal and informal, paid and unpaid, productive and reproductive, and market-based and household-based labour. The household thus becomes a more nuanced lens for understanding the intersections of platforms, work, and everyday life, as well as the role of social reproduction in development. Framing the household as a site of economic innovation, ‘stretching’ social reproduction challenges neoliberalism’s emphasis on market integration and individual entrepreneurship as the primary pathways to development. Women’s home-based gig work is therefore not a detour on the road to formal employment but a different route altogether, one that redefines participation in economic life and opens a feminist economic imaginary grounded in reciprocity, sufficiency, and purpose. The conclusion returns to this imaginary to show how these insights extend beyond market feminism and inform policies that acknowledge the social, emotional, and spiritual knowledges and relationalities that sustain life.

Chapter Seven - Conclusion

This dissertation began with a composite scene that is both ordinary and analytically disruptive: a woman moving between childcare, cooking, budgeting, WhatsApp messages, neighbourhood visits, and customer orders, while navigating inflation, household expectations, and the material realities of keeping work possible from within the home. That scene is not a backdrop to “real” economic activity. It is where economic life is made. This dissertation argues that women’s lives are not add-ons; they are the core of the economy and the family. Their bodies lie at the intersection of work and life. Their knowledges and relationalities move across paid and unpaid realms, the public and the private, the market and the home. However, neoliberal development discourses that frame women’s empowerment primarily through the market often invisibilize these lived experiences. This dynamic is evident in national state and global development initiatives that seek to increase women’s labour force participation by promoting formal market integration and individualized financial solutions.

Drawing on six months of fieldwork with 25 informal, home-based women food vendors in Greater Cairo, I argue that understanding women’s home-based gig work requires a conceptual shift. Rather than relying on frameworks that conceptualize the digital economy primarily in terms of platform-based work, formal entrepreneurship, and measurable labour-market outcomes, I call for an approach that centers women’s everyday lives as the conditions through which work, value, and participation are made possible. To capture this shift, I propose ‘stretching’ social reproduction as an approach for theorizing from the Global South, understood not only as a geographic site but also as an epistemological standpoint from which to reposition informal, household, and digital economies at the center of global economic analysis.

This notion of ‘stretching’ does not reject existing feminist political economy approaches; rather, it situates the analysis within the specific historical, material, and relational contexts of women in the Global South. By centring lived experiences, embodied knowledges, and relationalities, it extends social reproduction analysis beyond structural and material conditions to encompass how labour, value, and productivity are constituted in everyday life. ‘Stretching’ social reproduction challenges the public/private and production/reproduction dichotomies by reframing these realms as fluid and interdependent, thereby disrupting hierarchies that invisibilize and devalue informal and household economies. In doing so, it reclaims social reproduction not only as a structural condition sustaining capital, but also as a lived and agentive site of creativity,

resistance, and reimagining. I draw on this approach to examine how informal home-based labour is integrated into the ‘gig’ economy and how women gig workers in Egypt navigate precarity and reshape meanings of agency and economic participation.

I situate my research within feminist political economy, specifically in relation to critical development, digital labour, and social reproduction. In Chapter Two, I build on critiques of neoliberal feminism and intersectional analyses of gendered and racialized hierarchies within digital economies. This literature offers structural and material macro-level analyses of women’s digital labour, yet it remains centred on Global North frameworks or focused on formal platform work. To account for informal and home-based gig work, I turn to social reproduction scholarship, which foregrounds how global capitalism systematically exploits and devalues women’s productive and socially reproductive labour. Social reproduction theories highlight the centrality of women’s unpaid labour to the production and accumulation of capital: SRF conceptualizes the household as a key site where capitalism exploits women’s bodies, while SRT emphasizes that the exploitation of gendered bodies extends beyond the household. Still, we must ask: who are these bodies, and whose lives remain invisible even within this critique?

