The African Women's Development and Communication Network

Women and the Platform Economy in Africa: Beyond Flexibility and Digital Innovation

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Abstract

This article explores the gendered realities of gig work in Africa's platform economy, moving beyond celebratory narratives of flexibility, entrepreneurship, and digital inclusion. It argues that while platform-mediated work may offer women new routes to income generation, its promise is shaped by deeply unequal labour markets, unpaid care responsibilities, digital exclusion, weak social protection systems, and limited public services. For many women, the platform economy functions less as a pathway to economic freedom and more as a survival strategy within conditions of precarity, debt, gender-based violence, algorithmic control, and fragmented labour accountability, while also providing, for some, partial access to income and market participation. Using an African feminist and social reproduction lens, the paper examines how women's paid platform labour is sustained by invisible reproductive and caregiving labour, while platforms often externalise risk onto workers. It concludes by calling for stronger International Labour Organisation standards on platform work, including gender-responsive safeguards, social protection, algorithmic accountability, cross-border platform accountability, protections against violence and harassment, and care-centred labour regulation.

Introduction

"When spider webs unite, they can tie up a lion". This proverb serves as a crucial entry point for discussions regarding women, gig work, and the platform economy.[1] In Africa, the narrative of platform employment transcends mere technology, applications, ratings, and wages. It pertains to power, the allocation of risk, the absorption of crises, the provision of care, the visibility to markets, and who remains invisible to the law. The digital economy is often seen as a new frontier for women's economic empowerment, unlocking flexible, digital, borderless, and entrepreneurial opportunities for income, skills, and visibility. (Paracha et al., 2025; Savita et al., 2025). However, for African women, the same economy can become a digital extension of old inequalities, leading to informal employment lacking social protection, unstable income, so- called flexibility that offers no real autonomy, and "opportunity" that could exacerbate debt, gender-based violence, caregiving responsibilities, and precarity.

The question, therefore, is not simply whether the digital economy is beneficial or detrimental for women. It is whether the digital economy is being built as a pathway to dignified livelihoods or as a new architecture of extraction and exploitation. Across Africa, women are increasingly turning to digital platforms because platform-mediated work is often presented as more compatible with caregiving obligations, labour market exclusion, and the pursuit of income autonomy. Yet this expansion is unfolding within deeply unequal labour markets where gender gaps in pay, labour and social protection, and digital access continue to persist. Sustainable Stories Africa captures this contradiction clearly: women are entering platform work, but the core question is whether they are entering on equitable terms.

The platform economy is a familiar narrative presented in a contemporary guise.

Although framed as digital innovation, the platform economy often repackages older patterns of labour informalisation, casualisation, and risk-shifting through the infrastructure of technology rather than representing an entirely new labour formation (Coletto and Dimitriadis,2026). Platform work is typically structured around brief, short-term tasks, facilitated by algorithms and defined through contractual agreements that categorise individuals as independent contractors instead of employees. The ILO's examination of platform employment indicates that while platform labour may create new income opportunities, it also raises challenging issues regarding control, algorithmic management, and employment status (ILO, 2026).

[1] For clarity, this paper distinguishes between the "platform economy" as the broader system of digitally mediated markets that connect workers, clients and consumers, and "gig work" as the specific labour undertaken through those platforms. Gig work is therefore used here to refer to platform-mediated, short-term and task-based work, while the platform economy describes the wider structures, technologies and business models that organise and govern that work.

In several jurisdictions, courts and regulatory bodies have scrutinised the degree to which platforms exert control over workers through ratings, fares, routes, performance systems, and deactivation processes, particularly when determining whether platform workers are genuinely independent contractors or are entitled to labour and social protections. [2] This is significant for African women, as informality is not a novel phenomenon. The novelty lies in its digitalisation. The ODI study on women in the gig economy in Kenya and South Africa revealed that many gig workers experience considerable financial instability and subsist through a combination of income-generating endeavours, including employment across various platforms and additional informal occupations (ODI, 2019). Workers frequently appreciate gig work for its superior flexibility compared to traditional options; nonetheless, many still prefer the stability of conventional employment.

Feminist reading into platform economy exceptionalism: reframing innovative narrative

An African feminist analysis becomes necessary to illuminate the dominant framing of platforms as neutral engines of innovation, yet they reproduce racialised and care-based inequalities. The platform economy is not developing in a neutral context. It is infiltrating economies already characterised by colonial exploitation, racialised labour markets, patriarchal caregiving structures, elevated youth unemployment, diminishing public services, and the feminisation of poverty. Read alongside Najjuko's framing of digitalisation and the future of work through a Pan-African feminist lens, the platform economy must therefore be understood not only as a technological shift, but as a labour and livelihood question embedded in longer histories of gendered and economic injustice (Najjuko, 2025). Andiswa Kona's work on young Black women utilising South Africa's Money for Jam (M4JAM) platform indicates that these women frequently engage in gig work not in pursuit of theoretical entrepreneurial autonomy, but out of necessity for sustenance, housing, utilities, nappies, internet access, and fundamental dignity (Kona, 2022). In this context, the "side hustle" frequently constitutes not a supplementary endeavour but rather a means of subsistence.

