

Changing the world
with **women and girls**
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Platforms of precarity: Women's economic rights and the gig economy

Findings from a rapid mapping study of Ghana, South Africa, Kenya, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Brazil and Guatemala



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Cover photo – The number of digital labour platforms is rapidly increasing at a time of wider declines in workers' rights globally. Gig workers' classification as independent contractors means they often fall outside labour laws and unable to access social protection.

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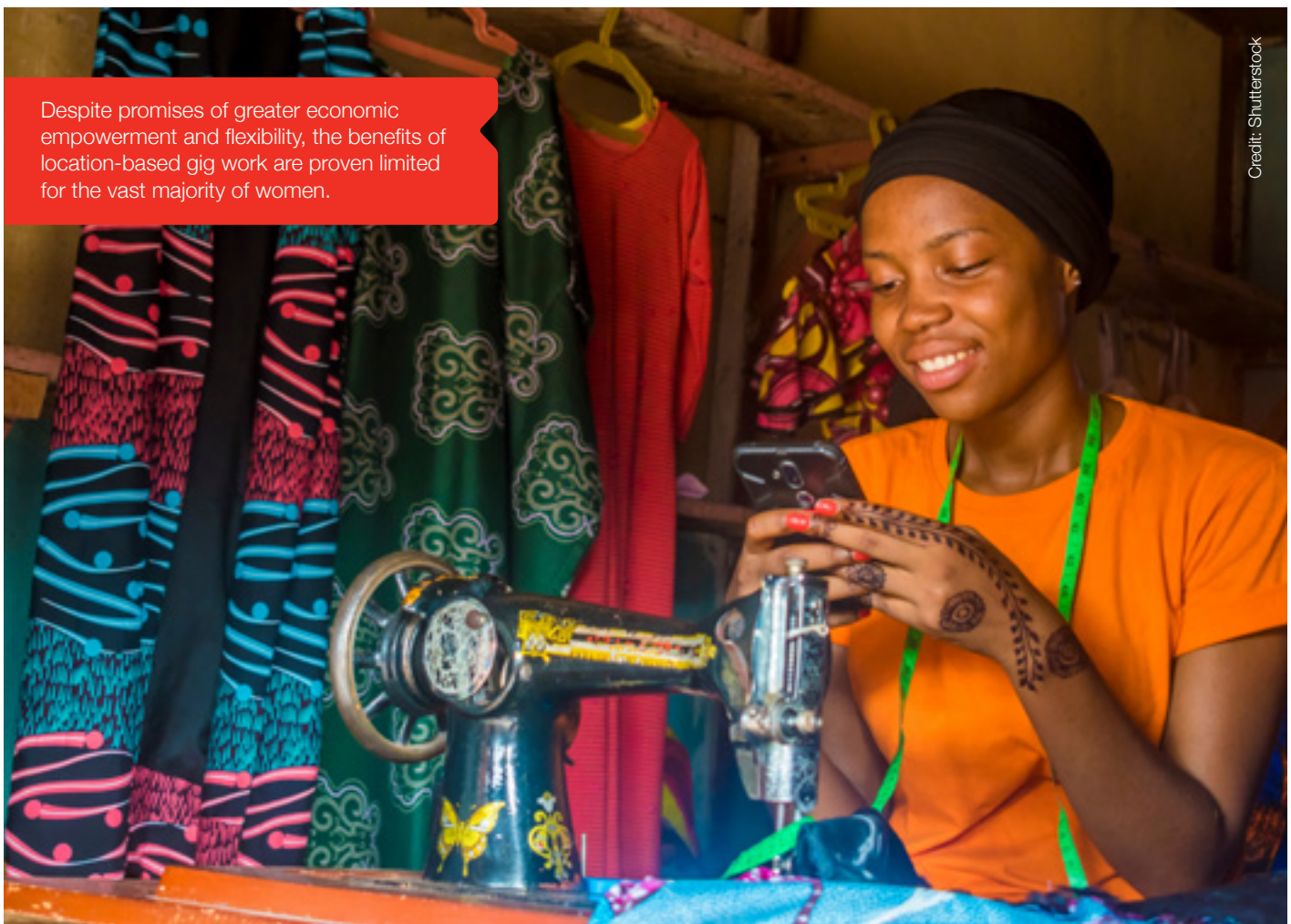
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1. Executive summary

The digitalisation of our increasingly globalised economies is intensifying at an unprecedented rate. Governments are rolling out strategies to harness the opportunities such digitalisation can create, including in the world of work. Within this context, the gig economy, where online platforms connect workers with one-off pieces of work ('gigs'), has been growing fast. This report presents findings from a rapid mapping into what the gig economy means for women's right to decent work, with a focus on seven countries across three regions in the global South: Ghana, South Africa and Kenya (Africa); Brazil and Guatemala (Latin America); and Bangladesh and Vietnam (Asia). Drawing on existing research, including by feminist academics and networks, as

well as a small number of interviews with stakeholders from civil society (see the Methodological Note in the Annexe), we investigate the intersectional barriers to, and opportunities and challenges for women within, location-based gig work in three sectors: ride-hailing and delivery; domestic and care work; and beauty services.

We know that women are already concentrated in precarious and exploitative forms of work in the informal sector or within global value chains of multinationals, and their livelihoods are being disproportionately impacted by the intersecting crises of Covid-19, high inflation, debt, austerity, and climate change. We also found there are



significant data gaps within this rapidly emerging sphere, particularly in the female-dominated sectors of domestic, care and beauty work. However, existing evidence strongly indicates that, for the vast majority of women, the benefits of location-based gig work and the wider 'Fourth Industrial Revolution' are proving limited or illusory.

An intersectional digital divide excludes many women from the digital sphere. For women with access, location-based platforms are creating new opportunities for paid work, along with some positive benefits such as training and an increased sense of professionalism. However, while these experiences signify valuable inroads, the broader picture is less positive. The narratives of independence, flexibility and economic empowerment pushed by some platform companies and development finance institutions investing in platforms often mask working conditions characterised by informality, precarity, low and unpredictable pay, long hours, limited access to social protection, denial of rights to unionise, exposure to violence, and lack of corporate accountability. Much of the precarity hinges on labour platforms' insistence on classifying workers as independent contractors, thereby circumventing minimum wage and other statutory obligations, and undermining access to social protection. The gender, class and race-based exploitation women face in the traditional world of work are replicated, whilst new forms of discrimination and corporate control have emerged. These include algorithms that effectively penalise women workers for having to juggle unpaid care work, and for their concerns around gender-based violence (GBV).

The size of platform companies and the terms they provide to workers varies, with some stating commitments and enacting policies aimed at improving pay and conditions. However, broadly the unchecked expansion of corporate power is enabling the exploitation of women as 'cheap' app-based labour, further entrenching power dynamics rooted in a racial and sexual division of labour and – in the case of multinationals based in the global North in particular – relations of coloniality. Despite governments committing to global standards on

decent work that should cover all workers, including in the gig economy, legislative frameworks generally remain weak and poorly implemented in the countries we analysed, with a lack of clarity on extending them to gig workers. Within this challenging context, location-based platform workers are bravely engaging in collective activism to defend their rights. Others are resisting the exploitative corporate model by setting up platform cooperatives. However, these initiatives remain relatively small-scale, while most examples of collective action we identified in the focus countries are in the male-dominated ride-hailing and delivery sector, with little documented involvement of women. Although the gig economy is on the radar of some unions and worker associations covering domestic, care and beauty workers that we spoke with, it is not yet a major area of focus.

This report seeks to make a small contribution towards filling the gaps in knowledge on women's rights and the location-based gig economy, and offers recommendations to policymakers, platform companies and civil society. ActionAid believes there is an urgency to this agenda given the rapid growth of the digital platform economy within a context of rollbacks on women's rights and workers' rights. If a feminist just transition is to be achieved to economies that centre care, wellbeing and human rights, the digital platform economy must be developed and managed in ways that are gender just. Simplistic narratives of the gig economy as a means to economically empower women must be challenged, and policies and legislative frameworks implemented to redress the intersectional digital divide and advance the rights of all women workers in the gig economy. These must be informed by the voices and perspectives of women, and include strategies to eliminate GBV and redress women's unequal share of unpaid care and domestic work. Power needs to be shifted away from multinationals back to workers and communities, with companies held accountable for abusive practices.

2. Introduction: The rise of the gig economy and the Fourth Industrial Revolution

“Digital labour platforms have the potential to benefit both workers and businesses – and through them, society more generally. But they will only fulfil this positive potential, and help us achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, if the work opportunities they provide are decent.”

Guy Ryder, Director General, ILO¹

The digital platform economy is rapidly evolving in countries around the world. According to the ILO, the number of online digital platforms which match workers to one-off pieces of work have increased five-fold globally in the last 10 years.² This includes in countries across much of the global South. As a lack of decent work opportunities continues to wrack the global economy, exacerbated by the impacts of Covid-19 and huge spikes in fuel and food costs, millions of workers are signing up to online platform applications (‘apps’) to seek a livelihood. This includes workers providing online web-based services, such as IT, customer relations, accounting and graphic design. It also includes workers providing location-based services in sectors such as ride-hailing (i.e. motorbike and taxi services) and delivery, domestic services and beauty work (see Box 1).³

For example, in South Asia, there are an estimated four million gig workers offering food delivery, e-commerce logistics, or transportation, a figure set to potentially grow to 12 million by 2025.⁴ In Africa, the estimated size of the digital economy is expected to rise from USD 115 billion to USD 712 billion by 2050,⁵ while 365 digital platforms were identified in a study of eight countries across the continent.⁶ In Latin America, the number of platforms operating throughout the region is approximately 14 times larger than ten years ago.⁷ These shifts, along with wider technological change and digitalisation of economies, have been framed as the ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ (4IR) and are explored through policy initiatives around the ‘Future of Work’.⁸ In line with this, many governments and regional bodies, such as the African Union, ASEAN and European Union⁹, have been rolling out strategies to further the digitalisation of their

Box 1: The Fourth Industrial Revolution and digital economy

The **Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR)** was a concept coined by Klaus Schwab, the founder of the World Economic Forum (WEF), an annual global gathering of heads of state, multinational corporations (MNCs) and wealthy elites. The WEF describes the 4IR as representing:

“...[A] new chapter in human development, enabled by extraordinary technology advances commensurate with those of the first, second and third industrial revolutions. These advances are merging the physical, digital and biological worlds in ways that create both huge promise and potential peril. The speed, breadth and depth of this revolution is forcing us to rethink how countries develop, how organisations create value and even what it means to be human.”¹⁰

The 4IR is being driven by the rise of the **digital economy**. This term refers to all economic activities that use the internet as a platform and digital information as key inputs for producing, marketing and distributing goods and services. This includes through interactions with mobile networks and other information technologies.¹¹

The **digital platform economy** or gig economy refers to paid work that is coordinated by digital platforms. Companies operating these platforms act as intermediaries, enabling purchasers to order a specified service or task (a ‘gig’) from a worker, usually taking a fee or commission when the service is paid for or completed.¹² They include location-based platforms, where tasks are performed at a specified physical location by individuals, and online web-based platforms, where tasks are performed online and remotely.¹³

economies, including expanding internet coverage and building knowledge and skills of citizens, as a way to harness the opportunities such technological advances can create, including in terms of job creation. The platform economy is also presented as means to formalise the informal sector,¹⁴ including by some platform companies which claim that gig workers have heightened levels of autonomy and flexibility.¹⁵ As such, development finance institutions, such as the UK's British International Investment (BII), are investing in platform companies as a way to create jobs in the global South.¹⁶ Meanwhile, the International Finance Corporation (IFC) part of the World Bank Group, is promoting gig platforms as a means to economically empower women (discussed further on page 21), along with platform companies such as Uber. Whilst acknowledging the need to address substantial barriers, the IFC argues that "digital platforms represent an opportunity to close longstanding [gender] gaps in access to jobs, assets, and markets".¹⁷

There is an urgent need for the creation of decent work opportunities for women, as long called for by women workers, feminist networks, trade unions and wider civil society, including as part of a feminist, just transition to an economic system centred on rights and wellbeing of people and planet.¹⁸ Whilst many men also face major denials to the right to decent work, especially in the global South, the barriers women face are particularly acute due to the way in which patriarchy intersects with other systems of oppression based on race, class, migrant status and geographical location (see Figure 1). As such, women are vastly over-represented in precarious roles in the informal economy, such as in agriculture, as informal traders, domestic workers, or toiling in factories and fields in the value chains of MNCs. Access to comprehensive social protection remains impossible for the majority of the world's women. The Covid-19 pandemic caused millions of women to lose jobs and livelihoods, driving their global labour force participation rate down to just 62.9%¹⁹ and pushing many into poverty. Women also undertake at least two and half times more unpaid care work than men, a load which was greatly exacerbated by Covid-19.²⁰ This creates further time poverty, infringing on women's access to education, training, decent work, as well as rest and leisure. Women remain excluded from economic decision-making and are under-represented in collective activism for their rights.

Box 2: Defining decent work

We use the definition of decent work set out by the International Labour Organisation (ILO), which covers four pillars, with gender as a cross cutting issue: job creation and opportunities for work; rights at work (including fair pay, secure contracts, regulated hours, and freedom from discrimination, violence and harassment); social dialogue (encompassing the right to engage in trade union and other collective worker action); and access to social protection (such as paid parental leave, sick leave and pensions).²¹

This report sets out to explore what the location-based gig economy means for women's right to decent work, what opportunities it holds, and what sorts of policies are needed to ensure that the 'Future of Work' centres the rights of women. We undertook a rapid mapping of seven countries across three regions in the global South, namely: Ghana, South Africa and Kenya (Africa); Brazil and Guatemala (Latin America); and Bangladesh and Vietnam (Asia) (see the Methodological Note in the Annexe for further background). All these countries are investing in digitalisation strategies and have seen a growth in location-based platform work (see Figure 2). Drawing on a small but rapidly growing body of research, including by feminist activists and networks, as well as media articles, grey literature, and a small number of interviews with key informants from civil society, the report investigates how women are engaging in location-based gig work in three sectors: ride-hailing and delivery; domestic and care work; and beauty services. Using an intersectional feminist lens that recognises that women do not live single issue lives,²² we outline where, how and in what conditions women are engaging in work through the gig economy, and the social, economic and cultural obstructions they face in this regard.

Kenya

- Women face higher unemployment (6.1%) than men (5.4%),²³ while 51.2% of employed women lost their jobs due to the Covid-19 pandemic.²⁴
- 14 million to 16.8 million working people are either self-employed or in the informal sector. This share has grown over the last decade.²⁵ 88% of women work in the informal economy.²⁶
- Women face a 32% gender pay gap²⁷ and spend 11.1 hours a day on unpaid care, versus 2.9 hours spent by men.²⁸

Ghana

- Women have a lower labour force participation rate (64.5%) compared to men (72.2%)²⁹ and are concentrated in low-paid precarious roles in the informal sector (92%)³⁰
- Women in Ghana spend 25.5 hours per week on unpaid care and domestic work, compared to 7.4 hours for men.³¹
- Economic inequality in Ghana has decreased since the 1990s³² but remains widespread. The poorest 50% in the country owned only 4.1% of the personal wealth in the country, while the top 10% owned 62.3% in 2021.³³

South Africa

- A higher proportion of women (35.7%) are employed than men (31.8%)³⁴ and account for 47.6% of the informal sector.³⁵ Of the 3 million people who lost jobs due to Covid-19, two-thirds were women.³⁶
- In 2019, 46.8% of youth were in neither education, employment or training, the majority being female and black.³⁷
- Women spend 16% of their day on unpaid care work, while men only spend 6%.³⁸
- Around 30% of South African women have experienced harassment in the workplace.³⁹

Brazil

- Women's labour market participation rate is 54.2% compared to 74.1% for men.⁴⁰ Black women are disproportionately affected by unemployment (15.6% compared to 11% for white men). This situation has only been worsened by the pandemic.⁴¹
- Only 7% of women in opposite-sex marriages earn more than their husbands and are more likely to work fewer hours in an informal job.⁴²
- In 11 out of 27 states, more than 50% of workers are in the informal sector,⁴³ with women,⁴⁴ and black and brown people over-represented.⁴⁵

Guatemala

- Guatemala is the most gender unequal country in Latin America. It ranks 135th out of 191 countries in the Gender Development Index.⁴⁶
- Female labour-force participation is just 37% compared to 84% for men.⁴⁷ For every dollar a man earns, women are paid only 50 cents.⁴⁸ 36.6% of women work under informal conditions, in contrast to 63.4% of men.⁴⁹
- Indigenous young women are the most vulnerable group, suffering higher levels of poverty and lower access to the formal economy.⁵⁰

Bangladesh

- Women's labour force participation rate is 32% compared to 76% for men. 96.6% of working women are in the informal sector.⁵¹ 40.7% of all employed women work part-time compared to 10.1% for men.⁵²
- Up to 60% of women have reported facing gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work.⁵³ ActionAid Bangladesh found almost all women entrepreneurs had faced online violence or abuse.⁵⁴
- Women engage in 6.3 hours of unpaid care work per day, compared to just 1.1 hours per day by men.⁵⁵

Vietnam

- Vietnam's female labour force participation rate is 73% compared to 82.5% for men.⁵⁶ Women are disproportionately concentrated in the informal sector in low paid, vulnerable work. This includes many migrant women.⁵⁷
- The gender wage gap is estimated to be 29.5%. Women undertake twice as much unpaid care and domestic work as men.⁵⁸
- 32.1 million people aged 15 and above were hit by job losses, reduced hours and pay due to Covid-19.⁵⁹ In 2020, women experienced the biggest loss with a 4.8% drop in labour force participation, compared to a 3.9% fall for men.⁶⁰

Situating in the wider context

In our analysis, we situate the gig economy within the current dominant economic paradigm that prioritises economic growth and corporate profits over human rights, wellbeing and preservation of the environment, and which thrives off women's unpaid and underpaid labour, particularly black, brown and migrant women. In this way, the gig economy further perpetuates the current sexual and racial division of labour. Within the ride-hailing and delivery sectors, in which MNCs significantly dominate, unequal power dynamics play out between countries and companies based in the global North and those in the global South, which are themselves rooted in legacies of colonialism.⁶¹ On the other hand, we highlight how workers are fighting for their rights and are devising new strategies to resist abusive practices, some of which are being augmented by technology. Other interrelated themes addressed by the report include the intersectional digital divide, women's unpaid care work, legislative frameworks and governance gaps. It features snapshots of facts in relation to key themes and sectors, before offering recommendations for policy-makers, platform companies, and civil society.