The bodies of racialized women are often unseen or erased within these critiques, or treated merely as objects of research rather than as knowledge producers. I wanted to find a way to center these voices, these bodies, and these knowledges in my research and writing, to expand social reproduction and to theorize from SWANA. I propose ‘stretching’ social reproduction, not to abandon the insights of SRF or SRT, but because neither framework, on its own, was enough to account for the lives of the women I encountered in Egypt. I therefore draw on postcolonial feminist and intersectional critiques that challenge the dominance of Global North epistemologies and situate women’s labour within histories of colonialism, capitalism and gender. My work is inspired by critical feminist scholars such as Alessandra Mezzadri (2021, 2025), who calls for the pluralization of social reproduction, and by feminist scholars who engage with gender and development in the SWANA region, such as Sara Salem, Mai Taha, and Jennifer Olmsted. This scholarship does not essentialize women’s experiences in the region; it takes seriously the historical, cultural and material contexts that shape its economies and societies.

My methodological approach is inspired by Black Feminists such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000) and Indigenous Feminist scholars such as Linda Smith (2012) and Leanne B Simpson (2017), who challenge the notion of objectivity in research and the separation of knowledge

production from everyday life. As an Egyptian woman, I do not feel removed from this research; I constantly shift and navigate between my role as a researcher and my identity, sense of belonging, and longing within my community. I have always been interested in the everyday, the forms of resistance and resilience it embodies, and how people continue to navigate precarity and (re)define their agency. I ground my work in the Egyptian Revolution's quest for 'bread, freedom, social justice' and in the potential of feminist economic imaginaries to disrupt the everyday violences of global capitalism. To this end, I conducted fieldwork in Greater Cairo, Egypt, where I interviewed home-based women gig workers in the emerging food tech economy. These workers lie at the intersection of digitization, labour, gender and development policy debates, yet they remain largely invisibilized in dominant digital labour and development discourses. In Chapter Three, I detail how I designed a qualitative research project intended to center these women's narratives and lived experiences, not as objects of inquiry, but as sites of theory building and knowledge mobilization.

In addressing the research questions, the dissertation first asks: How is home-based labour integrated into the gig economy, and what does this reveal about the binaries of paid and unpaid work in the digital domain? Chapter Four demonstrated that women integrate into the gig economy not by leaving the household or separating work from daily life, but by extending social reproduction into digitally mediated spaces. Platform features such as WhatsApp messaging and voice notes, Facebook public posts, Instagram direct messages and stories, and searchable video content on YouTube/TikTok serve as accessible, affordable mechanisms for integration from within the home. This integration is enabled not merely by "platform use," but by the unpaid work of learning, practice, coordination, and relational maintenance that generates economically valuable capacities within the household. The chapter traced four linked mechanisms of integration: (1) intergenerational teaching and household practice as the foundation of culinary capacity; (2) the adaptation and professionalization of skills through courses and experiential learning; (3) reciprocal knowledge sharing and community building as an informal professional support system; and (4) relational market-making, where trust, discretion, social obligation, and reputation are actively produced and managed through digital interfaces. These dynamics clarify why, in the digital domain, the line between paid and unpaid work becomes blurred. It is not that everything turns into paid work, but rather that the labour required to maintain skills, trust, time investment, and relationships remains unpaid, even as it underpins income generation.

Second, this dissertation explores how women navigate precarity in informal home-based gig work? Chapter Five demonstrated that precarity is not an occasional disruption but a lived material condition shaped by inflation, price volatility, irregular demand, upfront costs, cash-flow pressures, and systemic exclusion from formal protections and supports. This precarity is also embodied and socially reproductive as households absorb instability through budgets, time, and women's bodily endurance, long before it appears as a "business" problem. Women navigate these conditions through household hustling strategies, a concept I use analytically rather than celebratorily. Hustling names the practical logics through which women convert instability into workable routines without romanticizing resilience or reducing women's strategies to coping. These strategies include (1) moral and spiritual grounding through *rizq*, which makes uncertainty bearable and shapes decision-making; (2) informal and community-based financial practices, especially *gam'eyas*, that create buffers and discipline without converting volatility into debt obligations; (3) household resource management through low-capital operations, strategic informality, and relational provisioning networks (including *balady* sourcing) that stabilize costs and quality; and (4) logistical coordination and planning (batching, freezing, documentation, advance ordering) that produce rhythms of readiness amid overlapping household responsibilities. Across these strategies, the household becomes the primary site through which precarity is navigated. However, the chapter also revealed a central contradiction: the practices that make gig work possible can also intensify the privatization of risk, shifting the burdens of crisis into women's unpaid coordination, emotional labour, and bodily endurance.

