
Women, Platforms, and State Power: The Lunch Bell Project and Digital Solidarity Economies in Kerala

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Abstract

The Lunch Bell project, a platform-based women's food delivery network launched in March 2024 in Kerala, India, exemplifies a grassroots alternative to corporate-owned digital labor platforms. Developed by Kudumbashree, Asia's largest women-led community network of self-help groups, the initiative leverages the Pocketmart app to coordinate a sustainable labor chain. Meals prepared in Kudumbashree's cloud kitchens with locally sourced ingredients are delivered in steel utensils, adhering to the Kerala state government's green protocol and eliminating plastic waste. These meals are transported by women workers on wheels, following pre-agreed delivery times in several cities across Kerala. The initiative spans food sourcing, preparation, delivery, and post-use processes, showcasing a holistic approach to labor organization mediated through a digital platform.

Launched in 1998, Kudumbashree comprises over 4.4 million members, primarily women below the poverty line, organized through neighborhood groups that run various micro-enterprises (Biju & Kumar, 2013). While neither a cooperative nor merely a self-help group, it is a vital component of Kerala's social solidarity economy, mobilizing participatory citizenship through its collaboration with local government planning and state bureaucracy (Bhoola et al., 2024). While Kudumbashree enables women to design and implement alternative economic futures, it has now ventured into labor mediated through digital platforms, supported by state-aided designs, assistance, and resources.

In this context, this paper situates Lunch Bell within broader discussions on digital solidarity economies by highlighting the role of the state alongside women's grassroots mobilization in imagining alternative digital futures. Drawing on Grohmann's (2023) insights into the ambivalence of alternatives to corporate platforms, it examines how Lunch Bell navigates the complexities of capitalist power and state relations while promoting participatory democracy, sustainability, and empowerment in the development of digital solidarity economies. In particular, we explore how the Lunch Bell project promotes the design of inclusive economies and examine its relationship with women's collectives and the state. By analyzing this case, the paper contributes to an understanding of how digital labor can be reimagined through solidarity-based frameworks, offering lessons for equity-focused technological innovation.

This study is a qualitative investigation conducted between March 2024 and August 2024, covering the initial implementation phase of the Lunch Bell project. It includes participant observation, eight interviews with participants such as women riders, cooking staff, managerial workers, and Kudumbashree bureaucrats, as well as an analysis of project documents related to the initiative.

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