Limitations and challenges

There are inherent challenges in drawing conclusions from such a diverse range of sectors and country contexts. Moreover, due to its swift expansion and gaps in government monitoring, there is a significant lack of data about the gig economy, the size and composition of the workforce, as well as workers' experiences within it.⁶² Although gender-disaggregated data is even harder to come by, including in the countries investigated in this report, the numbers of women engaging through location-based platforms seem to remain relatively small. Various factors contribute to this, including patriarchal norms that limit women's access to and control over economic resources, women's over-representation in socially and economically marginalised groups (see *The intersectional digital divide* below), and high levels of GBV. Furthermore, by far the largest platform sectors are ride-hailing and delivery, both of which are dominated by men, and which have received the greatest amount of attention by researchers. The emergence of platforms in women-dominated domestic, care and beauty services is relatively nascent, and data even more scant.

There is also variation in the extent to which workers rely on platforms as a primary source of income or to supplement other forms of work. However, in countries of the global South, many workers depend exclusively on digital platforms for their livelihood.⁶³ Moreover, as the number of labour platforms and the wider digitalisation of economies increases, coupled with a persistent lack of decent work opportunities elsewhere, the numbers of women trying to earn a living through gig work are likely to grow.



Kenya



- Kenya is one of the top ten fastest growing digital economies globally. Its Digital Economy Strategy aims to diversify its economy, create new jobs, and foster economic growth.⁶⁴
- The value of Kenya's gig economy was some USD 109 million in 2019, with over 36,500 gig workers.⁶⁵
- The two largest sectors are professional work platforms (IT, sales, etc.) and ride-hailing. This had an estimated market value of USD 45 million, employing 13,000 people in 2019.⁶⁶
- The growth of Kenya's gig economy has been aided by the resurgence of the mobile payment industry and is the most used payment channel after cash.⁶⁷

Ghana



- Ghana is considered one of the top three digitalised economies in Africa.⁶⁸
- Ghana's World Bank-funded Digital Acceleration Project aims to promote digital inclusion for women, persons with disabilities and rural communities, and is expected to increase internet connectivity for 6 million people.⁶⁹
- There are around 72 platforms in Ghana, 42% of which are local.⁷⁰ Ghana has the cheapest internet rates in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁷¹
- By 2021, 60,000 - 100,000 people were employed through platforms including Uber, Bolt, and Jumia Food.⁷²

South Africa



- Considered 'one of the digital economy leaders on the African continent'.⁷³
- SA's draft ICT and Digital Economy Masterplan (2021) provide concrete steps to build a digital economy. It identifies 119 digital platforms across various sectors, 70% of these were developed locally.⁷⁴
- It has an internet penetration rate of 70%,⁷⁵ with the majority of the population accessing via mobile phone.⁷⁶
- There are up to 100,000 workers engaged in gig work, 30,000 of which are using location-based platforms.⁷⁷

Brazil



- Brazil is one of the five largest platform economies globally,⁷⁸ with over 500,000 delivery or mobility platform workers in 2020.⁷⁹
- In 2018, the Government launched the Brazilian Digital Transformation Strategy to promote government coordination, advance digitalisation and enable economic growth.⁸⁰



- The platform economy was estimated to account for 22% of GDP in 2016 and was projected to reach 25.1% of GDP by 2021.⁸¹

- Internet access through smartphone usage is high: 71% of women and 81% of men owned a smartphone in 2020.⁸²

Guatemala



- Guatemala is rapidly digitising. In 2021, digital commerce generated USD 446.60 million and online services USD 33.77 million.⁸³
- Various policies to boost digitalisation are in place, including the Program for the Digital Transformation of Guatemala for Inclusive Access to Connectivity, to boost infrastructure and skills. This has a focus on the integration of women and indigenous populations.⁸⁴
- Digitalisation has allowed companies to achieve more diverse recruitments (75%), creating opportunities for people that have faced exclusion in the past.⁸⁵

Bangladesh

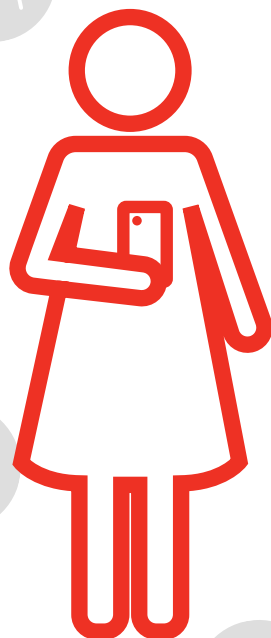


- In its Digital Bangladesh strategy, the government commits to increase internet infrastructure, access to low-cost broadband, and ensure ICT in education.⁸⁶
- The number of people with access to the internet has increased massively in the last decade, from 3.7% in 2010 to over 30% of the population in 2022.⁸⁷
- Covid-19 propelled the growth of the gig economy and platform companies, especially those in ride-sharing, transportation and delivery e.g. Foodpanda grew by 300%.⁸⁸

Vietnam



- Vietnam's National Strategy for Digital Economy and Society Development 2022 focuses on development of infrastructure and digital inclusion.⁸⁹
- There has been a rapid growth in numbers of workers engaged in the digital economy, facilitated by 73.2% of the population having internet access⁹⁰ and relatively cheap internet costs in 2022.⁹¹
- The digital economy accounts for 8.2% of Vietnam's GDP, with a revenue of \$123 billion.⁹²



3. Decent work in the gig economy

“The phenomenon of platformization transforms production, distribution and social reproduction in ways that reinforce the concentration of economic and social power in the hands of digital corporations and countries of the Global North.”

Anita Gurumurthy, Nandini Chami, Cecilia Alemany⁹³

The platform economy is transforming how workers access and engage in work, as well as how they interact with companies. This has profound implications for decent work, including for women. As the academic Lorena Lombardozi explains:

“The technology behind the gig economy is indeed shaping the time and space that organises labour in dramatically different ways... the huge transformational potential of such technology is, however, confuted by the reality of inequality reinvented and reproduced by neoliberal digitalism.”⁹⁴

Furthermore, the rapid rise of digital labour platforms is taking place at a time of wider declines in labour rights globally (see Box 3), and when wealth inequality is reaching historic highs. Covid-19 led to precipitous job and livelihood losses, reducing the income of some 97 million more people in the global South to less than USD 1.90 a day,⁹⁵ with women disproportionately impacted. At the same time, many MNCs boast staggering profits and are valued at billions. Uber Technologies, for instance, which dominates ride-hailing and delivery in many of the countries we examined, reported a net worth of \$52.95 billion in 2022.⁹⁶ Meanwhile, as we explore below, drivers relying on the platform for their livelihoods often struggle to make ends meet – an issue Uber itself has acknowledged as being in need of addressing.^a In many contexts, gig workers are unable to access comprehensive social protection due to the common practice by labour platforms of classifying workers as independent contractors. This raises questions about the limited choices workers have for securing decent jobs, especially for women,



Credit: Shutterstock

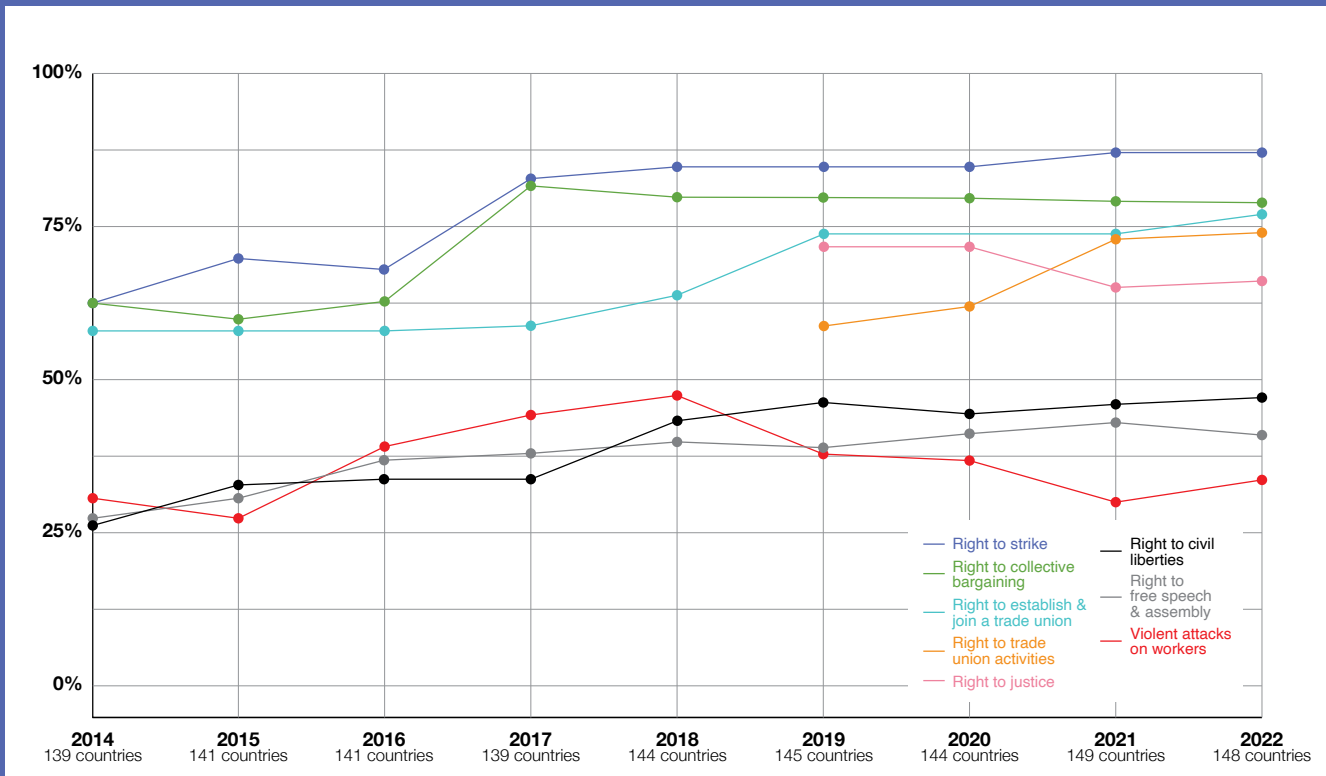
The number of digital labour platforms is rapidly increasing at a time of wider declines in workers' rights globally. Gig workers' classification as independent contractors means they often fall outside labour laws and unable to access social protection.

who face significant discrimination in the world of work (see Figure 2). Women migrating within and across borders are commonly subjected to further discrimination and legal restrictions to accessing paid work in the formal economy. As such, it is no surprise that many workers who rely on the gig economy are migrants. For instance, they comprise up to 70% of app-based delivery drivers in Argentina and Chile.⁹⁷

a. With respect to its European operations, Uber's CEO has noted that 48% of the 600,000 people who worked as drivers and couriers on the app in 2020 said financial difficulties were their top concern that year. Here, Uber says that since 2018 it has provided its workers with access to comprehensive injury and protection insurance, which includes death and disability protection, sick pay, occupational injury insurance, and maternity and paternity payments. See: <https://www.uber.com/newsroom/a-better-deal/>

BOX 3: Wider declines in workers' rights

The growth of the platform economy is occurring in a context of declines in democratic freedoms⁹⁸ and workers' rights globally. According to the International Trade Union Confederation's (ITUC) Global Rights Index (see Graph 1),⁹⁹ over the last nine years workers have faced rising violations of rights to unionise and strike, whilst coming under increasing levels of attack. Three of our focus countries, Bangladesh, Guatemala and Brazil, are named among the ten worst countries in the world to be a worker. Many rights violations are perpetrated directly or with the complicity of companies. As this report shows, this includes within in the platform economy.



Picture credit: ITUC

3.1 The intersectional digital divide

“In the context of the digital divide, understanding unpaid care as one of the origins of inequalities between men and women is key, since the disparate burden of these tasks conditions a greater scarcity of time.”

Presiding Officers of the Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean¹⁰⁰

The digital divide means many women are denied the opportunity to even seek a livelihood through digital platforms. It is determined by a number of intersecting factors, including gender, race, class, caste, language, migrant status, literacy and

location.¹⁰¹ For millions of women (and men) from the poorest and most marginalised communities, especially in rural areas where educational attainment and literacy levels are often lower than in urban areas, the costs of owning a smartphone and paying for data combined with poor internet connectivity, make it impossible to gain work through digital platforms. Moreover, patriarchal norms which assign women and girls a greater share of unpaid care work than men greatly curtail their time to engage in educational and training opportunities. Similarly, in many contexts, girls are denied the same opportunities to access an education, and are not encouraged to pursue subjects related to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) to the same degree as boys.¹⁰² Women and girls face constraints on their freedom of movement and control over economic resources and decision-making (see Figure 3).¹⁰³ This

can include, for instance, fathers and brothers acting as gate-keepers of computers, mobile devices and the internet.¹⁰⁴ Women migrating to towns or across borders to seek work can face racism, xenophobia and increased levels of GBV¹⁰⁵ and often lack formal identification documents which are needed to register on some labour platform.¹⁰⁶

In almost all the countries analysed, men have more access to digital devices and the internet, and higher levels of literacy. For example, in Ghana, less than a third (29%) of women are using the internet, 6% less than men.¹⁰⁷ Female literacy stands at around of 74%, making access to virtual platforms unattainable for almost a quarter of women.¹⁰⁸ Location is also a significant determinant, with higher levels of illiteracy and lower internet coverage in rural areas compared to urban.¹⁰⁹ The same is true for Kenya, where internet costs are among the least affordable in East Africa¹¹⁰ and the gender gap for mobile internet access stands at 34%.¹¹¹ In South Africa, women own mobile phones almost to the same extent as men, but the gap is larger with respect to internet access (63% for men compared to 54% for women).¹¹² The intersections between race, class and gender and the rural-urban divide mean that black and coloured people,¹¹³ women, and those living rural areas, face greater challenges in accessing mobile devices and finding job opportunities on digital platforms.¹¹⁴

In Bangladesh, women aged 18 and over are less likely to use mobile internet compared to their male counterparts,¹¹⁵ with the gender gap increasing with age.¹¹⁶ More than half (54%) of rural households surveyed by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development in 2019 had no access to the internet, while just two-fifths (41%) had access to a smartphone.¹¹⁷

In Brazil, female literacy rates are marginally higher than men's.¹¹⁸ While some 82% of population has access to the Internet, the rate drops to 60% for rural populations.¹¹⁹ Internet quality and cost also present barriers to access, especially for poor women in the Northeast and for black and indigenous communities throughout the country.¹²⁰ There is a similar situation in Guatemala, where inequality in economic and infrastructural development between urban and rural areas is high. Internet and smartphones access is roughly the same between men and women who live in cities,¹²¹ but the mountainous areas where indigenous communities reside lack digital infrastructure and reliable electricity. Internet costs are

some of the highest in the region, with one gigabyte of data costing over 4% of the average salary.¹²² In Vietnam, 99% of women with a degree have internet access compared to 17% of those without.¹²³ Ethnic minority communities are among the most marginalised in the country,¹²⁴ meaning they are likely to experience disproportionate barriers to digital technologies and infrastructure.

