

Women and the Digital Gig Economy in South Africa



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Introduction

The gig economy, characterized by digital platforms that bring together workers and the purchasers of their services, is expanding globally. A majority of gig workers engage with these platforms through necessity. These workers often face low and insecure incomes, discrimination, and limited labor protections. Little research to date has focused on gig workers outside of North America and Europe, nor on gendered experiences of gig work. In this study, we analyze data from a two-year project to understand women's involvement in gig work in Kenya and South Africa. We probed workers' time use, how work experiences differ from the employment these workers might otherwise find, and the extent to which gig work offers independent, flexible working patterns that support women workers in managing paid and unpaid work. This briefing focuses on our results for South Africa.²

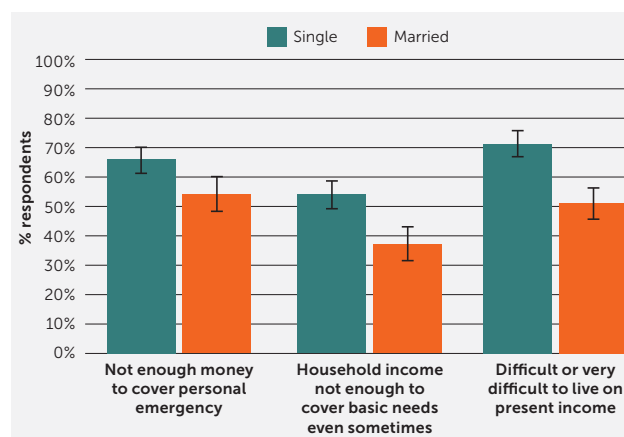
Our Approach

We collected socio-demographic data from 650 domestic gig workers, nearly all of whom were black African women, through a nine-round longitudinal phone-based survey. Our digital platform collaborator provided us with data on their workforce, which we merged with the survey data at an individual level to obtain a fuller picture of worker experiences and company operations. We also analyzed the workforce data to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the services offered and worker availability. We carried out in-depth interviews with gig workers who care for at least one child under 8 years old to understand the trade-offs between gig work and family life.

Results

We find that platforms offered some positive features that workers value, and that improve their working conditions. Platforms offered paid work in an economy with high unemployment, greater hourly pay than that which is available in other jobs, and some flexibility for child care and educational pursuits. Many workers also felt that platforms afforded them the opportunity to improve their skills. The platform companies themselves spoke of the goal of 'professionalizing' the gig workforce through certifying their offerings, providing training in customer relations and other areas, and more broadly dignifying service-based work, which was seen as critical to be able to increase wages eventually.

Figure 1. Economic situation of single and partnered gig workers.



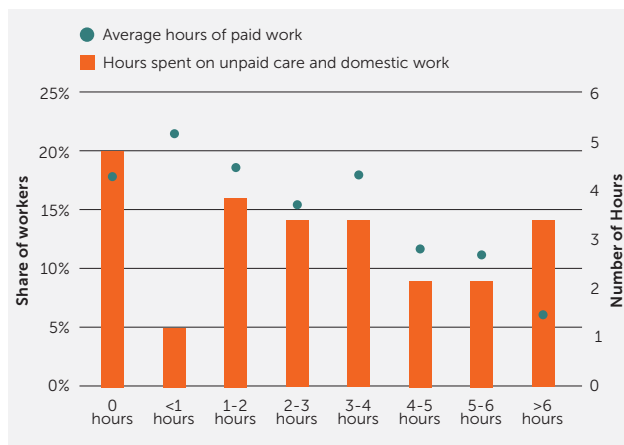
However, workers – particularly the majority who were single (and typically parents) – struggled with the unpredictability of earnings from gig work and felt that their overall earnings were not enough to meet household needs (Figure 1). In turn, the platform company cited an inability

1. For the full report, please see: Hunt, A., Samman, E., Tapfuma, S., Mwaura, G. and Omenya, R. with Kim, K., Stevano, S. and Roumer, A. (Forthcoming, 2019), The gig economy, care and time use in Kenya and South Africa (Working Title), London: ODI. The quantitative data was collected in partnership with Ulula and Data-Pop Alliance.