Platform work is not developing in a neutral context; it is emerging within economies already shaped by colonial extraction, racialised labour markets, patriarchal caregiving structures, high youth unemployment, shrinking public services, and the feminisation of poverty. The platform may overlook the histories of racial capitalism and women's unpaid labour, while women's bodies, houses, and communities retain this memory. ***"The axe forgets, but the tree remembers"***. They recall through fatigue, uncompensated caregiving, informal lending, violent economies, unsafe transportation routes, childcare deficiencies, and the incessant pressure to be available for work that may not provide sufficient remuneration for sustenance.

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[2] See, for example, Wambua v Uber Kenya Limited & 2 others (Miscellaneous Application E004 of 2022) [2022] KEELRC 4866 (KLR), and Uber South Africa Technology Services (Pty) Ltd v NUPSAW and SATAWU obo Morekure and Others [2018] ZALCCT 1. In Kenya, see also Republic v Transport Licensing Appeals Board; Bolt Operations OU (Ex parte); National Transport & Safety Authority & another (Interested Parties) [2025] KEHC 6998 (KLR), concerning a driver's complaint over account deactivation, data privacy, and regulatory compliance.

Flexibility for whom?

The concept of flexibility is one of the most compelling assurances of the digital economy. Platforms promote market flexibility as autonomy: work at your convenience, earn according to your requirements, and regulate your life according to your preferences. This promise is especially appealing to women with caregiving responsibilities, as formal labour markets frequently penalise motherhood, caring, and domestic duties. Nonetheless, flexibility may have both advantages and disadvantages. It may facilitate women's participation in paid employment, although it can also perpetuate the notion that women should stretch themselves further rather than demanding redistribution of care.

Fox reported that women accounted for only 27% of the online gig workforce in sub-Saharan Africa in 2023, trailing men. She also highlights a 37% gender disparity in access to digital technologies in Africa, as well as women's increased need for training, equipment financing, and health insurance (Louise Fox, 2026). This indicates that women's entry into platform work is inherently uneven from the outset. Devices, data, electricity, transportation, digital competencies, and secure working conditions are not uniformly accessible. These forms of exclusion do not operate in isolation; they intersect with broader gendered responsibilities around unpaid care and household labour, shaping when, where, and how women can participate in platform-mediated work. The ODI report similarly shows that a significant number of women recognised childcare as a primary limitation on their economic prospects and work-life balance (ODI, 2019, 9). Some women could work only with informal childcare from relatives, neighbours, or older children; others were forced to forgo work when care arrangements failed.

Read through a social reproduction lens, this is not flexibility in the emancipatory sense. The burden of sustaining platform labour becomes intertwined with women’s unpaid reproductive and caregiving labour, meaning that the platform economy depends not only on women’s paid digital or location-based work, but also on the invisible labour they perform to keep households, children, and communities functioning. It is flexibility as an adjustment to abandonment: Women adjust to the absence of public childcare. They adjust to unsafe transport. They adjust to low and irregular pay. They adjust to algorithmic penalties and opaque performance systems. They adjust to maternity without income protection. In this context, flexibility can become a polite word for the transfer of social risk from the state and employers onto women.

From supplementary income to financial entrapment

The digital economy generates income, but it can also generate debt. Women often require working capital before they can earn smartphones, laptops, data bundles, fuel, transport fares, platform commissions, subscription fees to access platforms, bidding fees required to compete for jobs, professional tools, childcare, certification and sometimes vehicles or rented equipment. Fox notes that female gig workers identify access to credit for equipment as a key need, closely followed by access to health insurance (Louise Fox, 2026). This creates a structurally precarious arrangement in which women assume significant upfront financial risks without guaranteed income security. Women may borrow or divert scarce household resources to participate in the digital economy, yet the income t generated is often unstable and unpredictable.

Algorithms may reduce visibility. Clients may cancel. Demand may fluctuate. Ratings may determine access to future work. Transport costs may consume earnings, while illness or caregiving interruptions may halt work altogether.

