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on the Status of Women

STUDYGUIDE



UNCSW
Women's Economic Empowerment in the Gig Economy: Labour Rights and Protections

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1. Introduction to UNCSW

1.1 Mandate and Objectives

The United Nations' Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) is the principal global intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality, the rights, and the empowerment of women [1]. Established in 1946 by the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), UNCSW's mandate includes:

a. Promoting women's rights and gender equality across political, economic, and social spheres globally.
b. Reviewing progress on international commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)[2] and the Beijing Platform for Action [3].
c. Identifying challenges and emerging issues affecting women globally, such as women's participation in the gig economy.
d. Providing policy recommendations to UN member states and agencies to advance gender-responsive development.

2. Introduction to the Agenda

2.1 Introduction

The rise of the gig economy - characterized by short-term, flexible, and task-based employment, often facilitated by digital platforms - has reshaped global labour markets over the past decade, creating new forms of work that transcend traditional employer-employee structures. While this has improved economic opportunities, particularly for women seeking flexible income sources, it has also introduced new forms of vulnerability; women in gig work often operate without the labour protections, social security, or workplace safety mechanisms provided to traditional employees [4]. These gaps disproportionately affect women due to pre-existing gender inequalities in labour markets, unequal access to digital tools, and the burden of unpaid care responsibilities.

As digital platforms increasingly influence labour allocation and evaluation through algorithms, new challenges related to transparency, discrimination, and data privacy also emerge as algorithmic biases [5] may replicate or amplify gender disparities. In addition to that, the absence of standardized legal frameworks for gig work leaves many women classified as "independent contractors," excluding them from minimum wage laws, maternity benefits, health insurance, and the right to collective bargaining [6]. At the same time, safety concerns highlight the urgent need for platform accountability and gender-responsive workplace protections. As the gig economy

continues to expand, ensuring that women can participate safely, fairly, and sustainably is essential for advancing global goals of gender equality, decent work, and inclusive economic development.

While the gig economy offers women new avenues for flexibility and income generation, its current structure perpetuates gender-based inequalities; therefore, advancing women's economic empowerment requires gender-responsive labour protections, equal digital access, and regulatory frameworks that safeguard the rights, safety, and economic security of women gig workers worldwide.

3. Glossary and Key Terms

Gig Economy
A labour market based on short-term, task-based, or freelance work, often mediated through digital platforms [7] such as ride-hailing, delivery apps, or online freelancing marketplaces.

Platform Work / Digital Labour Platforms
Work facilitated by digital applications or websites that match workers with clients or tasks, often using algorithms to allocate jobs, set prices, or evaluate performance [50].

Misclassification
The practice of categorizing gig workers as "independent contractors" [6] instead of employees, preventing them from accessing social security, minimum wage laws, maternity protection, and collective bargaining rights.

Algorithmic Management
Use of automated systems, such as rating models, matching systems, or behavioural analytics, to supervise workers, assign tasks, and evaluate performance, often without transparency [8].

Algorithmic Bias
Systematic errors in automated decision-making that reproduce or amplify existing inequalities or discriminatory patterns, often because the algorithm learns from biased data [23].

Ask Gap
The observed disparity where women quote or request lower prices or wages for the same work compared to men, contributing to gendered earnings differences [9].

Occupational Segregation
The concentration of women and men in different types of jobs or sectors due to social norms, discrimination, or structural barriers [13].

Digital Gender Divide
The gap between men and women in access to digital tools, internet connectivity, digital skills, and participation in online economic activities [24].

Feminized Labour
Work sectors traditionally associated with women, such as caregiving, domestic work, micro-tasking, are undervalued and underpaid [13].

Unpaid Care Work
Household labour such as childcare, eldercare, and domestic chores that is performed without pay and disproportionately carried out by women [26].

Social Protection / Social Security
Policies providing income support, health insurance, pensions, maternity benefits, or worker safety nets [10]. Most gig workers lack access due to their contractor status.

Presumption of Employment
A legal approach where workers are assumed to be employees unless the platform proves otherwise. This shifts the burden of proof onto companies [12].

Portable Benefits
Social protections that remain attached to the worker across different platforms or jobs, rather than tied to one employer [10].

Collective Bargaining
Negotiation of wages and working conditions through unions or worker associations. Gig workers are often excluded due to misclassification [51].

Worker Cooperatives
Worker-owned organisations where members share decision-making and profits [11]; in the gig context, cooperatives provide safer and more equitable alternatives to platform dependency.