2. Complications with the study in Kenya restricted the quantitative data we were able to collect from our survey and from the platform company with which we collaborated.

to raise prices to provide a better income for workers, as this would price some clients out of the market, resulting in less work being available overall. In addition, while platforms highlight the flexibility they offer workers, this flexibility is limited in practice by client demand, which determines the volume, location, and timing of bookings. Workers also face safety issues that stem from the fact that many on-demand gigs take place in private households. The large distances between gigs exposed workers to additional security risks, including robbery and assault, which were accentuated further by poor public transport and early working hours. Gig workers also lack social insurance that would provide protections, for example in the case of ill health or childbirth. The latter proved a particular hardship, as workers often had limited means of coping during maternity periods in which they could not work.

Figure 2. Weekly hours spent working on paid work and unpaid care and domestic work.



Workers also struggled to balance gig work with childcare and other unpaid household work. While women’s unpaid care was inversely correlated with their paid work, nearly a third of all gig workers did at least four hours of unpaid work daily (Figure 2). Moreover, the flexibility that gig work offers is often not used in practice because workers are reluctant to turn down bookings and forego badly needed income. Women relied on family, neighbors, and friends to provide childcare, but when such support was lacking, they relied on high-risk strategies, such as leaving young children alone or in the care of slightly older children.

Implications

To make the gig economy work for marginalized people, we argue that policymakers and platform companies have a responsibility to improve economic security, support unpaid childcare, give workers more flexibility over schedules, and ensure worker safety. Governments ought both to focus on the broader contextual factors that influence working conditions (through better infrastructure for transport, childcare etc.) and to put in place regulations that ensure that platform companies provide a minimum set of protections to their workforce, in line with relevant national legislation on labor rights.

Economic security requires:

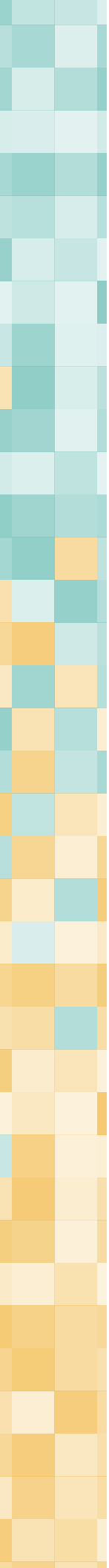
1. Greater investment in training, certification, and skills development;
2. The promotion of workers by emphasizing their education, skills, and experience in addition to customer ratings;
3. Cost analysis to ensure that workers are being paid at least the national minimum wage (and that the statutory minimum equates to a living wage);
4. Active participation in initiatives to raise standards in the gig economy.

Supporting unpaid childcare includes:

1. Analysis of the costs and benefits of quality childcare services;
2. Canvassing worker demand for and preferences about childcare;
3. Advancing public and private initiatives that provide affordable childcare for working families.

Giving workers flexibility entails:

1. User-friendly platform features that allow workers to select and cancel gigs with ease;
2. New strategies to incentivize clients to accept work at hours preferred by workers;
3. Addressing the issue of client underreporting of the amount of work required.



The converse of this is that workers need some assurance of **stability in their work**, such as a guarantee of a minimum number of hours and compensation when clients cancel gigs they are expecting to do.

Ensuring worker safety requires:

1. Government investment in transport infrastructure (with support from companies, where feasible);
2. Providing workers with information on violence hotspots;
3. Creating platform features for workers to access support in the event of safety threats;
4. Taking reports of client abuses seriously;
5. Tailored workplace safety laws that recognize the specific risks gig workers face.

Finally, we note that our research efforts were complicated by data access issues. These include difficulties in reaching a dispersed worker population and in accessing platform data itself. While we were able to collaborate effectively with platform companies, there are sound ethical and legal reasons for gig platforms to limit access to data, including worker privacy considerations. However, newly available data sharing models could allow researchers to query data through specific algorithms, running on the servers of the gig platforms, that would perform analytical tasks without sharing or exposing data. This would also help resolve the intrinsic tension between understanding and improving the experience of vulnerable populations, preventing further disenfranchisement, and managing relationships with data custodians. Such a system would also help to involve gig workers further in all future research using data about them.