Third, the dissertation addresses the question: In what ways does home-based gig work shape women's economic participation and agency? Chapter Six argued that home-based gig work expands participation by transforming the household into an economic site and workspace, while also making participation conditional on gendered moral expectations that can render women's labour invisible, socially unreadable, or devalued. Participation relies on proximity and continuous attentiveness as household routines become production logistics, and socially reproductive labour becomes the precondition for earning. However, participation is governed by ideals of domestic order, marital harmony, respectability, and self-regulation, and is often paid for through women's exhaustion.

Women nonetheless articulate value on their own terms through culturally grounded concepts that exceed narrow metrics of entrepreneurial success. *Nafas* names embodied legitimacy

and differentiation; value felt through taste, care, and a distinctive touch. *Kayan* names work as serving a purpose beyond income generation. *Istiqlal* names the material room to act under uncertainty and a negotiated capacity to support, decide, and endure without constant dependence. Together, these concepts show how women stretch social reproduction into value-making and income-generation. The chapter reframes agency as relational, in which women sustain participation through everyday practices of mobilizing kin networks, redistributing labour, managing risk through trust, and securing recognition that offsets shame, isolation, and devaluation. This relational agency is not inherently emancipatory; it can reproduce gendered expectations and uneven burdens even within supportive households. However, it clarifies why dominant empowerment scripts misrecognize women's economic lives since participation and agency emerge not in spite of the household, but through it.

Taken together, the dissertation's findings sharpen the conceptual intervention of 'stretching' social reproduction in three ways. First, 'stretching' shows that social reproduction is not only a structural condition sustaining capital; it is also a lived site of creativity, coordination, and economic reorganization. Women do not simply "enter" the gig economy. They extend their knowledges and relationalities, including intergenerational skills and household routines, into the digital domain as the conditions that make work possible. Second, 'stretching' reveals how platforms mediate rather than resolve the overlap between production and reproduction. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram, and messaging applications like WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger, enable women to coordinate orders, negotiate payment and delivery, and maintain customer relationships. Yet these same platforms carry moral and temporal consequences: they can intensify isolation, raise expectations of constant responsiveness, and further invisibilize socially reproductive labour, even when it is exhausting and continuous. Here, the "digital" is not an external sphere but a set of practical affordances woven into household rhythms, budgets, and negotiations.

Third, 'stretching' clarifies the political stakes of refusing dominant binaries. When participation is routed through social reproduction, the question is not simply whether women are "included" in the economy, but on what terms and at what costs. In particular, it highlights how the state, through its economic development strategies, labour regulation, and austerity policies, organizes the conditions under which households absorb and redistribute crises. The dissertation, therefore, pushes beyond market feminism's reliance on formalization, upskilling, and

entrepreneurial inclusion as default solutions, and complicates neoliberal feminist frameworks that locate politics primarily in formal labour rights or contracts by showing how relational economies and household-based arrangements under crisis conditions shape everyday economic life.

These theoretical interventions are grounded in an empirical terrain that focuses on informal, home-based, digitally mediated food work in Cairo, exposing a mismatch between policy scripts and lived economies. Development strategies that frame women's economic participation as a matter of skills, finance, and flexible opportunities often presume that the household is a constraint to be "balanced" or managed. The findings here suggest something more troubling and more instructive: what those frameworks render as background (household labour, moral obligation, relational work, embodied endurance) is the site through which participation is actually made possible and sustained. If policy frameworks do not recognize the role of social reproduction, they will continue to misrecognize women's work, undervalue what sustains it, and reproduce hierarchies of value that privilege formal markets and measurable productivity over the conditions that sustain life. The dissertation also reorients how the food tech economy is understood. Formal food tech ventures, such as food delivery platforms and cloud kitchens, and venture-backed start-ups are often celebrated for innovation and efficiency. However, women's home-based food economies reveal another form of innovation in the practical and relational labour required to sustain food production amid inflation, fluctuating demand, and a lack of protection. These are not residual economies waiting to be formalized; they are fully realized economic worlds organized around different logics of value, legitimacy, and survival.