Legacies of colonialism

This gender, class and race-based digital divide within countries, as well as between countries in the global North and South, is rooted in colonialism. Many countries in the global South were deliberately de-industrialised and under-developed, and their populations subjected to genocide before being enslaved, exploited and oppressed during more than 500 years of slavery and colonial rule as a means to enrich countries in the global North, including to propel the First, Second and Third Industrial Revolutions in Europe and North America.¹²⁵ In the 1980s and 90s, the implementation of 'Structural Adjustment Programmes' under the aegis of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank – two of the world's most powerful global financial institutions – led to public spending cuts that "effectively reduced public investment in technological innovation, cutting much of the global South out of the dot-com boom".¹²⁶

Global power imbalances and the extraction of wealth from the global South continues to this day, including through the value chains and tax avoidance of MNCs, trade and investment rules, debt repayments, and the domination of global North countries in economic decision-making.¹²⁷ This has created a situation where, since gaining independence just 60-65 years ago, many states have been denied the resources and policy space needed to invest in gender-responsive public services and social protection, such as health and education. Such services are vital for redistributing women's unpaid care work, redressing wider social inequities and promoting access to decent work.¹²⁸

Kenya



- Affordability is the main reason given for not owning a mobile phone (56% of men and 45% of women). However, illiteracy affects more women, with 31% indicating this as the main reason for not owning a device compared to 23% of men.¹²⁹
- While the gender gap for mobile phone use is only 6%, the gender gap for mobile internet access is 39%.¹³⁰
- The internet in Kenya is the least affordable of all countries in East Africa.¹³¹
- The urban-rural divide strongly impacts digital access. Smartphone penetration in rural areas stood at 17% compared to 55% in urban areas.¹³²



Guatemala



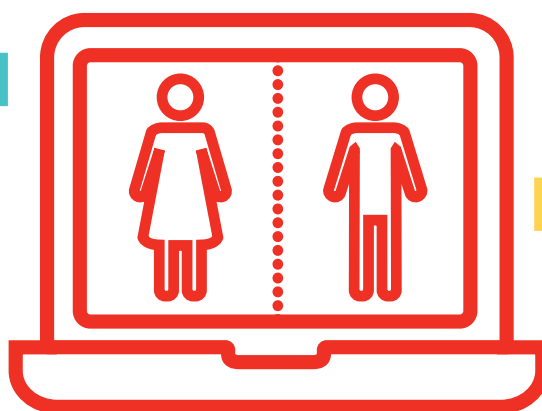
- 32% of 3–18-year-old girls are out of school compared to 29% of boys. The indigenous schooling rates is half that of the non-indigenous population.¹⁴⁶ Lower education has been found to lead to lesser access to “good jobs” in urban areas and in ICT services.¹⁴⁷
- 35% the population remains offline,¹⁴⁸ only half the population can afford to pay for digital devices and services, and internet quality remains low.¹⁴⁹
- 75% of men compared to 57% of women report ever having used the internet. Most access the internet via phones and mobile devices due to the high cost of computers.¹⁵⁰
- Mountainous areas where indigenous communities reside lack digital infrastructure and reliable electricity. Rural penetration rates are approximately 15%.¹⁵¹



Ghana



- 29% of Ghanaian women are now using the internet, 6% less than men.¹³³
- The female literacy rate is 74.5%, making access to virtual platforms unattainable for just over a quarter of women.¹³⁴
- Location is the biggest determinant for digital access. Literacy levels, access to education¹³⁵ and internet coverage are lower in rural areas compared to urban.¹³⁶



Bangladesh



- 71.2% of women are literate compared to 76.7% of men.¹⁵²
- 54% of rural households surveyed in a 2019 had no access to the internet; less than half (41%) had access to a smartphone.¹⁵³
- 84% of men own mobiles compared to 66% of women.¹⁵⁴ Women aged 15-24 are less likely to use the mobile internet compared to young men.¹⁵⁵
- Mobile and internet access for women is shaped by patriarchal norms that deny women ownership of assets like mobile phones and exclude them from financial decision-making.¹⁵⁶



South Africa



- Women face discriminatory barriers stemming from patriarchal norms¹³⁷ related to literacy, digital literacy, device ownership and access to the internet, as well as social norms that implicitly exclude them from certain sectors.¹³⁸
- Race, class, gender and geographical location¹³⁹ intersect to determine access to the gig economy, particularly impacting black people and those living in rural areas.¹⁴⁰
- The region is the most expensive in the world for internet costs, with a Gigabyte typically costing over USD 5.¹⁴¹

Vietnam



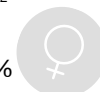
- Decision-making in rural areas still rests with men, which limits women’s access to devices and digital skills.¹⁵⁷
- 83% of men (aged 15-49) compared to 81% of women were using internet.¹⁵⁸
- Mobile phone use and internet access is also determined by location, income level, and education. For instance, 99% of women with a degree have internet access compared to 17% of those without.¹⁵⁹
- Vietnam’s 53 ethnic minority groups (14.6% of the population) face intersecting forms of discrimination, including violence, exploitation and trafficking. This also means they have limited access to education and skills training.¹⁶⁰



Brazil



- Brazil is one of the few countries in the world where female literacy rates (93.4%) are higher than male (93.01%).¹⁴²
- Some 65% of people living in rural areas had internet access in 2020, compared to 75% in urban areas. 96% of internet users are aged 16-24.¹⁴³
- Internet quality and cost also present barriers to access, especially for poor women and black and indigenous communities.¹⁴⁴ The average monthly income of white population is 74% higher than the black and brown population.¹⁴⁵



3.2 A fair gig? Conditions for location-based women gig workers

“Unless existing ingrained structural barriers are removed, women, especially those already most marginalized, will continue to lose out. It is not a matter of “fitting” women into the current and future world of work, but rather shaping the world of work in a manner that is gender-transformative, benefitting both women and men.”

Report of the Expert Group Meeting, CSW67¹⁶¹

The intersectional digital divide is both a cause and a consequence of structural discrimination that permeates the life-course of women, especially those located in the global South. However, women’s digital inclusion will not automatically lead to decent jobs.¹⁶²

Anita Gurumurthy of the Feminist Digital Justice Project observes that the platform economy is broadly extractivist, exploitative and unsustainable. Like other traditional globalised labour markets, “it is built on the back of a global division of labor that bears the marks of race, class, gender, and geography”.¹⁶³

Box 4: Positives of platform working

Women in several countries and sectors have shared how location-based gig work has created new work opportunities and has been positive and empowering in various ways. In a survey of 4,900 ride-hailing, food delivery, and domestic services gig workers in 15 countries, 11% of women said they did not have a job before joining a platform, compared to 8% of men.¹⁶⁴ In countries such as Argentina, data suggests that platforms have facilitated a marginal increase in female participation in male-dominated sectors, such as ride-hailing and delivery. One suggested reason for this are the online sign-up mechanisms, which allow women to avoid discrimination they may face in an in-person interview.¹⁶⁵ Women engaging through location-based platforms in the domestic and beauty sectors have also reported a greater sense of professionalisation, and feel empowered by the training opportunities provided (this is discussed

further on page 28).¹⁶⁶ Of the small proportion of women platform-based drivers in South Africa, the perceived benefits of such work include flexibility (67%) and an increase in income (46%).¹⁶⁷

It is also important to note that there is significant variation in the size of platform companies and the conditions of work they offer. There are numerous national or city-level companies, some of which provide better pay and conditions than larger platforms. These include, for instance, The Black Ride and Enshika in Ghana (see page 18), which charge lower commission rates. Some platforms have partnered with civil society organisations as a way to help them improve conditions for workers, such as the JupViec-Asia Foundation partnership supporting migrant domestic workers in Vietnam (see page 25). Other platforms are set up as cooperatives, and are run by and for workers as a direct challenge to extractive and exploitative corporate models (discussed further on page 24).

Whilst there may be some positive benefits of location-based platform working (see Box 4), these are often dramatically undermined by broader decent work deficits, weak regulatory frameworks and lack of corporate accountability. As explored through the three sectoral case studies below, in many ways the digital platform economy “is reinforcing existing gendered social divisions and enabling the ‘remaking of women into devalued workers’”.¹⁶⁸ There are two particular issues to highlight that are enabling this: misclassification of workers and algorithms that penalise women.

Misclassification of workers perpetuating informality

The majority of platform companies, including in the sectors we analysed, treat workers as independent contractors or ‘partners’, rather than as employees, thereby largely avoiding any form of employer liability.¹⁶⁹ It means gig workers often fall outside of the purview of labour laws, including those covering minimum wages, working hours, and safety at work; and lack access to social protection, such as paid parental leave, sick leave, holiday pay or a pension.

Instead, workers must pay the platforms, either through a regular subscription or a commission fee.

For example, in a global study by the ILO, less than 10% of respondents in the app-based taxi and delivery sectors were covered by unemployment protection and disability insurance, while less than 20% had pensions or retirement benefits (whether public or private plans). Only about half were covered by health insurance and about 30% for employment-related injury, despite the high occupational risks of this work.¹⁷⁰

Meanwhile, workers' entire relationship with a platform company is mediated through a digital app. The closest they have to a contract are the terms they sign up to when registering.¹⁷¹ There is very little accountability to gig workers through the apps. Although some do have mechanisms for individual workers to raise complaints, the level of responsiveness is often poor, while mechanisms for collective complaints have been found to be even more limited.¹⁷² Moreover, "almost all platforms explicitly rule out recognition of worker... groups, association or unions",¹⁷³ denying their rights to engage in collective bargaining, and compounding their atomisation.

Algorithms that penalise for unpaid care work and GBV

"Remember she still has these chores back at home. So, [she does] double work for just survival pay... This woman cannot hire someone to relieve her of her chores back at home. So, she will go find something for survival, come back home and still deliver the [unpaid care] work that was left."

Representative of the Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Educational Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA)¹⁷⁴

Most digital labour platforms store and process vast amounts of data on their workers, for instance, on customer ratings, tasks undertaken, locations and payments. This data is used to underpin algorithmic systems of management, which determine how jobs are assigned to individual workers. According to the ILO, such practices are "re-organising control and re-shaping power balances in the workplace"¹⁷⁵ in ways that mean the supposed autonomy and flexibility that app-based workers supposedly have is largely a myth.¹⁷⁶ Rather, algorithmic management can result in

low pay, isolation, unsocial and irregular hours, and exhaustion.¹⁷⁷

Algorithms have also been found to discriminate against women, who are unable to respond as quickly or work as many hours as men because of unpaid care responsibilities. For while digital platforms often tout the 'flexibility' of gig work, this has not reduced wider discriminatory expectations around unpaid care and domestic work. This can result in women working even longer days. This was especially the case during the Covid-19 pandemic, when schools closed and women were expected to look after children. For example, in Argentina, the Association of Platform Workers reported that women platform delivery drivers, who were the main household breadwinners, had no choice but to work fewer hours. They also shared how the algorithms, "condemn" those who cannot juggle "work and family".¹⁷⁸

In addition, safety concerns, including around GBV, can deter women drivers from accepting rides after dark and in certain locations. A study of seven countries, including Kenya and South Africa, found that women platform drivers worked fewer hours than men,¹⁷⁹ contributing to a sizeable gender wage gap.

Many platforms deactivate workers from the system if their customer ratings are low, with no scope for discussion. Once deactivated, drivers can find it hard to work independently due to price undercutting by platform companies.¹⁸⁰ According to Siddarth Peter De Souza of the Centre for International Governance and Innovation, "[r]atings... impact not just the work that people are able to do, but also their capacity to be able to organise, negotiate and resist."

There is a startling lack of transparency and accessibility of the data collected on workers (and users) by platform companies.¹⁸¹ Research in Africa and Asia found that such data asymmetries place workers at a major disadvantage if they enter a dispute with a company,¹⁸² leading to calls by feminist networks as well as the ILO¹⁸³ for community data rights and collective bargaining on data.¹⁸⁴ ¹⁸⁵ These calls echo wider civil society demands for workers to reclaim digital power in our increasingly technological world.¹⁸⁶

In the next section we explore these issues further through case studies on the platform-based ride-hailing and delivery, care and domestic work, and beauty services sectors in Ghana, South Africa, Kenya, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Guatemala and Brazil.

3.3 Case study 1: Ride-hailing and delivery driving

“An algorithm determines everything for them: the value of the work, the duration of their work, even the route they should take. And if you don’t accept, there are penalties.”

Tatiana Simonetti, Brazilian labour prosecutor.¹⁸⁷

Multinational ride-hailing and delivery platforms, such as Uber and Bolt, and Grab in Vietnam, dominate the location-based gig economy in all the countries and regions we examined. Although official figures are absent and apps rarely make worker data available, the sector is dominated by men: in Bangladesh, one media report stated that less than 1% all driving

licence holders are women,¹⁸⁸ whilst in Vietnam, just 5% of the country’s 200,000 app-based drivers are reportedly women.¹⁸⁹ The scarcity of women reflects patriarchal norms, which view driving as a ‘male domain’.¹⁹⁰ For instance, in a study of Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, and South Africa, up to 15% of women app-based drivers surveyed believed some passengers had cancelled due to their gender, while 11% said their family or friends disapproved of them signing up.¹⁹¹ However, Covid-related lockdowns led to huge job losses in many sectors, with women particularly hard hit, whilst spurring the growth of delivery platforms due to unprecedented demand. For example, in Brazil, the number of delivery gig-workers grew by 979.8% between 2016 and 2021 (from 30,000 to 268,000).¹⁹² In Vietnam, some platforms reported a two or threefold increase in the number of women seeking work as drivers.¹⁹³



Women working in the ride-hailing sector of the platform economy are unlikely to enjoy decent work conditions and face greater safety and security threats.

Credit: Shutterstock



Kenya

- There are over a dozen ride-hailing apps in Kenya, with Uber and Bolt the most prevalent. As of 2018, Uber had 12,000 drivers and 363,000 users.¹⁹⁴
- Only 3% of platform drivers were women in 2019. A lack of capital is as a common barrier to entering the sector.¹⁹⁵ Women drivers are often single mothers who do not own a car and have to resort to high-interest loans.¹⁹⁶ Structural constraints and patriarchal norms limit access to finance and economic resources for women.¹⁹⁷
- Women are unable to earn as much as men due to unpaid care work¹⁹⁸ and often face harassment and insecurity.¹⁹⁹ This exacerbates the struggle to earn a living wage.²⁰⁰
- Uber, Bolt and Little Cab have launched features that allow women riders and drivers to match, but sometimes at increased prices.²⁰¹
- The Kenyan government recently capped the commission fee at 18% following driver strikes.²⁰²

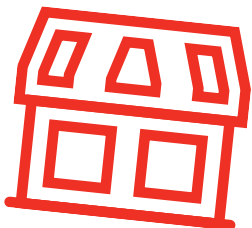
Ghana

- The sector is dominated by Uber and Bolt. Women drivers are few in numbers due to social norms and concerns around security and GBV.²⁰³
- In 2017, Uber announced it was seeking to recruit one million female drivers worldwide by 2020, including in Ghana.²⁰⁴
- A comprehensive assessment found that, while ride-hailing and delivery provide jobs in Ghana, these cannot, on average, be considered decent.²⁰⁵
- Worker precarity is compounded by financial risks as drivers often need to front high capital costs to purchase vehicles from companies sub-contracted by large platform companies, or do so on credit with high levels of interest.²⁰⁶
- Some local companies are trying to improve working conditions. Enshika provides subsidised fuel credit for drivers. The Black Ride pays above minimum wage with a flat commission per trip of USD 0.16 and has driver representation bodies like the Ghana Online Drivers Union.²⁰⁷



South Africa

- There are many, mainly international, ride-hailing apps, with Uber and Bolt the most popular (71% and 28% of market share respectively).²⁰⁸
- Smaller, local app companies include Africa Ride, which allows drivers to own part of the business through participation in a trust.²⁰⁹ The app is connected to mobile money services which facilitates safe payment.²¹⁰
- The workforce is dominated by men – only 3.8% of Uber drivers in South Africa are women.²¹¹
- Women drivers work five fewer hours than men due to unpaid care work. A lack of capital is reported as the main barrier to the sector by 40% of women.²¹²
- 51% of female drivers cited security as the main reason they drive less than men,²¹³ with numerous reports of harassment and rape of women by drivers.²¹⁴ A social media campaign by female passengers forced platforms to respond.²¹⁵
- Social norms discourage female drivers, with 31% of men reporting that they would be unhappy if a female family member wanted to become an Uber driver.²¹⁶

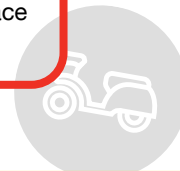


Brazil

- Brazil is the second largest market for Uber after the US, with over 600,000 drivers,²¹⁷ and numerous competitors.²¹⁸
- Most drivers endure low salaries, long hours, and unclear relationships with employers. Over 99 platforms surveyed by Fair Work Brazil did not offer the minimum wage.²¹⁹
- Female participation rates are low. Women lack access to efficient vehicles and may reject gigs if an area is dangerous or at night.²²⁰
- Sexual harassment is rampant. Few apps offer protection mechanisms. Ride-hailing companies that cater solely to women are catching on (e.g. Femi Taxi and Lady Driver).²²¹
- Brazil has many platform cooperatives run by and for workers, including Puma Entrega and Señoritas Courier, which are operated by women.²²²

Guatemala

- Several multinational platform companies are present in Guatemala, including Uber, Rappi, Glovo, Deliveroo, Pedidosyo, In Driver, and Picap.
- There are also some local platforms such as Urban and Traeguate Carpooling. Urban has an 'urban pink' option which connects women users with women drivers.²²³
- There is very limited information available about the sector in Guatemala and no information was available on women drivers, but it can be assumed drivers face the same kinds of challenges as elsewhere.



