

PROMOTING GENDER
INCLUSIVITY IN THE GIG
ECONOMY IN KENYA



ALEXANDER VON HUMBOLDT INSTITUTE FOR INTERNET AND SOCIETY

PROMOTING GENDER INCLUSIVITY IN THE GIG ECONOMY IN KENYA

Policy brief

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Berlin, April 2023



SUSTAINABILITY, ENTREPRENEURSHIP
AND GLOBAL DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION



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INTRODUCTION

Digital technologies are now playing a major role in the everyday life of many people in Africa. Their use can be seen in health care, industry, education and business, among other areas. The result is a steady growth in the use of digital platforms that open up vast opportunities for knowledge workers to engage in diverse forms of entrepreneurship and boost their economic opportunities, particularly via gig work. Kenya is at the forefront of this gig economy, with a wide range of digital platforms and applications operating in the country. These platforms offer workers immense opportunities for flexible, cost-effective and convenient entrepreneurship ventures at both the local and global levels.

Gig workers are often independent, self-motivated and innovative and possess unique technical know-how that has seen them engage in self-employment. Their self-reliant career is characterised by high mobility, freelance assignments and short contracts rather than long-term employment. Currently, Kenya has digital gig platforms that range from transport, micro-task work, artisan work, delivery, accommodation and business-process outsourcing.

GENDER CONCERNS IN THE GIG ECONOMY IN KENYA

Evidence from a recent study of 314 online gig workers by the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society in cooperation with the Digital Centre Kenya of the Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) revealed the low participation of female workers in the gig economy in Kenya. In fact, only 88 (28.0%) of the 314 gig workers participating were female, while the rest were male (Wakunuma & Kwanya, 2023). These findings echo other studies in Kenya and elsewhere. For instance, a study conducted on gig workers using Upwork in South Africa, Kenya, Uganda, Nigeria and Ghana concluded that about 60% of gig workers in these countries were male (Anwar & Graham, 2020).

Although available evidence shows that there are generally more male than female gig workers in the global South, the opposite is true in some countries in the global North such as United Kingdom and Italy. The low presence of female workers in the gig economy can be attributed to a myriad of factors such as safety concerns, which have hindered many women from fully participating in the gig economy. There is also evidence that female gig workers face sexual harassment in instances where the gig work requires face-to-face interaction. Another reason why fewer women participate in the gig economy is because women already bear the burden of unpaid labour when running households. Therefore women in gig work do not often work in the evenings because of the need to balance the work with their domestic duties. Consequently, they put in fewer hours and complete fewer tasks than their male counterparts.

The study also revealed that most (56.8%) of the female gig workers in Kenya were aged under 25 years (Wakunuma & Kwanya, 2023: 77). It was also evident that women are more likely than men to exit the gig economy. Often this is because as they get older, they are likely to get married, start a family and focus their energies on taking care of those families. Thus, unmarried young women who do not have children are more likely to participate in gig work than their older counterparts.

The study also demonstrated that there is no relationship between the platform selected for gig work and the gender of gig workers in Kenya. It follows, therefore, that the selection of the platform for gig work in Kenya is not determined by gender-based factors. This finding also implies that the platforms do not intrinsically favour any gender. This is an important facet of the gig economy because it equalises opportunities for both male and female workers.

CONCLUSION

The gig economy has opened vast opportunities for Kenyans to engage gainfully in platform jobs. Although most gig assignments are knowledge-based, many Kenyan women and girls do not participate fully in gig work. As more work moves online, women and girls are likely to be pushed out of the job market due to gender-based factors. The government and other stakeholders should promote gender inclusivity through relevant affirmative policies.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Government of Kenya and other stakeholders should scale up specialised initiatives to equip women with the requisite digital skills to bolster their participation in the gig economy.
- The Government of Kenya should create a dedicated security unit within the Kenya Police to promptly deal with the security concerns unique to the gig economy and boost the safety of all gig workers including women.
- The Gender and Equality Commission should recognise gig work as one of the areas where gender biases are experienced. The Commission should develop initiatives to promote gender parity in the gig economy in Kenya.
- The Government of Kenya and other stakeholders should deploy initiatives that promote digital device ownership and access among potential female gig workers in the country.
- Gig economy stakeholders in Kenya should advocate for gender-friendly policies such as equal pay for equal work, maternity leave for gig-working mothers and flexi-job arrangements for lactating mothers.

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IMPRINT

A policy brief published by the Alexander von Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society.

PUBLISHED

April 2023

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PUBLISHER

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DESIGN

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KEYWORDS

Gender, Gig Work, Kenya, Equality

CITATION

Kwanya, T. & Wakunuma, K. (2023). Promoting Gender Inclusivity in the Gig Economy in Kenya.

HIIG Impact Publication Series. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7572535>