Kona's research on young Black women using South Africa's digital platform M4JAM demonstrates that while gig work may provide short-term income for food and necessities, it frequently fails to produce long-term financial stability due to low and inadequate wages and the absence of social protection, which render workers vulnerable to poverty and economic strain (Kona, 2022). The ILO's report on digital platforms in Kenya highlights analogous vulnerabilities within digital labour platforms: insufficient work availability, low wages, poor social security provisions, work-related stress, safety issues, and significant gender inequities (ILO, 2024). These findings reinforce the need for stronger protections on employment relationships, collective bargaining, social protection, workplace safety and health, transparent and non-exploitative contracts, and data protection. The peril lies in the digital economy becoming a revolving door: women enter to escape poverty, pay participation costs, earn irregularly, take on care responsibilities, and remain unprotected when income collapses. In such cases, platform work does not disrupt poverty; it reorganises it.

Safety and gender-based violence

For women, employment transcends just financial gain. It pertains to safety as well. Location-based gig employment may require women to go to unfamiliar areas, private residences, vehicles, restaurants, bars, salons, or other secluded work locations during early morning or late evening hours. Research[3] reveals that gig workers encounter security threats such as robbery and assault, which are uniquely experienced due to their high mobility, inadequate public transport, early work hours, and employment in private or secluded settings.

Gender-based violence in platform employment must not be treated as a peripheral or accidental outcome of platform work. It is a structural labour rights concern, produced and intensified by unsafe working environments, unequal power relations between workers, clients, and platforms, and the absence of adequate safeguards, reporting mechanisms, and accountability. Drawing from ILO Convention No. 190, violence and harassment in the world of work can be understood as a range of unacceptable behaviours, practices, or threats that may result in physical, psychological, sexual, or economic harm, including gender-based violence and harassment. This framing is particularly important for platform work because women's exposure to harm is shaped not only by individual clients or workers, but also by platform design, weak accountability mechanisms, and the absence of enforceable labour protections. If a platform can regulate client access, pricing, fines, visibility, deactivation, and dispute resolution, it cannot assert innocence when women encounter harassment, abuse, hazardous conditions, or retaliatory ratings. The platform cannot serve as a marketplace when profit is at stake, yet it vanishes when harm needs to be mitigated.

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[3] See ILO. Exploring the gig economy: Challenges and opportunities. A self-guided resource. (2025). https://doi.org/10.54394/NMBW0887; See also Nkansah, E. A., Nsaful, E. Y., & Asumeng, M. (2026). Drivers' safety and security in the gig economy: A content analysis of media reports in Ghana. Next Research, 6, 101431. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nexres.2026.101431

Public services, healthcare and the social reproduction crisis

The platform economy cannot be separated from public services as they are intrinsically linked. Where childcare is unavailable, women's work is constrained. Where healthcare is unaffordable, illness becomes income loss. Where public transport is unsafe or unreliable, women's mobility is restricted. Where social protection is tied to formal employment, gig workers fall through the cracks. Where digital infrastructure is expensive or unreliable, women's participation in platform-mediated work is further constrained, especially in tasks that depend on stable connectivity, adequate devices, data, digital skills, and upfront investment. The issue, therefore, is not that platform work is inherently high value, but that unequal access to digital infrastructure shapes who can enter, remain, and earn with some degree of stability in the platform economy. If states fail to establish public structures that support women workers, women will continue to resort to precarious survival strategies. The issue is not that women lack resilience. The issue is that resilience has become a substitute for rights.

Notwithstanding these limitations, women are hardly passive victims of the platform economy. They coordinate, disseminate information, alert one another, educate one another, and establish informal care networks. Kona revealed that young Black women on M4JAM used WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok to assist one another in navigating campaigns, understanding training, and accessing employment opportunities (Kona, 2022, 75). This solidarity is significant. However, it also exposes an alternative form of extraction: the unpaid intellectual labour of women. When women train one another because platforms offer insufficient support, they are effectively subsidising the platform's business model. An African feminist reading requires both recognising women's communal survival mechanisms and resisting their romanticisation. The concept of women supporting one another is significant; yet it should not serve as a foundational policy framework. Sisterhood ought to serve as a source of empowerment rather than a substitute for labour legislation, public services, and platform accountability.

The analysis above demonstrates that the challenges facing women in Africa's platform economy are not merely the result of regulatory lag or technological disruption. Rather, they reflect deeper structural conditions, including the persistence of informalised labour relations, gendered labour market segmentation, unequal access to digital infrastructure, weak social protection systems, inadequate public services, and the continued reliance on women's unpaid and under-recognised care work. Platform work, therefore, operates within and often intensifies existing political-economic inequalities. While it may create new opportunities for income generation and market participation, these opportunities remain constrained where risk is individualised, accountability is fragmented, and labour protections are weakened by opaque contractual, algorithmic and cross-border governance arrangements. The policy challenge is therefore not simply how to include more women in platform work, but how to transform the conditions under which such work is organised, governed, and valued. The following recommendations to the International Labour Organisation are offered in response to these structural concerns.