Bangladesh

- Ride-sharing began with the launch of local company Pathao in 2016, followed by Uber.²²⁴ The sector is now valued at USD 259 million, representing 23% of the transportation sector.²²⁵
- Driving is considered a male domain; in 2018, it was reported that 1% of driving license holders were women.²²⁶
- Some Bangladeshi-owned companies Lily Ride, Pink SAM and Obon offer a female-only service. They were started as a response to women commuters facing harassment.²²⁷
- Gig economy drivers have high costs (40-50% of income goes to expenses such as fuel and maintenance) and limited decision-making power over how much to charge customers.²²⁸
- Most companies rate poorly on labour standards. A few local platforms, like Pathao (which charges a commission fee of 15% compared to 25% by Uber) and Lily Ride (which offers workers formal contracts) score slightly higher.²²⁹
- Some drivers have abandoned platforms due to high commission fees, and two motorbike taxi platforms, Shohoz and OBHAI, shut down in 2021.²³⁰



Vietnam

- Ride-hailing (especially motorbikes) and delivery services are the largest gig sector, tipped to be worth \$4 billion by 2024.²³¹ 95% of Vietnam's 200,000 app-based drivers are men.²³²
- Grab dominates the ride-hailing market.²³³ Others include Gojek and Be.
- Job losses caused by the pandemic led to a surge in women engaging in gig work, including in delivery and ride-hailing.²³⁴ Vietnamese delivery start-up Loship reported the number of women signing up more than doubled from 2020-'21.²³⁵
- Commission fees are usually 20% - 30%.²³⁶ Drivers work long hours in all weather,²³⁷ with limited access to social protection.
- Workers are taxed like employees, on top of having unstable income due to changing of fees and rates by platform companies.²³⁸
- There are numerous reported cases of women gig drivers enduring sexual harassment and discrimination, including clients cancelling orders or refusing to ride with them.²³⁹ Grab has a zero tolerance policy on violence and has developed various safety features.²⁴⁰



Contexts of violence

Fears about safety and security are another reason fewer women sign-up as drivers and, when they do, drive fewer hours. There have been numerous reports of sexual and other forms of GBV being perpetrated against women drivers and passengers. For example, Olivia, a Nairobi-based delivery driver, said: “Some customers pretend that they are afraid of the motorbike, and they hold you and, in the process, they start caressing you. They take advantage and sexually assault you.” As a result, Olivia stops riding at 7pm for fear of being physically assaulted.²⁴¹ In Vietnam, a woman delivery driver was paid on the condition she agreed to have a drink with a male client.²⁴² In South Africa, 51% of women drivers say security concerns limit the number of hours they work.²⁴³ Gender-based violence is endemic in every country.²⁴⁴ The constraints it places on women in the gig economy further undermines the claims of flexibility advertised by platform companies.

The prevalence of GBV perpetrated against women passengers and drivers has led the creation of several women-only ride-hailing and delivery platforms. These include LilyRide in Bangladesh, a women-only motorbike sharing service, whilst in Brazil, Lady Driver, FemiTaxi, Ubra,²⁴⁵ and Señoritas Courier, an intersectional feminist and LGBTQIA transport and courier service, have all launched in recent years.²⁴⁶ In Kenya, smaller local apps like Little App and NISA are female driving services specifically serving women, while Uber and Bolt have a female driver request option. However, opting for a female driver can cost more, leading to accusations against platform companies of exacting a “pink tax” for women’s safety.²⁴⁷

High costs and financial risks

A further barrier to women entering the sector is the high costs needed to obtain a driving licence, purchase and maintain a vehicle, and pay for smartphone and data costs.²⁴⁸ Drivers often have to place themselves at high financial risk. In Ghana, for instance, some drivers buy their car from ‘fleet owners’ – car rental companies or vehicle owners who are sub-contracted by large platforms such as Uber.²⁴⁹ Drivers pay high rates of interest, with little support for maintenance costs.²⁵⁰ As observed by Fairwork, a CSO ranking platform companies on decent work standards in countries around the world: “Workers [...] end up bearing the brunt of the costs and risks, without any legal safeguards or protections.

This forestalls platform accountability, and contributes to an opacity in the labour process for workers.”²⁵¹

Compounding precarity

“We work in rain and sun, and pay up to 25% commission on our earnings, which is extremely high... We are still not considered workers,”

Belal Ahmed Khan, general secretary of Dhaka Ride-sharing Drivers Union²⁵²

What is clear is that women who work in this sector are unlikely to be enjoying decent working conditions. Singaporean company Grab, which operates in Vietnam, has set up a pay-per-trip micro-health insurance scheme for drivers, who contribute a small portion of their earnings from each trip into an insurance fund. However, this effectively creates a further economic burden on drivers.²⁵³ With the exception of Brazil, which provides access to a degree of social protection for delivery drivers in the context of Covid-19 (discussed on page 34), drivers in the countries we examined remain largely uncovered by labour laws. Drivers, many of whom are migrants with fewer work opportunities, lack contracts, minimum wages, and despite driving long hours, often struggle to make ends meet.²⁵⁴ In Vietnam, one study found the average working hours of app-based drivers was 75.6 hours per week,²⁵⁵ whilst a fifth of location-based gig workers in South Africa reported working over 90 hours a week.²⁵⁶ Although gig platform drivers may earn more than traditional taxi and delivery drivers (for example, in Indonesia, hourly earnings between platform-based taxi drivers and those in traditional companies are estimated to be 48% higher), this does not account for fuel and vehicle maintenance costs, as well as longer hours, lack of social protection, and accident and insurance costs.²⁵⁷ The recent surge in fuel and food prices is exacerbating the financial strain for drivers, while dampening demand for their services. Cikala Ladislas, a male Congolese driver for a platform company in Johannesburg who works shifts of up to 15 hours a day, seven days a week, shared in a media report that: “I even withdrew my kids from school because I cannot afford to pay the bills.”²⁵⁸

Ride-hailing companies have been called out for deliberately allowing a greater supply of workers than needed. For instance, The Washington Post reported that in South Africa, as instructed by its headquarters, Uber “incentivized more drivers to sign up than were necessary, shrank driver earnings and

Simplistic narratives of women's economic empowerment

built a system that rewarded workers for undertaking routes and schedules that put them at risk of harm in locations plagued by violence.” The pushing down of wages causes greater competition between drivers, necessitating them to work longer hours. Uber stated that its drivers enjoy good economic opportunities, and wage fluctuations are “a normal part of doing business”.^b

Some companies have been found to fiercely resist any attempt to better regulate their activities and take on the responsibilities of employers.²⁵⁹ Being classified as independent contractors can prevent drivers from legally forming a union, a vital route to collective bargaining.²⁶⁰ In the US, Uber is one of several platform companies that have funded a lobbying group in support of this business model, while a leak of 124,000 documents allegedly showed how Uber used its power to engage in law-breaking and secret lobbying of governments. Uber argues that app-based work is fundamentally different from employee-based work and says it wants to work towards finding solutions that support app-based workers “without limiting their independence”.^c Meanwhile, in a statement responding to the leak, Uber admitted to “mistakes and missteps”, but said it had been transformed since 2017 under the leadership of its current chief executive.^d Uber has also recognised that it needs to change its practices to improve working conditions, although this commitment seems to be limited to Europe.^e Although the example of Uber is used a lot in this report, and it is just one company, given its size and market domination in so many countries, we believe its alleged practices demonstrate how the gig economy is open to monopolisation by large multinationals with potential harmful impacts on workers.

Some local companies, such as The Black Ride and Enshika in Ghana, offer slightly more favourable working conditions for drivers. Enshika provides subsidised fuel credit at designated locations.²⁶¹ The Black Ride pays above the minimum wage with a flat commission per trip of USD 0.16, and has signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ghana Online Drivers Union, which registered in 2022.²⁶² LilyRide in Bangladesh provides formal employment contracts, while Pathao charges a 15% commission fee compared to Uber's 25%.²⁶³ However, these smaller local companies often struggle for market share against large multinationals.

“When we talk about women's economic empowerment, we must think about women's unpaid care and domestic work. The assumption made by IFC is that there will be more flexibility in terms of schedules. However because of the gig economy system of earnings meaning you must work long hours to actually make enough money, the flexibility goes out of the window.”

Faith Lumonya, Akina Mama wa Afrika²⁶⁴

In 2017, Uber announced it was seeking to recruit one million additional female drivers worldwide by 2020, including in Ghana²⁶⁵ and Nigeria,²⁶⁶ as a means to ‘economically empower’ women.²⁶⁷ The initiative was first announced in partnership with UN Women in 2015, but the UN dropped their support following campaigning by feminist movements and trade unions, who pointed out the numerous cases

b. In response to questions from The Post, an Uber spokesperson said that, because drivers may freely choose to work for different app-based services, it is “fundamental that we endeavour to create conditions to retain drivers on the platform.” In a statement, a spokeswoman for Uber co-founder Travis Kalanick, said he had helped pioneer a new business model. “To do this required a change of the status quo, as Uber became a serious competitor in an industry where competition had been historically outlawed. As a natural and foreseeable result, entrenched industry interests all over the world fought to prevent the much-needed development of the transportation industry.” She did not answer questions about Uber's treatment of drivers, its business in South Africa or its rollout of cash payments. See: MacMillan, D. (11/07/2022) ‘Uber promised South Africans better lives but knew drivers risked debt and danger’. The Washington Post. Available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/business/2022/07/11/uber-driver-south-africa-attacks/>

c. In a statement to the Guardian, the CEO of Flex, the lobbying group funded by platform companies, said: “App-based work is fundamentally different from traditional employee-based work, which is why people turn to it in the first place. It's not just about scheduling. It's also about where and how people work [...] We believe there is a way to support app-based workers without limiting their independence and are eager to work with policymakers, community leaders, and workers across the country to find forward-thinking solutions.” See: Chan, W. (11/03/2022) “Insidious and seductive”: Uber funds new lobbying group to deny rights for gig workers’. The Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/jul/10/uber-files-leak-reveals-global-lobbying-campaign>

d. Uber said: “We have not and will not make excuses for past behaviour that is clearly not in line with our present values. Instead, we ask the public to judge us by what we've done over the last five years and what we will do in the years to come.” An Uber spokesperson added that Uber's expansion initiatives were “led by over a hundred leaders in dozens of countries around the world and at all times under the direct oversight and with the full approval of Uber's robust legal, policy and compliance groups”. The Guardian (11/07/2022) ‘Uber broke laws, duped police and secretly lobbied governments, leak reveals’. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2022/jul/10/uber-files-leak-reveals-global-lobbying-campaign>

e. With respect to its European operations, Uber says it has taken “an honest look at how our platform has benefited workers—and, importantly, how it hasn't” and has committed to change, stating: “We believe independent workers across Europe deserve better: work that offers flexible and decent earning opportunities when they want it, and protection and benefits when they need it.” In 2021, they published a white paper, A Better Deal, calling on policymakers, platform companies and social representatives across Europe to come together to set a new standard for platform work. See: <https://www.uber.com/newsroom/a-better-deal/>

sexual violence reported by women drivers and passengers, as well as the poor working conditions endured by drivers.²⁶⁸ Uber has stated that it takes all incidents of sexual assault seriously and has been implementing increased safety features, including enhanced driver background checks and other survivor-centric policies.^f The IFC, the private sector arm of the World Bank Group, has also been extolling ride-hailing platforms for their economic empowerment potential for women and partnered with ride-hailing and delivery apps, such as Pick Me and Uber, to further explore the issue.²⁶⁹ Although the IFC acknowledges various barriers, such as discriminatory social norms, and flags the need for improved safety measures to protect against GBV, they pay little attention to other dimensions of decent work. As such, their research has been criticised for blurring the line between company lobbying and research.²⁷⁰ The IFC has also invested in a number of platform apps to support their expansion in ‘emerging markets’, despite ongoing strikes by workers over pay and conditions. This includes an investment of \$5 million in Brazilian motorcycle courier platform, Loggi, in 2016, €20 million in Bolt in 2021, as well as investing in the expansion of Uber’s fleet manager in South-of-Saharan Africa.²⁷¹

Similarly, British International Investment (BII), the UK’s development finance institution, has been putting money into platform companies as way to generate jobs in the global South. BII has produced voluntary guidance for investors highlighting various risks the sector poses to decent work, which includes some gendered analysis.²⁷² However, BII places no mandatory requirements for platform companies or financial intermediaries in which it invests to undertake gendered human rights due diligence to identify potential harmful practices and impacts. This

creates a risk that BII is investing in companies that are undermining gender equality, thereby undermining the UK government’s commitments in this regard.

Tax avoidance compounding gender inequalities

Some of the largest multinational ride-hailing and delivery apps have been accused of tax avoidance, undermining any stated commitments to women’s economic empowerment. For instance, Bolt was fined 1.4 million Euros in Latvia for allegedly failing to pay its fair share of taxes. Bolt has filed an appeal, claiming it has paid what it owes.⁹ Meanwhile, according to the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), Uber sought to save millions of dollars by routing profits through tax havens. In a leaked 2016 memo, a senior Uber employee described how, in Nigeria, the company had diverted the attention of authorities away from its own tax liabilities onto the tax compliance of its drivers. In response, Uber stated that it is committed to complying with tax laws wherever it operates, and to supporting its vendors, partners and drivers to do the same.^h Every year countries in the global South lose some \$45 billion to corporate tax avoidance and evasion, equivalent to nearly 52% of their combined public health budgets.²⁷³ This significantly depletes the resources governments have to invest in gender-responsive public services, such as health, water and sanitation, education and early childcare. Such services are vital for redressing gender and other intersecting inequalities.

f. According to Uber’s own data, in the US, there were 998 sexual assaults including 141 rape reports in 2020. See: <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/06/30/tech/uber-safety-report/index.html>. Uber has been publishing a ‘Safety Report’ in the US since 2018 in a bid to improve the safety of drivers and riders there, and committed to sensitizing 100,000 drivers in India on women’s safety (see: <https://www.uber.com/en-IN/newsroom/on-international-womens-day-uber-announces-gender-sensitisation-of-100000-drivers-by-end-2021/>). In 2022, joint legal action was launched against Uber by women claiming they were sexually assaulted by drivers and that the company has not responded adequately. An Uber spokesperson said in response: “Sexual assault is a horrific crime and we take every single report seriously. There is nothing more important than safety, which is why Uber has built new safety features, established survivor-centric policies, and been more transparent about serious incidents. While we can’t comment on pending litigation, we will continue to keep safety at the heart of our work.” See: Tidman, Z. (15/07/2022) ‘Uber sued by 550 women claiming they were sexually assaulted by drivers’. The Independent. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/uber-sexual-assault-san-francisco-b2122851.html>

g. See: Err.ee (12/09/2022) ‘Bolt fined €1.4 million for tax evasion in Latvia’. Bolt is appealing against the decision, stating that: “All taxes claimed by the State Revenue Service have been paid by Bolt. There are differences in views on the question of how exactly the corporate income tax should be calculated, taking into account the tax agreement between Estonia and Latvia. The appeal has been filed in court for clarification on the applicable methodology,” Available at: <https://news.err.ee/1608713044/bolt-fined-1-4-million-for-tax-evasion-in-latvia>.

h. International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (11/07/2022) ‘Tax shuffle: Uber shifted scrutiny to drivers as it dodged tens of millions in taxes’. The Uber Files. Available at: <https://www.icij.org/investigations/uber-files/uber-tax-havens-dodge-drivers/>

3.4 Case study 2: Domestic and care work

“It is one of the worst forms of employment, but many of them are migrant workers with few other options”

