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**19 August 2025**

## **Same platforms, unequal pay: How women are losing out in Africa's gig work boom**

Platform work – including ride-hailing, food delivery and online freelancing – has been praised as a new avenue for women's employment in Africa. However, a landmark study spanning five African countries has revealed that while men and women share many of the same challenges in the gig economy, women face distinct disadvantages that limit their opportunities and deepen economic insecurity.

Published in *Platforms & Society*, the study, titled "[Gendered inequalities of platform work in Africa: Findings from a multi-country analysis](#)", was conducted by a team of researchers from the University of Cape Town (UCT) in collaboration with international partners.

The study, conducted across 18 platforms in four key sectors (ride-hailing, delivery, professional services and microtasks), is the first systematic, multi-country comparison of men's and women's experiences of platform work in Africa. It challenges the assumption that the rise of digital platforms empowers women.

The study found that men and women experience similar issues in platform work: inadequate social protection, lack of employment contracts, reliance on opaque algorithmic management systems, and little or no representation in decision-making. Both genders reported similar struggles with unpredictable income, job insecurity and limited recourse for disputes with platforms.

However, these shared challenges play out in a broader social and economic landscape where women face additional structural disadvantages. Gender norms influence the types of platform work women can access, with men dominating sectors such as ride-hailing and delivery. In contrast, women are more concentrated in professional services and microtasking sectors, often paying less and offering fewer hours.

One of the study's most striking findings was that women earn less than men, not because they are paid less per task, but because they work fewer hours on average. This reduced working time is often linked to unpaid care responsibilities and cultural expectations that limit women's availability for work.

"In many cases, this also undermines one of the most cited benefits of platform work: flexibility. While digital platforms are marketed as offering women a way to work around

other commitments, the reality is that fewer working hours translate into lower incomes and greater dependency on gig work as their primary or only source of earnings,” said Dr Sharon Geeling from UCT’s Department of Information Systems.

Although only a small number of surveyed women reported experiences of gender-specific discrimination, the incidents they described were significant. Some women reported order cancellations or customer complaints they believed were motivated by gender bias. Others described facing verbal abuse, harassment or unsafe working conditions.

“These experiences, although less common, have a chilling effect on women’s participation in certain sectors, particularly those requiring face-to-face interactions with customers or working late hours,” said Dr Geeling.

The study also pointed out a surprising irony: women in the sample generally had higher levels of formal education than men, yet this did not translate into higher pay or better conditions. Without the hours to match men’s participation, women were unable to leverage their qualifications into a wage premium.

Pitso Tsibolane, a senior lecturer in UCT’s Department of Information Systems, said: “Platform work in Africa holds promise, but our research shows that without targeted intervention, it risks reinforcing – rather than reducing – existing gender inequalities. Women may be working on the same platforms as men, but the social and economic context in which they work is profoundly different.

“The flexibility of platform work is often overstated for women. Flexibility without security simply shifts the burden onto the worker, and in many cases, that means onto women who are already juggling unpaid care work and limited job options.”

As African economies increasingly integrate digital labour platforms into their employment landscape, Professor Richard Heeks from the Centre for Digital Development at the University of Manchester said policymakers and platform operators alike were under pressure to ensure fair and equitable conditions for all workers.

“With women’s participation in the labour force already lagging in many countries, the stakes are high: platform work could either help close the gender gap or widen it,” he said. “This study provides the first comparative evidence across multiple African countries to inform that debate. It shows that addressing gender inequalities is not just a matter of fairness but of unlocking the full potential of the continent’s growing platform economy.”

The paper concluded with a series of recommendations addressing gender inequalities in platform work. These include:

- designing platform policies that explicitly recognise and address gender-based barriers to participation.
- introducing safeguards and reporting mechanisms to protect workers from harassment and discrimination.
- offering more flexible and predictable scheduling options that accommodate unpaid care responsibilities without penalising workers through lower earnings.
- ensuring equal access to the most lucrative sectors of platform work through targeted outreach and training.
- expanding research into women’s lived experiences of gig work in Africa to guide evidence-based policymaking.

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**Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department**

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