Feminist recommendations to the International Labour Organisation

The International Labour Organisation has an urgent role to play in ensuring that the future of work does not become the future of feminised precarity. The ILO's standard-setting role within the platform economy must directly address the gendered dynamics of exclusion, precarity, and unequal protections.

1. The ILO should adopt enforceable international labour standards for the platform economy that guarantee fundamental rights and freedoms at work for all platform workers, irrespective of employment classification.
2. The ILO should establish gender-responsive platform safeguards. These could mandate that platforms conduct gender impact evaluations of remuneration systems, evaluation systems, algorithmic governance, task distribution, deactivation protocols, and grievance channels. Platforms must demonstrate that their systems do not inadvertently disadvantage pregnancy, caregiving, handicap, safety-related refusals, restricted night availability, or interruptions due to caring obligations.
3. The ILO should provide explicit guidance on the application of Convention No. 190 within the platform work environment, recognising gender-based violence and harassment as structural labour rights issues rather than external risks. Such guidance clarifies platform responsibilities regarding prevention, reporting mechanisms, anti-retaliation protections, emergency support, and accessible dispute resolution processes with mechanisms developed in consultation with workers, including women workers, and workers' organisations for experiencing violence and harassment in both the physical and digital workspaces. Such guidance should also address algorithmic and platform-mediated forms of retaliation, surveillance, and economic coercion that heighten women workers' exposure to violence and harassment
4. The ILO should develop binding principles on data transparency and algorithmic accountability. Women workers must have the right to understand, contest, and seek redress regarding decisions affecting ratings, rankings, pay, visibility, task allocation, suspensions, and deactivations. Independent audits of platform algorithms should assess not only transparency but also discriminatory impacts linked to caregiving responsibilities, restricted mobility, maternity, disability, safety-related refusals, and unequal digital access. Algorithmic management must be recognised as a labour rights issue rather than a technological process.
5. The ILO should ensure care is at the centre of platform work regulation. Any decent work framework that fails to account for unpaid care will systematically disadvantage women. Platform labour standards should therefore require care-responsive work design, greater scheduling predictability, maternity protection, caregiving protections, and public investment in accessible childcare and social infrastructure. Care work is not external to the platform economy: it is the hidden infrastructure that sustains it. Without distributing care responsibilities and strengthening public support systems, platform flexibility risks functioning primarily as a transfer of social and economic risks to women.

6. The ILO should develop cross-border accountability mechanisms for digital labour platforms operating across multiple jurisdictions, particularly in contexts where platform companies are transnational and labour governance remains fragmented. Platform companies should not be permitted to evade labour obligations through complex corporate structures, jurisdictional arbitrage, or the outsourcing of responsibilities across borders. International labour standards should strengthen cooperation between states to ensure that platform workers can access enforceable rights, effective remedies, and accountability for platform-related harms across the full digital labour supply chain.

Lastly, African governments should regulate platforms within the framework of a comprehensive public services agenda. Labour laws alone cannot resolve the structural vulnerabilities embedded within platform employment. Decent work in the platform economy depends on broadband, secure transport, public childcare, healthcare, housing, social protection frameworks, and gender-responsive digital skills initiatives. Without sustained public investment in social infrastructure, the platform economy risks deepening existing inequalities while transferring the costs of economic insecurity onto workers, particularly women.

Conclusions

The platform economy is not inherently liberating or exploitative. It is a contested terrain. For some women, it offers income, autonomy, confidence and entry into markets that previously excluded them. For others, it exacerbates debt, instability, fatigue, safety hazards, and unpaid caregiving responsibilities. For many women, it fulfils both functions concurrently. The danger lies in celebrating women's participation without transforming the terms of that participation. Involvement in precarious employment does not constitute empowerment. Visibility on a platform does not equate to having a voice. Flexibility devoid of income security is not true freedom. A side hustle that requires debt, unpaid care, unsafe mobility and no healthcare is not decent work.

The platform economy has rapidly advanced. It must now advance significantly towards justice, safety, social protection, and dignity. The ILO, African governments, platforms, unions and feminist movements must act with urgency. Otherwise, women will continue to carry the platform economy on their backs, in their homes, on unsafe roads, through unpaid care, and across WhatsApp groups of survival. Furthermore, until the law, the state and the platform become accountable, women will still need to be their own sisters' keepers.

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