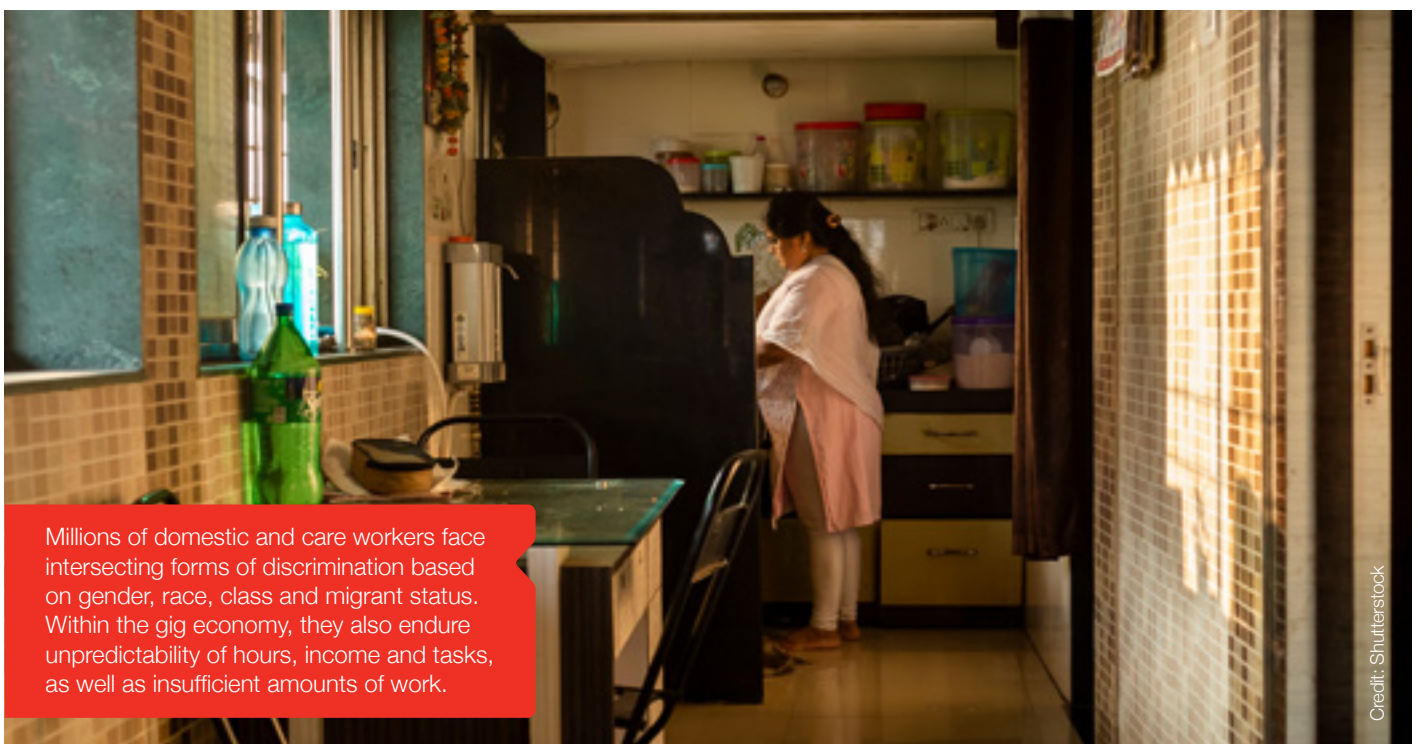
Rikta Krishnaswamy, All India Gig Workers' Union²⁷⁴

Domestic workers – the vast majority of whom are women, and many of whom are internal or international migrants – face some of the most punishing forms of marginalisation and discrimination in the world of work. Like unpaid care work, professional domestic and care work, which can include cooking, cleaning, tending gardens, caring for children, the elderly and the sick, remains significantly undervalued and underpaid. Domestic workers are often rendered invisible and readily subjected to exploitation and abuse within the private homes of their employers, where labour laws are difficult to enforce. In many African countries, such as Ghana²⁷⁵ and Kenya,²⁷⁶ domestic workers work long and unspecified hours, lack job security, fixed wages, rest periods, paid leave or social security, whilst sexual abuse and harassment are common.

Domestic workers face intersecting forms of discrimination based on race, class and migrant status. For instance, 90% of the 10.5 million people employed as domestic workers in Bangladesh are women, usually from marginalised, low-income groups.²⁷⁷ There are

estimated to be 350,000 domestic workers in Vietnam, many of whom are young women migrating from rural areas.²⁷⁸ This number is increasing as the country's rapidly growing middle-class drives demand.²⁷⁹ Brazil has 6.4 million domestic workers, 93% of whom are women and 61% are black women,²⁸⁰ accounting for almost 7% of the working population and 18% of black women workers.²⁸¹ Meanwhile, in Guatemala, 92% of domestic workers are women, 62% of whom are from indigenous communities.²⁸² In South Africa, the domestic care industry employs up to 6% of the workforce. Here, 91% of domestic workers are black and the remaining are coloured, reflecting historic apartheid-colonialist link between white families employing black women for domestic work.²⁸³

Domestic workers were particularly hard-hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, both in terms of exposure to infection as well as job losses. In Rio de Janeiro, the first recorded death of Covid-19 was a 63-year-old maid who worked for a woman who tested positive.²⁸⁴ Many lost their livelihoods under lockdown measures, including those working in the hospitality sector. In Kenya, this reportedly led to an increase in domestic workers seeking opportunities through online apps.²⁸⁵ More recently, the cost of living crisis has been a major contributing factor to 25% of domestic workers surveyed in South Africa and 69% in Kenya – many of whom are sole breadwinners – losing their job between 2021 and 2022.²⁸⁶ These startling statistics underscore the precarious existence of millions of women trying to earn a living in this way.



Millions of domestic and care workers face intersecting forms of discrimination based on gender, race, class and migrant status. Within the gig economy, they also endure unpredictability of hours, income and tasks, as well as insufficient amounts of work.

Credit: Shutterstock



Kenya

- There were approximately 2 million domestic workers in Kenya in 2017.²⁸⁷ They face low pay, long hours, precarity, lack of access to social protection, and are subjected to psychological and sexual abuse.²⁸⁸
- Barriers and discrimination based on education, class, religion and language also place constraints on their ability to bargain for labour rights.²⁸⁹
- Many domestic workers jobs during the pandemic. When hotels closed, cleaners and caretakers sought job opportunities online.²⁹⁰
- Nanny911 claims to be the largest platform in Kenya and offers precise job descriptions that allow for clear expectations and grounds for negotiations between parties. Sweep South, a South African company, recently launched in Kenya – but in November 2022 announced that it was pausing its operations there.²⁹¹ It claims to work towards decent work standards, but only scored 4 out of 10 by FairWork.²⁹²



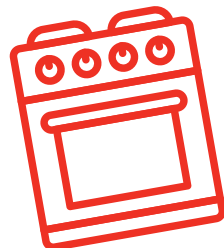
South Africa

- Up to 6% of the workforce is employed in this sector,²⁹⁵ where 91% of workers are black and the remaining coloured.²⁹⁶
- Domestic workers are usually paid below the living wage²⁹⁷ despite 83% being sole breadwinners.²⁹⁸
- SweepSouth, founded in 2012, is the largest platform for domestic gig-work. The company has made commitments to safety for its workforce and pays for workers mobile data. In 2020, it launched a Covid-19 fund to pay workers \$32 USD a week. However, workers are classified as independent contractors without access to social security. They also have to cover transportation costs.²⁹⁹
- The We Care Digital Platform Cooperative Project, run by the Centre for Transformative Regulation of Work in the University of Western Cape, is organising 60 women domestic workers with the aim to upskill their leadership and digital literacy and create a digital cooperative platform for the domestic care industry that is run by and for women domestic workers.³⁰⁰



Ghana

- Workers are mostly migrants with low levels of education from rural parts of the country.²⁹³
- They work long and unspecified hours, lack job security, fixed wages, rest periods, paid leave or social security. Sexual harassment is prevalent.²⁹⁴
- International domestic care work platforms are particularly prevalent, including India-based HelperChoice, a social enterprise with a “vision to end poverty, forced labour, worker’s exploitation, and human trafficking”, and US-owned GreatAuPair, which has 37,887 workers registered in Ghana, who can set their own prices/salary expectations.
- There is a lack of data about the quality of work generated and the experiences of domestic workers using the platforms, including whether any have protection mechanisms against GBV.



Brazil

- There are 6.4 million domestic workers in Brazil, of which 93% are women and 61% are black women.³⁰¹ This accounts for 6.7% of working population, and 17.9% of black women workers.³⁰²
- Domestic workers earn 60% less than other workers and only a third of them are formalised. Nearly 70% do not have an employment contract.³⁰³
- Domestic workers typically earn below minimum wage and have been disproportionately impacted by Covid-19.³⁰⁴
- Platforms that focus on domestic work include general services platforms (e.g., Trigger and GetNinjas) and specialised platforms (e.g., Parafuzo and Donamaid).³⁰⁵ Further information on these platforms was challenging to obtain.
- Since most domestic workers are women from marginalised communities, platform apps will likely “intensify this historic sector of the Brazilian workforce, with gender inequalities”.³⁰⁶



Guatemala



- 92% of domestic workers in Guatemala are women and 62% are also indigenous.³⁰⁷ They often face rights violations and discrimination.
- There is a lack of legislation to protect domestic workers, including in relation to sexual harassment, as well as access to healthcare or childcare.³⁰⁸
- Key informants shared that worker wages are generally lower than the minimum established by law, and they are charged a commission for the first three months of their employment.³⁰⁹



Vietnam



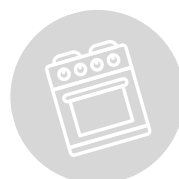
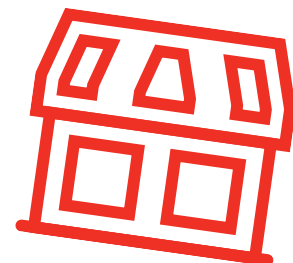
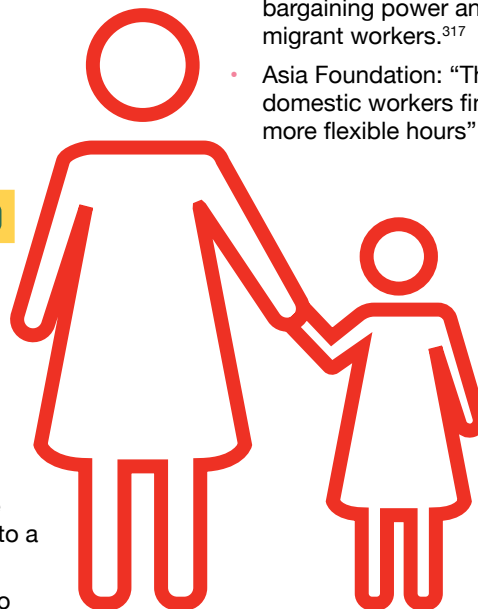
- There are estimated to be 350,000 domestic workers in Vietnam, most of whom are migrants. Most lack contracts and are largely excluded from social security systems.³¹⁴
- A rapidly growing middle-class is driving high demand. Their informal status leaves them exposed to exploitation.³¹⁵
- Vietnamese platform companies like BTaskie, GiupViecTot, Phu Viec Nhanh and JupViec connect domestic workers to urban households. JupViec operates in 5 provinces with 3,000 workers. It charges a 15-20% commission fee. Workers have the option to register as employees. It offers liability insurance and health insurance for 'high performing' workers.³¹⁶
- JupViec has partnered with Asia Foundation to develop a 'digital ledger' of personal data and work history to increase bargaining power and access to social protection for migrant workers.³¹⁷
- Asia Foundation: "These new platforms have helped domestic workers find more stable jobs with higher pay and more flexible hours" – But data lacking.³¹⁸



Bangladesh



- 10.5 million people employed as domestic workers in Bangladesh. 90% are female, usually from marginalised, low-income groups.³¹⁰ The sector is estimated to be worth some USD 4 billion.³¹¹
- Domestic work is classed as informal employment, with no guarantee of remuneration or fixed working hours. The number of women using domestic and care work platforms ranges from a few hundred to a few thousand.³¹²
- HelloTask is a platform reportedly seeking to ensure its 2,000 domestic workers (2% of which identify as disabled) are paid fairly. It is working with BRAC, Oxfam Bangladesh and World Bank to train over 16,000 domestic workers on industry skills and their economic rights, and provide them with job placements through the app. It contains an SOS number for women to call if they feel threatened.³¹³
- Information on the process of hiring domestic workers, policies and commissions are unavailable due to lack of transparency in the platforms.



Far less attention has been given to the platform care economy than ride-hailing and delivery,³¹⁹ again reflecting the de-valuing of ‘women’s work’, particularly when it is done by black, brown, indigenous or migrant women (see Figure 5). As such, data on numbers of women engaging in such work in the countries examined in this study was hard to find. The sector is also relatively nascent – its size varies from country to country and overall remains relatively small in the focus countries, although seems to be larger in Europe and other ‘westernised’ countries.³²⁰ Key informants in Ghana and Kenya, for instance, shared that most domestic workers still rely on more traditional means of seeking employment, such as word of mouth, or by using of free social media platforms, such as WhatsApp and Facebook. However, the domestic and care work sectors are expected to grow in light of ageing populations with increasing long-term care needs, whilst entrenched inequalities within and between countries and an absence of alternative income generating opportunities means many women will continue to seek a livelihood in this way. Service providers are playing a growing role, with the number of digital labour platforms in the sector rising eightfold globally, from 28 platforms in 2010 to 224 platforms in 2020.³²¹

In a study by the Overseas Development Institute of location-based women gig workers in Kenya and South Africa, particularly domestic workers, the majority welcomed the professional and skills development they felt they gained by working through platforms, which added to their sense of dignity as workers. They also spoke positively of the increased knowledge they had gained of how to price jobs more fairly for themselves, along with the enhanced marketing and networking opportunities that enabled them to potentially reach new clients.³²²

Replication of injustices

However, many of the challenges women face in the traditional domestic work sector are likely to be replicated in the world of gig work. As with ride-hailing and delivery, most domestic gig workers are classed as independent contractors, and are thereby denied the rights, protections and benefits they would be able to enjoy as employees. Again, “[i]deas of enterprise and independence peddled in the platform economy often hide the erosion of labour rights and wellbeing underpinning its business model. Research in India, South Africa and the Philippines reveals how

this practice has led to a wearing down of hard-won gains in the women-dominated domestic work sector.”³²³

Domestic gig workers often face unpredictability of hours and income, insufficient amounts of work, and a lack of consistency in the tasks they will be expected to undertake, all of which can lead to stress and uncertainty. They have been faced with more or differing work than was described when accepting the gig, which takes longer to complete and does not reflect the agreed price. This means that, “workers are constantly adjusting to fit into the gigs available, working long hours to accomplish tasks given, but also waiting to know when the next gig will be available”.³²⁴ As with ride-hailing and delivery, domestic and care workers also come under increased pressure through the client ratings systems.³²⁵ Highly-rated workers are assigned more jobs, while low ratings can lead platform companies to ‘deactivate’ workers from their apps. “The constant tacit threat of deactivation ... reduces those workers’ power and agency,” said Fairwork. “They don’t know if they might wake up tomorrow and have lost their livelihoods.”³²⁶ However, workers are rarely able to rate clients back, exacerbating asymmetries in power and leaving the system open to abuse.³²⁷

“We worry that these apps are undoing all the progress we fought so hard for... Just because it is digital, it doesn’t mean the battle for our rights has changed”

Gloria Kente, a former domestic worker turned organiser in the South African Domestic and Service Allied Workers Union³²⁸

In South Africa, the dominant domestic work platform is SweepSouth. The company expanded to Nigeria and Kenya, although announced that it was pausing operations in November 2022 due to unstable global economic climate.³²⁹ The company has committed to improving conditions for its workers, such as worker safety, and by paying for their data costs.³³⁰ Safety measures include the verification of payment details, a two-way rating system, and follow-up where workers give clients a low rating. SweepSouth also has a support team, an emergency line, a quick-response messaging platform, and worker communication groups to help respond to incidents of GBV. In 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic drove down demand for domestic services, SweepSouth paid its workers 450 South African Rand weekly (approximately USD 32) to cover basic living costs.³³¹ However, whilst

some workers value the flexibility and autonomy granted through the app,³³² the company continues to classify them as independent contractors. Workers are also expected to cover their own transportation costs. In South Africa, these can consume as much as 10% of domestic workers' monthly income.³³³ Whilst advocating for the minimum wage, a recent study with 10 SweepSouth workers found the wages they earned through the platform were "insufficient to sustain a quality of life", while "the lack of control over work time, an absence of union representation and collective bargaining power, and no social benefits have a negative impact on domestic workers' working conditions".³³⁴ Although the study is small and the findings cannot be assumed to represent the experiences of all workers on the platform, it still raises concerns about working conditions.ⁱ

"I thank them for creating these jobs. But we are afraid to complain in case we lose the work."

