

Women, Work, and Digital Platforms: Enabling Better Outcomes for Women in the Digital Age

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Summary of text:

Over the last two decades the world has witnessed a proliferation of digital platforms and the emergence of an ecosystem of digital work. Against a backdrop of declining global female labour force participation rates, many policymakers wonder if this emerging world of online work will create more and potentially better labour market opportunities for women toward improving their participation rates.

The population of working age women is perhaps more heterogenous today than ever before. Women possess varying levels of education and skills; they come from a range of socio-economic and cultural backgrounds; they have different threshold conditions for labour force participation; and they engage with digital labour platforms in different ways. This heterogenous population of working age women is matched by an equally diverse universe of labour platforms. This paper examines women's experience with digital labour platforms along five dimensions of flexibility, autonomy, income, entitlements and labour protections, and representation. It looks at how women are faring in this emerging world of platform-mediated work, and what must happen to enable them to avail opportunities and see better outcomes.

Evidence suggests that online labour markets are at risk of replicating many of the same biases found offline. Women are drawn to the flexibility that platforms seemingly provide in when and where to work. Yet, this flexibility is frequently unrealized because women face a disproportionate burden of domestic and care work that fuels time poverty. When it comes to autonomy, despite being self-employed contract workers, platforms establish standards and norms; rating systems, and in many instances, set prices; all of these restrain autonomy. A lack of regulation means that, in many parts of the world, gig work is not aligned to minimum wages. Since workers affiliated with platforms are considered to be self-employed, platforms are not obligated to provide welfare benefits. In the absence of government provision of entitlements, women engaging in work through digital platforms can be left without social security coverage, including maternity and health benefits. Finally, when workers are self-employed, and especially when they are home-based, the ability to associate and engage in collective action is diminished weakening women's collective voice.

Key recommendations:

- Harnessing the potential of digital platforms to improve labour market outcomes for women is contingent on addressing the same socio-cultural norms that have constrained women in the offline world for so long. Policymakers must be willing to highlight the need to address socio-cultural biases.
- There is a need to create an enabling ecosystem to support women's economic participation and employment, including the integration of safe transport options, lighting and toilets; investment in childcare and other time-saving measures; and developing women's human capital through equitable access to education, skills, and technology.
- Labor regulations and protections must be instituted for workers in the platform economy, including a minimum wage. Governments must move iteratively toward public provision of basic social security for all, with targeted efforts to ensure that women are registered to receive entitlements.
- More gender-disaggregated data must be collected on the incidence, characteristics, and experience of women engaging in digitally mediated work through platforms.