In terms of the limits, contradictions and what remains open, this dissertation has emphasized that 'stretching' social reproduction should not be mistaken for a celebratory narrative. Women's strategies make work possible, but they do not dissolve inequality. Integration through household strategies can deepen the privatization of risk. Participation can expand while remaining conditional. Relational agency can sustain dignity and recognition while also reproducing uneven burdens and unpaid labour. These contradictions are not analytical problems to be smoothed over but are part of the empirical reality of home-based gig work under global capitalism. The dissertation's limits are also boundaries that shape what can be claimed. The study is grounded in a non-representative qualitative sample of 25 women in Cairo, shaped by online platforms' visibility and personal networks. Rural and peri-urban experiences, as well as the work of women who remain offline or hidden, are not captured here. The project does not attempt to quantify the

gig economy or map platforms as institutions through large datasets. Instead, it offers contextually grounded theorization that shows what becomes visible when women's everyday life is treated as the site where economic concepts must be rethought. These boundaries point to future research directions: comparative work beyond Cairo; attention to rural and peri-urban household economies; deeper examination of how customers, state actors, and platforms shape the moral and practical terms of participation; and continued efforts to develop feminist methods and concepts that take informal, digitally mediated labour seriously as economic life rather than an exception.

This dissertation has argued that women's home-based gig work is not a detour on the road to formal employment. It is a different road altogether, one that reveals how work, value, and participation are made possible through social reproduction rather than outside it. When women 'stretch' social reproduction into the digital economy, they do not simply blur binaries as an abstract theoretical point; they do so as a daily practice of survival and endurance, and as a way of defending legitimacy, meaning, and value under volatility. Returning to the scene that opened this dissertation, where food is being prepared, cash tucked away, WhatsApp messages checked, relatives called, supplies sourced, household peace negotiated, the point is not that this scene is exceptional. The point is that it is systematically treated as non-economic within dominant neoliberal development frames. 'Stretching' social reproduction insists that it is precisely here, in the everyday, that economic life is organized, crisis is absorbed, and alternative possibilities are imagined. This is the feminist economic imaginary that emerges from women's narratives, an economic life grounded not only in markets and metrics, but in reciprocity, sufficiency, purpose, and the relationalities that sustain life.

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Appendix A: List of Interviews

1. Naglaa, October 25, 2022, Giza.
2. Rasha, November 1, 2022, Giza.
3. Yasmin, November 2, 2022, Cairo.
4. Roaaya, November 3, 2022, Cairo.
5. Rabab, November 4, 2022, Cairo.
6. Omniya, November 5, 2022, Cairo.
7. Mona A., November 6, 2022, Cairo.
8. Nuha, November 7, 2022, New Giza.
9. Samar, November 9, 2022, Cairo.
10. Doaa H., November 10, 2022, Cairo.
11. Reda, November 13, 2022, Cairo.
12. Hala, November 14, 2022, New Cairo.
13. Radwa, November 15, 2022, New Cairo.
14. Maryouma, November 28, 2022, New Cairo.
15. Omayma, December 2, 2022, Cairo.
16. Sabah, December 4, 2022, Cairo.
17. Hanady, December 6, 2022, Giza.
18. Fatma, December 13, 2022, Giza.
19. Doaa, December 15, 2022, Giza.
20. Zeinab, December 19, 2022, Cairo.
21. Abeer, December 20, 2022, New Cairo.
22. Doaa E., December 23, 2022, New Cairo.
23. Manal, December 25, 2022, Cairo.
24. Mona, December 26, 2022, Giza.
25. Hoda, December 30, 2022, Cairo.