Naledi, a Zimbabwean cleaner in South Africa³³⁵

In Brazil, there are several platform apps providing an array of services including domestic work. These include Trigger, Parafuzo and Donamaid12, as well as major platforms such as GetNinjas. Although, like everywhere else, information on this sector is scarce, Fairwork Brazil notes that it is predominantly occupied by women from vulnerable communities, meaning it is likely to "intensify this historic sector of the Brazilian workforce, with gender inequalities".³³⁶ For instance, GenNinjas scored zero in the Fairwork ratings for 2021, which evaluates platform companies on fair pay, fair conditions, fair contracts, fair management and fair representation.³³⁷

Very little information is available on the digital platform offering domestic and care services in Guatemala. However, although we were not able to substantiate their reflections, key informants from civil society interviewed for this study said that domestic workers on digital platforms suffer problematic amounts of discrimination and harassment. Their wages are generally lower than the minimum established by law, and they can be charged high commission rates for the first three months of their employment, equivalent to about one month's salary. Female domestic workers are also reportedly penalised by employers for having to attend to their

own household duties by being induced to work without rest or food.³³⁸

Initiatives promoting decent work for platform domestic workers

Encouragingly, several initiatives seek to counter the exploitative nature of domestic work generally and app-acquired work in particular.

Bangladesh: As of August 2021, HelloTask had 2,000 active female domestic workers enlisted in its platform, of which 2% identify as disabled. HelloTask is seeking to promote dignified work for domestic workers including through enhancing the skills and professionalisation of workers. It is working with BRAC, Oxfam Bangladesh and the World Bank to train over 16,000 domestic workers on their economic rights and industry skills, after which they receive certification from Bangladesh's National Skills Development Authority.³³⁹ The app has a two-way rating system, and it encourages workers experiencing abuse to call the police or to contact the company. However, HelloTask workers are classified as freelancers³⁴⁰ and it is unclear if they earn a living wage.

Vietnam: JupViec offers liability and health insurance to its workers, but only to those it classifies as "high performing". It has a partnership with Asia Foundation to improve migrant workers' bargaining power and access to social security through the creation of 'digital ledgers'. These allow workers to store and access records of training certificates, work experience and other formal paperwork. Migrants from poor rural communities often lack such documentation, which may be necessary to access some forms of social protection.³⁴¹

Ghana: HelperChoice is a Hong Kong-based 'social impact startup' focusing largely on women migrating internationally to undertake domestic work. It claims to be dedicated to eradicating placement fees and human trafficking for the purpose of forced labor.³⁴² In 2017 it partnered with the ILO on an initiative to address illegal recruitment fees being charged to domestic workers in Hong Kong.³⁴³ However, information on the pay and working conditions for its workers domestic workers is not available.³⁴⁴

i. We contacted SweepSouth for a response to the findings but did not receive a reply.

3.5 Case study 3: The platform beauty sector

The beauty sector is another highly-feminised sector characterised by low pay, long hours, poor workplace safety, and a high degree of informality.³⁴⁵ Beauty sector workers – along with care and domestic workers – were also particularly hit by livelihood losses during the pandemic, due to the in-person contact required for the work.³⁴⁶

Data on the numbers and working conditions of women providing beauty services (such as hairdressing, manicures, pedicures, facials and massages) through digital platforms was particularly hard to find in all the countries covered by this study. This seems to be because the sector remains small, and in some countries we looked at, virtually non-existent. In Ghana and Kenya, for instance, we could not identify any beauty work platforms, and respondents shared that women mostly advertise these services through word of mouth, or through free social media platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook.³⁴⁷ Similarly, in Guatemala and Brazil, we found very little information, if any, about the platform beauty sector. In Africa, the domestic work platform SweepSouth is moving into beauty services, including in South Africa.³⁴⁸ Prim-U is another beauty platform operating in South Africa that connects some 300 beauty industry workers with over 1,000 home-based clients, as well as employment opportunities at salons and spas.³⁴⁹ Prices are set at industry standards which are slightly above the minimum wage, and include tips. Information on the commission paid by workers, and on who bears the cost of transportation, was not available.

About one million women work in beauty services in Bangladesh,³⁵⁰ where the government recently acknowledged it as an official industrial sector.³⁵¹ However, the number of women workers using platform apps is unknown. Popular beauty services apps include Romoni³⁵² and Sheba, which offer a range of household services including cleaning and beauty services. Sheba has over 15,000 workers, but sector-specific and sex-disaggregated data are unavailable.³⁵³ The conditions women experience on the platforms and wider information about their policies and practices are unknown.

Like gig economy domestic workers, some women working in the app-based beauty sector report valuing the opportunities for training and professionalisation. One worker in Nairobi shares: “I’ve learnt so much. Like when they are asking you for the quotation, they ask you ‘How much are you going to charge for your transport? How much are you going to charge for your labour?’ Those are some of the things you don’t think about when you’re giving out a service”.³⁵⁴

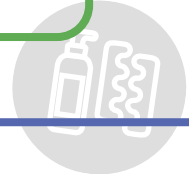
On the other hand, from the available literature it is clear that the low wages and informal working arrangements faced by women in the traditional sector are being reproduced in platform work, with added challenges based on the app-based systems of management. For example, in India, whilst platforms can support with the perceived professionalisation of beauty work,³⁵⁵ women workers have been organising against high commission charges, harmful workforce management practices, lack of control over working hours, and the need for effective grievance mechanisms and helplines to better ensure workers’ safety.³⁵⁶ They claim they have been “coerced into maintaining low cancellation rates, high acceptance rates, and following unilaterally assigned target systems through different forms of algorithmic and managerial control mechanisms, all of which contribute to curtailing women’s abilities to structure their paid work alongside significant unpaid care burdens”.³⁵⁷

Companies have been found to mandate workers to purchase equipment and products from them at unilaterally set prices, and to require them to attend lengthy training sessions if their ratings fell below a certain level. This led to workers incurring additional expenses and stress due to having to juggle this training alongside paid and unpaid care work commitments.³⁵⁸ In Bangladesh, given that beauty services is one of the few sectors dominated by small- and medium-sized women-owned businesses, where salons are fairly safe women-only spaces, women working in clients’ homes through large, centralised, male-owned and managed platforms are likely to have a very different experience, which may include feelings of isolation as well as potentially finding themselves at increased risk of GBV.³⁵⁹



Kenya

- Customers prefer to access beauty services by word of mouth or via free social media platforms, such as Instagram, Facebook and Whatsapp.³⁶⁰
- Lynk was formerly the go-to app for beauty (as well as domestic) services, but shut down because of small market size.³⁶¹
- SweepSouth, platform focused on domestic and care services that is venturing into the beauty sector,³⁶² recently expanded to Kenya but has since ceased operating there.



South Africa

- The beauty industry was valued at 3.5 billion USD in 2018 and was projected to be worth 6.16 billion USD by 2024.³⁶³
- Workers often use social media platforms to promote their services through word of mouth.
- Prim-U is a platform that connects some 300 beauty workers to clients at home and to job opportunities at salons and spas. The app monetises its service through commissions.³⁶⁴ Prices are set at industry standards and include tips. Pay is slightly above the minimum wage. Unclear who bears the cost of transport.
- Dyme was founded in 2018 and has about 350 workers. It has a set price list for beauty services set to industry standards. This means freelancers no longer control pricing but are still considered independent contractors. Commission fees are set at 20%.³⁶⁵
- We were unable to obtain information about conditions for gig workers using these apps.



Guatemala

- Key informants shared that most female gig workers belong to the areas of sales and beauty services.³⁶⁶
- Interviewees disclosed that their wages are generally lower than the minimum established by law and workers are charged a commission for the first three months of their employment.
- Fear of harassment and abuse has led female gig-workers in beauty services, who tend to be independent contractors, to only work with people they know or by recommendation.³⁶⁷



Bangladesh

- About 1 million women work in the beauty service sector in Bangladesh, representing 18% of working women.³⁶⁸
- The number of women workers using platform beauty apps is unknown.
- Romoni provides beauty services and has over 500 workers signed up.³⁶⁹ Sheba.xyz provides a range of services including cleaners and beauticians. It has some 15,000 workers.³⁷⁰
- The platforms' policies and the practices, and conditions for workers, are unknown.



4. Legislative frameworks and developments

“It is not enough to talk about women’s digital rights. We need a feminist economics to tackle inter-class and inter-country structures of inequality in the emerging data and AI paradigm.”

Participant, Asia Pacific regional consultation for the Charter of Feminist Demands from the Global South³⁷¹

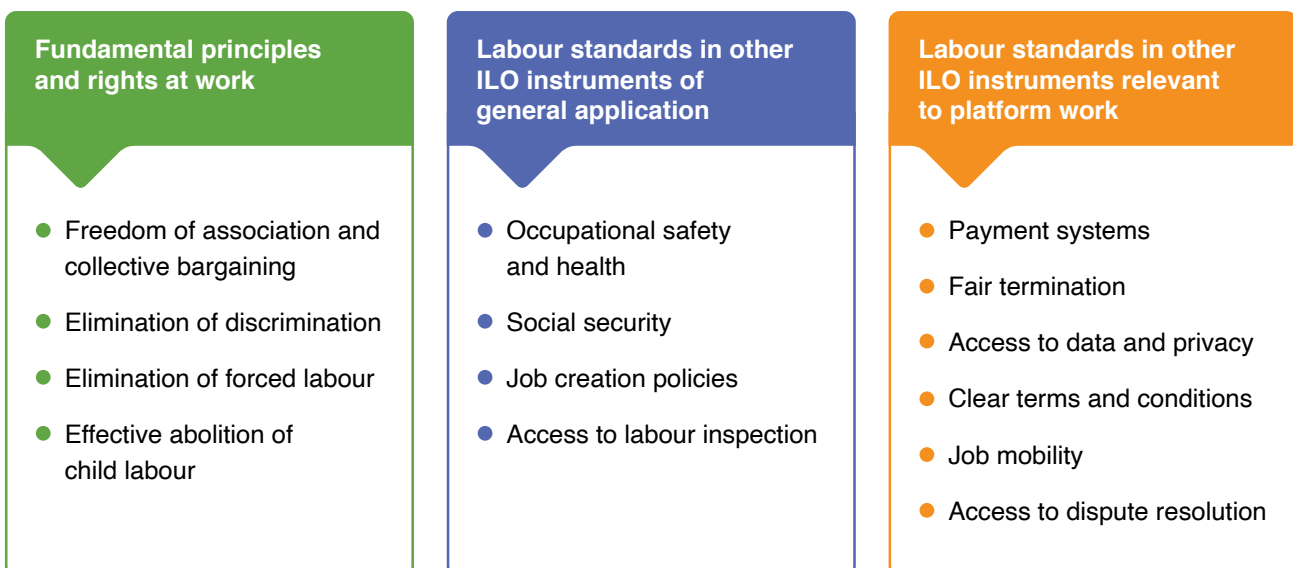
All the countries and regions covered in this study have strategies focused on harnessing the opportunities of digitalisation that address gender to varying degrees. For example, ASEAN’s Digital Masterplan 2025 (applicable to Vietnam) mentions gender once, and women once in relation to advancing digital skills in the workplace.³⁷² The latest available draft of Kenya’s Digital Economic Strategy has chapters on women, as well as youth, minority and marginalised groups, and persons living with

disabilities.³⁷³ However, apart from a brief mention of advancing fair labour practices in online labour platforms, the focus is largely on building digital skills and closing the digital divide. Whilst important, these strategies will not address the decent work deficits prevalent in location-based platform work, which are being caused by regulatory gaps and poorly implemented legislative frameworks. These gaps persist despite the fact that all the focus countries have ratified the majority of the fundamental ILO Conventions.³⁷⁴ Governments are legally bound to extend these rights to all workers, irrespective of their contractual status, including those working through location-based platforms. They include freedom of association and collective bargaining rights, elimination of discrimination, health and safety, access to social security, and access to dispute resolution (see Figure 7).³⁷⁵

Figure 7: Decent work elements applicable to all platform workers irrespective of contractual status.

All countries in the study have also committed to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals,

including Goal 5 on gender equality, and Goal 8 on decent work for all, and are party to other binding human rights frameworks, such as the Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.



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Disappointingly, few of the countries analysed have ratified Convention 189 (C189), which extends key rights such as paid leave, minimum wages or employment contracts to domestic workers,³⁷⁶ or Convention 190 (C190) on ending violence and harassment in the world of work (see Figure 8). Only South Africa has ratified both, while Brazil has ratified ILO C189. These landmark conventions are particularly pertinent to women gig workers in the sectors covered by this report, and were adopted after sustained campaigning by trade unions, worker organisations, and their allies in wider civil society.³⁷⁷ These groups continue to lobby hard for their national governments to urgently ratify and implement the conventions, including in Kenya.³⁷⁸

Furthermore, there is a lack of clarity on how existing labor rights and social protection frameworks apply to gig workers.³⁷⁹ As such, many of the legal cases fought by workers against platform companies turn on the critical issue of being recognised as employees so they can secure such rights. However, court

proceedings are often expensive, lengthy, and pitch workers against powerful companies. Meanwhile, requirements on companies to identify and address the harmful impacts of their practices on women's human rights throughout their value chains, as called for by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, are largely missing or inadequate, including in the countries where multinational companies are registered.³⁸⁰

Of the countries we looked at, Brazil is the only one which had legislation specifically pertaining to the platform economy. Despite recent alarming deteriorations in labour rights, in the wake of Covid-induced lockdowns, when delivery riders and drivers were recognised as essential service providers, the government introduced Law 14297 (2022). The law defines the rights of gig delivery workers during the pandemic and requires platforms to provide accident insurance, compensation for damages, and financial support to workers diagnosed with Covid-19 for 15 days.³⁸¹ Although it establishes important rights for



Activists present a petition to the Ministry of Labour in Guatemala calling on them to support the ratification of ILO Convention 189, to protect domestic workers' rights. These protections should extend to domestic workers engaging in the gig economy.

workers, Law 14297 is limited in scope and faces challenges to implementation. Encouragingly, there are indications in wider Brazilian labour laws that gig workers should be classed as employees, and several bills contesting this issue are under debate.³⁸² The government is also planning to extend social protection to digital platform drivers, granting them access to sickness, maternity and disability benefits as well as pensions.³⁸³

Whilst Bangladesh's Labour Act lists some forms of work that fall in the informal economy (e.g. 'seasonal, temporary, and permanent workers'), which in theory entitles such workers to a degree of protection, it is not clear if gig workers are included.³⁸⁴ Bangladesh's Ridesharing Service Guideline (2017) seeks to better regulate the sector, such as by requiring drivers to obtain operating certificates. However, it doesn't contain any stipulations regarding worker rights.³⁸⁵ In Vietnam, its Labour Codes (2012 and 2019) regulate employment contracts for domestic workers, and clarify employer and worker obligations. But implementation of the Codes reportedly remains weak, and does not ensure access to social protection for domestic workers. Moreover, as domestic gig workers are not recognised as employees by platform companies, it remains unclear how the Codes apply to them.³⁸⁶

Encouragingly in Kenya, the government is talking with unions, including the Transport Workers Union of Kenya (TWUK), about providing universal healthcare to informal sector workers. TWUK are using this opportunity to try to ensure gig workers are included in the social security system.³⁸⁷ Here, the 2013 National Social Security Fund Act (2013) provides a degree of contributions-based social protection to all workers, whether formal or informal, including a pension.³⁸⁸ Kenya's Employment Act (2007) also provides some protections for domestic workers and informal sector workers, including paid sick leave, parental leave and holiday; minimum wages and minimum levels of rest.³⁸⁹

Other countries have legislation which, in on paper at least, offers some protection to informal sector workers, including in the gig economy. For example, in 2022 South Africa introduced a Code of Good Practice on the Prevention and Elimination of Harassment in the Workplace to support its implementation of ILO C190,³⁹⁰ which extends to the informal sector. South Africa's Unemployment Insurance Act also entitles domestic workers to

maternity pay. However, the Act excludes foreign workers on a contract and individuals employed for less than 24 hours a month by a single employer. This is likely to impact many domestic workers, including those engaging through platforms, given they may work in multiple locations for short periods of time.³⁹¹ As observed by Fairwork: "employee rights were designed for 'standard' employees, such as factory or office workers, working fixed hours in workplaces where their rights can be enforced. But this is possible only to a limited extent, and with great difficulty, in the context of platform work. Even those rights which do extend to independent contractors – such as certain rights of domestic workers – are difficult to apply to a dispersed workforce by means of the existing institutions."³⁹²

In its Political Constitution, Guatemala recognises the right to a minimum wage, freedom of association, collective bargaining, as well as the right to strike and enjoy protection against unfair dismissal, along with 15 other national instruments covering sickness and maternity protections.³⁹³ However, here as elsewhere, the classification of gig workers as independent contractors does not fit within traditional labour laws, and specific provisions to protect gig workers are missing. Moreover, enforcement of labour laws remains weak and the country is classed as one of the ten worst countries in the world for workers due to the high level of violence against trade unionists and its climate of fear and impunity.³⁹⁴

Developments at the global level

"States have a duty to respect, protect and promote women's human rights, undertaking legal, institutional, policy and programming measures appropriate to the digital transition."

Charter of Feminist Demands from the Global South³⁹⁵

Several global-level legislative initiatives are seeking to secure greater protections for the rights of gig economy workers. The **Centenary Declaration for the Future of Work**, adopted at the 108th session of the International Labour Conference, calls on ILO Member States to promote decent work for all through "policies and measures that respond to challenges and opportunities... relating to the digital transformation of work, including platform work".³⁹⁶ In October 2022, the ILO convened a meeting of global

experts from worker organisations, government, and platform companies to discuss how to advance decent work in the platform economy, including through a possible new ILO Standard.³⁹⁷

A **UN Global Digital Compact** is to be agreed at the ‘Summit of the Future’ in September 2024. This will “outline shared principles for an open, free and secure digital future for all”, covering issues such as digital connectivity, data rights, and advancing the digital commons as a public good.³⁹⁸ In advance of this, a coalition of feminist networks from the global South has issued a **Charter of Feminist Demands**, calling for the Compact to place gender equality at its heart, and to address three core demands: state and corporate accountability for protecting women’s human rights in the digital age; a new global social contract for a socially just digital transition; and ensuring that internet and data resources are recognised and treated as common goods that are equally accessible to all.³⁹⁹ Similarly, as part of the Generation Equality Forum (a UN Women-convened initiative aimed at spurring progress towards achieving SDG gender equality commitments), the Action Coalition on Technology and Innovation⁴⁰⁰ has urged for the Global Digital Compact to recognise how digital technologies, including platform applications, can replicate inequalities based on gender and other intersecting identities.⁴⁰¹ And for the first time, the **UN Conference on the Status of Women** addressed the impacts of technological innovation and change on gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls at its 67th meeting in March 2023 (CSW67). Its Agreed Conclusions require UN member states to prioritise ILO standards that promote women’s rights to decent work, to create quality jobs in the platform economy, and ensure equal pay and access to social protection.⁴⁰² In the lead up to this, the **Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean** acknowledged how the digital economy, decent work and unpaid care work are interlinked, and called for the design of comprehensive universal care systems that promote greater digital inclusion of women.⁴⁰³

Box 5: Legislative developments elsewhere

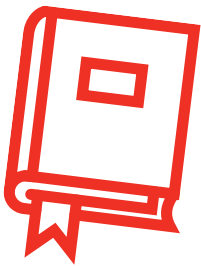
Encouraging legislative developments can be seen in countries around the world. Worker activism is causing governments to become increasingly conscious of the decent work deficits in the gig economy, and are evolving ways to extend labour laws and protections to the sphere. For instance, Chile has adopted the Law of Digital Platforms which regulates the relationship between workers, clarifies the roles of employee and employer, mandates the creation of special contracts for dependent workers, and demands a physical place of contact with workers.⁴⁰⁴ In Singapore, the Ministry of Manpower has established a Platform Workers Advisory Committee to consider legal changes to protect such workers,⁴⁰⁵ whilst important legal precedents have been set in China and the Republic of Korea recognising platform delivery riders as employees.⁴⁰⁶ In October 2022, the US Department of Labor announced a proposal that could reframe the distinction between independent contractors and employees, potentially making it easier for millions of workers to receive federal labour protections,⁴⁰⁷ whilst the European Commission is debating a Directive to improve conditions for platform workers.⁴⁰⁸

However, huge regulatory and governance gaps persist, whilst policy frameworks and legislation need to be firmly grounded in strong intersectional, women’s rights-based analysis, that recognise how women are uniquely vulnerable to systems of exploitation that are reproduced in the gig economy.

Kenya



- Kenya has not ratified ILO C190 or C189.
- Its 2010 Constitution refers to decent work standards. Social security and protection is regulated through the National Security Fund Act (2013) and the Employment Act (2007). The latter also defines rights of domestic workers (paid sick leave, parental leave, holiday; minimum wages and levels of rest).
- However, enforcement of labour laws is weak and the rights of workers are systematically violated.⁴⁰⁹
- Employment laws are not applicable to gig workers as they are hired as independent contractors.⁴¹⁰ It has been suggested that some forms of social protection still extend to them as 'casual labourers'.⁴¹¹



South Africa



- South Africa has ratified ILO C190 and C189. It has published a Code of Good Practice on the Prevention and Elimination of Harassment in the Workplace, which covers informal work settings and should apply to platform workers.⁴¹⁸
- However, employee rights are largely designed for those in formal work. Even rights that extend to informal workers are hard to apply to gig workers due to their dispersed nature and inadequate institutional arrangements.⁴¹⁹
- Domestic workers are entitled to maternity pay under the Unemployment Insurance Act. However, the Act excludes foreign workers on a contract and individuals employed for less than 24 hours a month by a single employer, excluding many gig workers.⁴²⁰
- Platforms can further evade regulations by employing workers under foreign-based companies. For instance, Uber South Africa contracts workers under Uber BV in the Netherlands. In a recent ruling following allegations of unfair dismissal brought by several drivers, the Courts decided Uber BV was beyond the reach national law.⁴²¹



Ghana



- Ghana has not ratified ILO C190 or C189.⁴¹²
- Its Constitution (1992) contains articles governing social security, as well as fair and equal pay.⁴¹³ The Labour Act 651 (2003) regulates employment relations, prohibits discrimination on any basis, and recognises employer responsibility to take action in case of sexual harassment. However, there is no legislation protecting workers from sexual harassment.⁴¹⁴
- All platforms in Ghana contract workers as independent contractors, thereby circumventing provisions under labour laws.⁴¹⁵
- Ghana faces many law enforcement issues. It ranks 58th out of 139 countries in the World Justice Project 2021 Rule of Law Index.⁴¹⁶
- High legal costs and court delays further hinder access to justice for workers.⁴¹⁷



Brazil



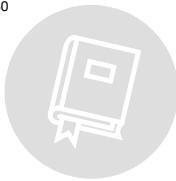
- Brazil has ratified ILO C189⁴²² but it is yet to ratify ILO C190.
- Brazil's Labour Law No. 13.467 (2017) has dramatically weakened labour relations and social protection, whilst the enforcement of labour laws deteriorated under President Jair Bolsonaro.⁴²³
- Law No. 14.297 (2022) defines the rights of gig delivery workers during the Covid-19 pandemic and requires platforms to introduce accident insurance, compensation for damages, and financial support to workers diagnosed with Covid-19 for 15 days.⁴²⁴
- While some argue gig workers could be categorised as employees under Brazil's labour laws, almost 40% of court rulings have upheld their classification as self-employed.⁴²⁵
- Proposed bills are in discussion in the Brazilian Congress, some arguing for establishing an employment relationship between platforms and their workers, others against.



Guatemala



- Drug cartels have a massive influence over the country, affecting governance, rule of law and human rights.⁴²⁶
- It is ranked as one of the ten worst countries globally for workers due to violence against trade unionists and a climate of fear and impunity.⁴²⁷
- Guatemala has not ratified many ILO Conventions including ILO C190 or C189.
- The Political Constitution recognises the right to a minimum wage, freedom of association, collective bargaining, the right to strike and protection against unfair firings, with other national instruments covering sickness and maternity protections.
- However, enforcement of labour laws is poor.⁴²⁸ Legal provisions promoting gender equality in the world of work and protecting gig workers are lacking.⁴²⁹
- Gig workers are regarded as 'partners' as opposed to employees, leaving them unprotected.⁴³⁰



Vietnam



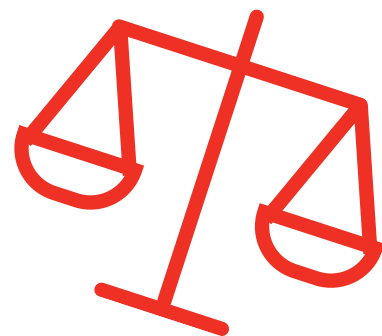
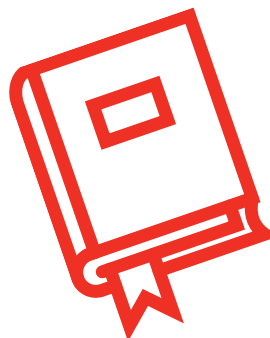
- Vietnam has not ratified ILO C189 and ILO C190
- Its 2019 Labour Code includes compulsory social, health and unemployment insurance, minimum wages, parental leave, allowances for those caring for sick children, pregnancy, and sections focused on work adversely affecting reproductive and child-nursing.⁴³⁶
- Its Labour Codes prohibit discrimination in the workplace. There have been efforts to revise the Codes to be compatible with ILO conventions, including definitions of sexual harassment and eliminating lists of jobs that exclude women.⁴³⁷
- Its 2012 and 2019 Labour Codes define domestic workers and regulates employment contracts and relations.⁴³⁸ However, the majority still lack contracts and comprehensive access to social protection.⁴³⁹
- There is no clarity on whether labour protections apply to online gig workers. As independent contractors, most are not entitled to a minimum wage, social protection or social security.



Bangladesh



- Bangladesh has not ratified ILO C189 or ILO C190. It is ranked one of the 10 worst countries in the world for workers.⁴³¹
- Its National Social Security Strategy (2015) and Action Plan (2018) provides sickness, unemployment benefits and other social protection for workers in the formal economy.⁴³²
- The Labour Act (2003) covers some forms of informal sector work e.g., 'seasonal, temporary, and permanent workers'.⁴³³ It is unclear if gig workers, as 'independent contractors', are covered.
- Bangladesh's Ridesharing Service Guideline (2017) makes some stipulations for companies, but none related to worker rights.⁴³⁴
- Certain workers are banned from unionising, it is unclear if this includes platform workers.⁴³⁵



5. Activism and resistance

Platform workers face substantial challenges to collective organising due to the atomised nature of gig work, which also places workers in competition with one another. Major hindrances also stem from their classification as self-employed contractors, legal ambiguities of their right to form and join a union (as in Vietnam and Bangladesh), and the risk of being removed from platforms for engaging in collective action.⁴⁴⁰ Collective bargaining rights are also undermined by the reluctance of many companies' to recognise and negotiate with unions.⁴⁴¹

Despite this restrictive context, location-based gig workers have been coming together to confront exploitative practices and evolve new strategies in response to the emergent nature of platform-based work.⁴⁴² This includes self-organising through social media groups, rather than organising through unions, as well as mass log-outs of apps, as well as protests and strike action.⁴⁴³ For example, delivery drivers in Guatemala and Brazil staged mass strikes during the Covid-19 pandemic demanding improved pay and health and safety measures. In December 2020, thousands of Grab drivers in Vietnam stopped work to protest high commission rates. Grab denied that it had raised the commission rate and claimed the increases related to a new rules on VAT.^j In South Africa, the crippling surge in fuel prices led to a three-day strike by platform delivery drivers in March 2022,⁴⁴⁴ while the National Union of Public Service and Allied Workers has been advocating for gig workers to be classified as employees.⁴⁴⁵

However, overall the numbers of gig workers organising collectively remain relatively small. A global study found that just 9% of app-based taxi drivers and 3% of app-based delivery workers have participated in a coordinated group actions, while 28% and 33% respectively were members of a work-related social media group.⁴⁴⁶

New unions are also being formed to specifically represent platform workers. These include the Digital Taxi Forum and the Organisation of Online Drivers in Kenya, as well as the App-Based Drivers Union



Registration of domestic workers by the first domestic workers' trade union in West Bengal, India. While the gig economy is on the radar of domestic worker unions in many of the countries we analysed, none were yet significantly focusing on it.

of Bangladesh. Its membership covers 35% of the country's 250,000 gig drivers, and it has organised strikes and protests across multiple cities. The Ghana Online Drivers Union coordinated large-scale strikes in 2018 and 2022, demanding reduced commission rates and for platform workers be included in the state social security system. In this case, Uber reduced its commission rate from 25% to 20%.⁴⁴⁷ And at a global level, the International Alliance of App-Based Transport Workers launched in 2020, with affiliates from 17 countries across Africa, Asia and Europe, as well as the US.⁴⁴⁸

j. Grab said it had been taking a 20% commission of the total fare of each ride and the VAT amount has been reduced from the remaining 80% of the fare that the drivers receive. It means that passengers are the ones that pay for the VAT. The company, as the party that is responsible for fulfilling customers and drivers' tax duties, stated it will collect the two aforementioned amounts altogether. See: Tuoi Tre News (08/12/2020) 'Drivers strike in Hanoi to protest Grab's increased charges' Available at: <https://tuoitrenews.vn/news/business/20201208/drivers-strike-in-hanoi-to-protest-grabs-increased-charges/58165.html>

Seeking justice in the courts

Gig workers have also pursued justice in the courts, with some important wins. In June 2022, the Kenyan government agreed to cap the commission fees charged by apps such as Uber and Bolt at 18%, down from the 25%.⁴⁴⁹ Uber is challenging the ruling on the basis that it would harm its earnings and discourage investment in the country.^k The court's decision will be an important indicator of the willingness of the government to regulate powerful multinational platforms.

Another contentious area fought out in legal battles is Uber's model of contracting workers under Uber BV, the Dutch subsidiary owning the technology behind the app. Being contracted under Dutch law makes it difficult for workers to take legal action or raise disputes.⁴⁵⁰ Encouragingly, in Kenya in 2021, following a case brought by drivers after the app substantially reduced its fees, the High Court ruled that Uber BV and Uber Kenya were related.⁴⁵¹ Uber is challenging the ruling on the basis that drivers should have followed

the dispute resolution mechanisms stipulated in their contracts before seeking legal redress.^l In South Africa, in relation to an alleged unfair dismissal case brought by seven drivers, the courts decided that Uber BV was beyond the reach of national law.⁴⁵²

In Brazil, workers have also faced defeat. In 2019, a driver filed a case against Uber for rights to labour protections under the constitution. The Superior Court of Justice found that: "The app's drivers have no hierarchical relation with the company because their services are provided now and then, with no pre-established timetable, and they do not have a fixed salary". This sets a concerning precedent both for Brazil and the wider region.⁴⁵³

There have been important legal precedents set elsewhere. For instance, in 2021 the UK's Supreme Court ruled that Uber must classify drivers on its platform as workers rather than independent contractors. This obliges the company to pay minimum wages and holiday pay.⁴⁵⁴

Box 6: Platform cooperativism as resistance

In some countries, workers are establishing digital platform cooperatives as a means to secure fair pay, decent conditions, and freedom from violence, and to counter the 'data extractivism' of large companies by ensuring ownership and control over their data. Cooperatives – which exist in many sectors – are typically founded on principles of cooperation, democracy, solidarity and trust, which reflect key feminist principles and serve to counter the monopolising forces of large multinationals.

In Brazil, for instance, there has been an explosion of platform cooperatives. These include *Contrate Quem Luta* (Hire Who Struggles), *Señoritas Courier* (run by and for women), *TransEntrega* (run by and for the trans community), *PedalExpress*, *Puma Delivery*, *Levo Courier*, *Safe Delivery*, *Decent Work Platform*, *Anti-Fascist Couriers Sao Paulo*, and *Na Pista*,

ContratArte.⁴⁵⁵ In South Africa, the University of Western Cape is overseeing the *We Care Digital Platform Cooperative Project*. This is organising 60 female domestic workers with the aim of upskilling their leadership and digital literacy, and creating a digital cooperative platform for the domestic care industry that is run by, and for, women domestic workers.⁴⁵⁶

Although small-scale, these platform cooperatives demonstrate that alternative models are possible. As of 2019, it was estimated that there were some 250 initiatives worldwide exploring this approach. However, examples of success are scarce due to the capitalist nature of the gig economy, which privileges profit-making over principles of solidarity and cooperation. A shift in values is therefore needed, accompanied by sustained investment and support by governments to shift power back to workers and "to create an institutional ecosystem for financial, legal and technological support to fledgling platform cooperatives".⁴⁵⁷

k. Uber also argues that Kenya is a free market, where ride-hailing companies have the right to negotiate commercial agreements without external influence. It claims that the regulations were made and gazetted without following due process and public participation. See: TechCrunch (2022) "Uber Wants Court To Nullify Kenya's New Ride-Hailing Law That Caps Service Fee At 18%" Available at: <https://techcrunch.com/2022/09/08/uber-wants-court-to-nullify-kenyas-new-ride-hailing-law-that-caps-service-fee-at-18/#:~:text=In%20court%20files%20seen%20by,further%20investment%20in%20the%20country>.

l. Uber's lawyers said in their court application: "The plaintiffs (drivers) have filed the instant suit in complete disregard of the said Arbitration Clause, and it is highly improper for the plaintiffs to have instituted the instant proceeding in contravention of the agreements. There being a dispute between the parties, the same ought to be referred to arbitration". See: Njanja, A. (09/05/2022) 'Uber seeks to resolve dispute with Kenyan drivers out of court'. TechCrunch. Available at: <https://tinyurl.com/36pccdj2>

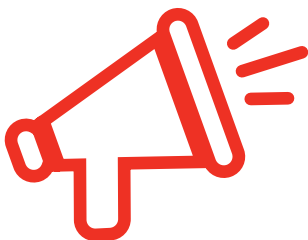


Kenya

- Unions are a strong force in Kenya, but gig worker organisations remain nascent. Workers are highly dispersed and many are unwilling to organise out of fear of being removed from the platform.⁴⁵⁸
- Examples of unions include the Digital Taxi Forum and the Organisation of Online Drivers.⁴⁵⁹ The Transport Workers Union of Kenya (TWUK) have organised widespread strikes by platform taxi drivers.⁴⁶⁰
- TWUK have utilised the government's interest in providing universal healthcare as an opportunity to include gig workers in the social security system.⁴⁶¹
- The Kenya Union of Domestic, Hotels, Education Institutions, Hospitals and Allied Workers (KUDHEIHA) is the main union representing domestic and some other care sector workers. However, they do not yet focus on the gig economy. No WROs focused on the gig economy were identified.

Ghana

- Several unions have emerged to represent online gig workers in the ride-hailing sector. The National Alliance of Digital Drivers Unions Ghana (NADDU) consists of nine smaller organisations and is registered with the Trades Union Congress Ghana (TUC).⁴⁶²
- The Ghana Online Drivers Union was registered in 2022 and has over 10,000 members. It is reportedly actively recruiting women drivers, has a WhatsApp-platform offering support to women drivers and advises them on safety procedures.⁴⁶³
- The Union of Informal Workers Associations (UNIWA), established in 2018, is a small association that represents informal workers, including in the care and beauty sectors.⁴⁶⁴ However they don't currently focus on gig workers. No WROs focused on the gig economy were identified.



South Africa

- Trade unions in South Africa are strong,⁴⁶⁵ but few focus on digital platform workers, partly because workers are so difficult to reach.⁴⁶⁶
- The National Union of Public Service & Allied Workers (NUPSAW) is advocating to classify platform workers as employees.⁴⁶⁷
- The South African Domestic Service and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU) and other domestic worker organisations continue to highlight the insufficiency of wages to meet the cost of living, as well as the persistent undervaluation of domestic.⁴⁶⁸
- No WROs focused on the gig economy were identified.

Brazil

- Brazil is among the ten worst countries for workers due to its regressive laws, violent repression of strikes and protests, and intimidation of union leaders.⁴⁶⁹ City and state-level unions have engaged in the struggle for gig workers' rights, especially in the ride-hailing sector, such as Taxi Drivers Union of Sao Paulo, part of the Confederação Nacional dos Trabalhadores em Transportes Terrestres (CNTTT).
- Mass strikes were organised by delivery drivers in Sao Paulo in 2020. The drivers sought improved pay and health coverage in the wake of Covid,⁴⁷⁰ leading to a Law 14297, offering them increased protections.⁴⁷¹
- There has been an explosion of platform cooperatives, including Contrate Quem Luta (Hire Who Struggles), Señoritas Courier, TransEntrega, PedalExpress, Puma Delivery, Levo Courier, Safe Delivery, Decent Work Platform, Anti-Fascist Couriers Sao Paulo.⁴⁷²
- In recognition of transportation as a public service, the Rio government has developed its own app for the 'traditional' taxi service, Taxi.Rio.⁴⁷³

Guatemala

- Guatemala has one of the worst track records in Latin America for labour rights violations. Between 2004-2017 more than 87 labour rights activists were murdered.⁴⁷⁴
- Movements and unions advocating for gig workers' rights include Movimiento Sindical y Popular Autónomo Guatemalteco (MSPAG), Movimiento de Trabajadores Campesino (MTC), Confederación de Unidad Sindical de Guatemala (CUSG), Confederación Central General de Trabajadores de Guatemala (CGTG), and Unión Sindical de Trabajadores de Guatemala (UNSI TRAGUA). These unions, alongside the ILO, advocate for broader recognition and protection of fundamental worker's rights.⁴⁷⁵
- In May 2020, gig workers in the delivery sector organised strikes to demand better pay and more robust health and safety measures against Covid-19.
- Feminist women in academia were identified as the most involved in activism, both in digital rights and online platforms.⁴⁷⁶
- No WROs focused on the gig economy were identified.

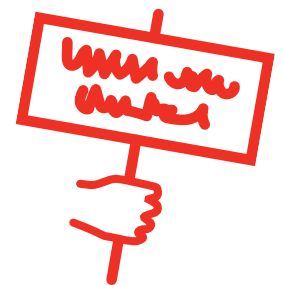


Bangladesh

- Bangladesh is considered one of the 10 worst countries globally for workers. Murders of workers, barriers to free speech and assembly and the filing of criminal cases against union leaders and members have been documented.⁴⁷⁷
- The right to unionise is enshrined in the Labour Act (2006). However, certain workers are banned from unionising⁴⁷⁸ and it's unclear whether gig workers are included.
- Gig workers also face a logistical challenge of obtaining signatures from 20% of a highly dispersed workforce in order to form a union.⁴⁷⁹
- 35% of the country's 250,000 drivers are members of the App-Based Drivers Union of Bangladesh.⁴⁸⁰ It has organised strikes, protests, press conferences, and has engaged in negotiations with companies. However, their demands remain unmet.
- There are no known women drivers who are part of this union, and no WROs focused on the gig economy were identified.

Vietnam

- New unions need to register with the state-led Vietnam General Confederation of Labour (VGCL). VGCL has not stated whether they consider app-based drivers to be contractors or employees.⁴⁸¹
- In May 2022, VGCL proposed policy reforms to improve working conditions and access to social protection for app-based drivers.⁴⁸²
- In 2020, thousands of Grab drivers stopped working and staged protests against increased commission rates. But their efforts did not lead to change.⁴⁸³
- There is little data available about women drivers being part of protests. Women are grossly under-represented within online gig worker collectivisation efforts. Unions and worker associations focused on female-dominated sectors do not seem to be working with online gig workers.
- Workers of one domestic worker platform reportedly organised to demand an increase in pay. It is not clear what the outcome was.⁴⁸⁴



Women organising

Women workers and feminist movements have a long history of challenging exploitation in the world of work. It was such organising by thousands of domestic workers globally led by the International Domestic Workers' Federation that led to the historical creation of ILO C189.⁴⁸⁵ Global union federations such as the International Trade Union Congress⁴⁸⁶ and the International Transport Federation (ITF) have been calling for decent work across the digital economy, with the ITF developing 10 Gig Economy Principles, which features a call for gender-neutral software in recognition of algorithmic bias.⁴⁸⁷

However, almost all the examples of activism cited above pertain to the male-dominated ride-hailing and delivery sector. Apart from some of the platform cooperatives, we were not able to identify concrete examples of women gig workers engaging in collective action in the countries we analysed.⁴⁸⁸ As such, it is unlikely their issues and demands are being addressed sufficiently, if at all, through gender-responsive policies and strategies.⁴⁸⁹ The apparent absence of women could also reflect the trend of women being less likely to engage in collective worker action due to social norms that deem such behaviour as inappropriate for women, as well as time poverty incurred through the double burden of paid and unpaid care work. Nor were we able to identify any women's rights organisations that work on the issue. Among unions representing domestic workers, some reported that the gig economy is on their radar, and others are using digital tools to support workers (see Box 7), but none had a specific focus on the issue. This is possibly unsurprising given that the vast majority of domestic workers remain excluded from the platform economy, which also remains relatively nascent in the domestic and care and beauty sectors in the countries analysed. On the other hand, there remains a lack of research in this area, and the limitations of this study (see Annexes) means there may be initiatives that we did not identify.

Indeed, there are examples of platform domestic workers organising elsewhere. In India, for instance, research has documented how beauty gig workers are devising ways to out-smart algorithmic systems of management to regain some control over their working hours,⁴⁹⁰ as well as protesting outside their headquarters over poor pay and working conditions (see page 28).⁴⁹¹ The platformisation of domestic and care work, as well as the beauty sector, is rapidly expanding in many countries, signaling a growing

need for civil society strategies and advocacy to address the issues faced by gig-workers. For some, this includes a shift to defending rights from multinational companies as opposed to individual clients. This emerging manifestation of neoliberal power is being critiqued by a growing network of civil society groups, trade unions, academics and multilateral institutions, including from an explicitly gendered or feminist perspective. The groups include IT for Change, Development Alternatives for Women of a New Era (DAWN), Digital Future Society, Kenyan research institute Qhala, and the ILO. A Global Manifesto for Fairer Platform Work has been developed and signed by over 200 academics.⁴⁹² Meanwhile at CSW67, The Declaration of Feminist Digital Justice was launched, developed by feminists from Asia-Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and Africa,⁴⁹³ complemented by a Charter of Feminist Demands from the Global South. The evidence, analysis and demands being generated by such groups and initiatives could be used by worker organisations and women's rights organisations to inform their strategies and demands.

Box 7: Using apps to secure rights

In Brazil, the National Federation of Female Domestic Workers and partner organisations have developed an app to provide workers with information about labour rights, a list of protection agencies, and a calculator for keeping track of hours and calculating what they are owed. Named after Laudelina de Campos Melo, an Afro-Brazilian activist and domestic worker, the Laudelina app is also a social networking tool to help overcome the isolation domestic workers can experience.⁴⁹⁴ Although not specifically targeting app-based workers, the app represents a valuable example of alternative domestic worker organising in the digital sphere.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations: Forging a feminist future of platform work

“Dominant platform firms that profit from gendered labor hierarchies in transnational value chains must make way for alternative platform models that transfer power to women-led and worker-owned social and solidarity enterprises.”

The Declaration of Feminist Digital Justice⁴⁹⁵

For the vast majority of women in the global South, the promises of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and located-based gig work are proving illusory. All too often, as this report has shown, the gig economy extracts labour, wealth, resources and data from workers in the global South to enrich multinational companies, exacerbating injustices rooted in colonialism and racism. Although location-based gig work affords workers some positive opportunities,⁴⁹⁶ the intersectional digital divide means many women are excluded from taking advantage of those opportunities. And, despite the rhetoric that gig work can function as a strategy for women’s economic empowerment, the evidence suggests that it frequently reinforces informality and precarity, enabling the “remaking of women into devalued workers”.⁴⁹⁷ As such, coherent policies on skills and education for women and girls, decent work, care infrastructure, preventing and responding to GBV, data rights, migrant rights and corporate accountability are required to respond to the opportunities and threats posed by the digital platform economy.⁴⁹⁸ As argued by the Feminist Digital Justice project, we need an approach that enables women from the global South to carve out a new social contract for the digital economy which is founded on feminist ethics and ensures women’s ownership and control of their data.⁴⁹⁹ These efforts must be part of a transformative shift towards feminist economies that prioritise decent work, human rights, care and wellbeing, and protection of the environment.

Recommendations to governments and policymakers at national and international level:

1. Institute strategies and allocate sufficient resources to eliminate the digital divide based on gender and other intersecting barriers, including by guaranteeing the right to quality education for girls in urban and rural areas; supporting skills development and training; investing in accessible, affordable quality digital technologies and infrastructure; and integrating digital economy concerns into national gender equality strategies.⁵⁰⁰
2. Uphold and implement commitments to decent, dignified work for all, including for women working in the location-based gig economy.⁵⁰¹ Strengthen policy frameworks to ensure that all gig workers, including migrant workers, are covered by national labour laws, enjoy full access to minimum wages, universal social protection, and the right to engage in collective bargaining. This includes ratifying and implementing all core labour rights conventions, as well as ILO C190 on violence in the world of work and ILO C189 on domestic workers.
3. Redress the structural barriers of unpaid care and domestic work to women’s right to education, skills development, decent work, and political participation by investing in universally accessible gender-responsive public services, including healthcare, early childcare, and education.
4. Develop comprehensive regulatory frameworks covering algorithmic management that establish workers’ rights over their data and guards against discriminatory bias based on gender or other factors. Create participatory mechanisms to negotiate and monitor algorithmic management to identify and prevent abusive and unfair practices.
5. Seek to limit the monopolisation of the platform economy by MNCs by developing frameworks and initiatives to support platform cooperatives run by

and for women and other marginalised groups, as well as domestic platform companies that adhere to decent work standards.

6. Place mandatory requirements on platform companies to undertake gendered human rights due diligence of their value chains and redress harms identified. Support the creation of a binding UN treaty on Business and Human Rights.
7. Ensure that national and multilateral development finance institutions undertake gendered human rights impact assessments of platform companies before investing, and place a requirement on companies to address adverse issues as a condition of investment.
8. Take measures to end tax avoidance by platform companies, including profit shifting to tax havens.
9. Champion efforts to place gender equality at the heart of the proposed UN Global Compact on Digital Transformation, including by integrating the principles and recommendations set out in the Charter of Feminist Demands from the Global South.⁵⁰²

Recommendations to platform companies:

1. Adhere to national labour laws and ILO standards of decent work. Recognise platform workers as employees and ensure their access to full worker rights, including living wages (taking account of data, equipment and transportation costs, and travel time), social protection including paid parental leave and sick leave, and ensure workers and their families are protected in cases of illness or injury. Respect the right to unionise.
2. Adopt zero tolerance on gender-based violence. Consult with women workers to establish appropriate mechanisms and procedures to respond to GBV and support them to hold perpetrators to account where they wish to do so.
3. Ensure algorithmic transparency and redress algorithmic biases so that women are not penalised for seeking to preserve their safety and to balance unpaid care work. Be transparent about the data being collected, seek workers' consent on how their data is being used, and respect the right of workers to access their data.

4. Consult with workers to ensure that app ratings systems are not punitive and engage in dialogue when a worker's ratings are low rather than automatically deactivating them. Implement a two-way rating system so workers can also rate clients.
5. For domestic, care and beauty sector workers, introduce stipulations for clients to provide accurate descriptions of work, with room for prices to be revised if a job differs from what was agreed.
6. Support worker training and develop functions within apps where workers can store records of training, work experience, and personal information to support their ability to negotiate fairer wages (where relevant), and to access statutory social protection.
7. Undertake gendered human rights due diligence of value chains to identify and address negative impacts on women workers, including with respect to GBV, and ensure access to remedy.
8. Register and pay taxes in the jurisdictions in which the business operates.

Recommendations for CSOs, trade unions, WROs and academics:

1. Undertake further research into the impacts of the gig economy on women in different countries, contexts and regions to provide evidence to inform advocacy and policymaking.
2. Trade unions and worker associations in the ride-hailing and delivery sector should increase engagement with women drivers to develop a gendered analysis of the issues they face and strategies for redressing these.
3. CSOs, trade unions and WROs working on economic justice should consider exploring and developing strategies to address the impacts of location-based gig work on women, including by drawing on evidence generated by feminist scholars and CSOs.
4. CSOs working with domestic workers and women working in the informal economy should explore opportunities for developing digital platform cooperatives as a means to promote decent work.

5. CSOs, WROs, academics and unions working on women's rights and the gig economy should seek opportunities for knowledge-sharing and collaborations to develop other stakeholders' capacity, expertise and engagement in this area.
 6. Global trade union federations should consider how they could further support alliance building and capacity strengthening with women gig workers, informed by a strong women's rights analysis.
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Annexe

Methodological Note

This research was undertaken between July and September 2022 by Catalystas, a consultancy committed to an intersectional feminist approach. It was supplemented by further desk research by ActionAid in 2022 and 2023. The consultants were based across the respective regions and some of the countries covered, giving them strong local knowledge in some areas.

Countries were selected based on where ActionAid has a presence and where local country teams had interest and capacity to support the research process.

We chose to focus on ride-hailing and delivery because it is one of the largest and most prominent sectors, and one in which is dominated by a small number of large multinational companies. We also believe it's important to understand the extent to which women are engaging in this typically male-dominated domain, the terms on which they are doing so, and how corporate power is being exercised. On the other hand, the gendered (and in many countries, class and race-based) division of labour means that women dominate in the domestic, care and beauty services sectors, making these sectors an important focus for a study concerned with the rights of women from marginalised groups.

Some of the women ActionAid works with through our economic rights and feminist movement building programmes may also be engaging in domestic and care work and beauty services.⁵⁰³ As such, it is hoped that the study can also offer insights into potential future programming and advocacy in this area, building on ActionAid's longstanding work on women's right to decent work.

The research was largely desk-based, including a rapid review of media articles, academic articles and grey literature, and was complemented by a small number of interviews (conducted remotely) with national representatives of civil society, including non-governmental organisations, trade unions, think tanks and academia. Interviews were conducted in local languages wherever possible.

Major limitations to the study included the lack of data and gender disaggregated data available in general on the gig economy and the numbers of workers engaging in income generating activities in this way. We also experienced challenges securing the proposed minimum of five interviews per country in several countries. For example, in Brazil and South Africa, just one interview was conducted in each country context, greatly limiting the possibility to attain critical local insights and perspectives. In each of the other countries, between three and five interviews were conducted.

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