Gender-Responsive Regulation
Policy design that intentionally accounts for gendered differences, ensuring that labour rules, safety standards, and social protections work effectively for women [54].

Platform Liability
Legal responsibility assigned to digital platforms for workers' protections, safety, income stability, or compliance with labour laws [12].

CSW Agreed Conclusions

Formal negotiated outcomes from UN Commission on the Status of Women sessions, outlining commitments and policy recommendations for member states [53].

Beijing Platform for Action
A global policy framework identifying key areas of action to advance women's rights, including economic participation and labour equality [41].

Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)
A UN treaty considered to be an international bill of rights for women, obligating member states to ensure substantive equality through legal reforms, institutional support, and monitoring by the CEDAW Committee [34].

ILO Conventions
Legally binding international labour standards adopted by the International Labour Organization, such as C100 (Equal Remuneration) [35] and C87 (Freedom of Association) [36].

Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH)
Any form of violence, intimidation, or harassment rooted in gender inequality; for gig workers, this often occurs in customer interactions or during travel-based jobs [52].

Care Infrastructure
Public services and systems, such as childcare centres, eldercare facilities, or parental leave schemes, that reduce women's unpaid domestic workload [55].

4. Historical Background

4.1 Historical Context

The extent of women's participation in the global workforce has seen significant improvement over the past century, shaped by social movements, technological progress, and changing economic structures. Historically, women's employment was largely concentrated in informal, low-wage, and highly gendered sectors such as domestic work, and this was often unregulated and excluded from formal labour protections [13]. As industrialization progressed in the 20th century, women increasingly entered formal employment, yet barriers such as discriminatory hiring practices, wage gaps, and limitations on economic rights persisted across many regions.

The second half of the 20th century marked a turning point as international organizations, including the United Nations and the International Labour Organization (ILO), began addressing gender inequality in the labour market, adopting resolutions and conventions that highlighted the need for gender-responsive labour laws, laying the foundation for global efforts to empower

women economically. However, despite progress, women remained disproportionately represented in informal labour, lacking social protection, stable income, and formal recognition.

The early 2000s introduced a new paradigm in global labour systems: the rise of digital platforms and the modern gig economy. As internet connectivity expanded and smartphones became widely accessible, companies developed app-based systems for freelancing and microtasking, creating new opportunities for flexible work, especially for women balancing caregiving responsibilities or facing barriers to traditional employment. However, this new form of labour also inherited - and, in some cases, amplified - historic inequalities [14]. Women, who have historically borne the burden of informal and precarious labour, found themselves once again in a sector lacking adequate regulation and transparency.

5. Current Global Landscape

5.1 Present Global Trends

The global gig economy has expanded rapidly in recent years, reshaping labour markets, introducing new forms of digital work, and creating both opportunities and vulnerabilities for women. The following are the major features of the current global landscape affecting women's economic empowerment in the gig economy:

a. **Growth of Digital Labour Platforms**: Digital platforms - from delivery services to freelance work - have surged in popularity worldwide due to increased smartphone usage and demand for flexible services, creating new job avenues, especially in economies experiencing unemployment or limited formal job growth due to flexible work. [15]
b. **Regional Differences in Gig Economy Adoption**: The growth of the gig economy varies across regions as high-income countries show more structured platform ecosystems, while in developing regions, gig work is often intertwined with informal labour markets. Women in the Global South face greater technological and infrastructural barriers compared to those in developed economies. [16]
c. **Barriers to Entry and Digital Access Gap**: A persistent gender digital divide limits women's engagement in more lucrative gig sectors, with barriers including limited device ownership, lack of digital literacy, and financial constraints restricting women's ability to enter or advance platform-based work [17].
d. **Misclassification of Gig Workers**: Most gig workers are classified as "independent contractors" rather than employees [18], excluding them from minimum wage laws and social protections.
e. **Income Instability and Wage Inequality**: Gig work often involves fluctuating pay, unpredictable algorithms, and dependence on customer ratings, so women frequently earn less than men due to platform biases and occupational segregation. [19]

f. **Growth of Women-Led Worker Cooperatives:** In response to inadequate protections, women gig workers in several countries have formed cooperatives that negotiate fees, provide training, and advocate for safer conditions. These groups offer alternative models of digital labour governance. Online communities and global labour movements have enabled gig workers to share experiences, demand transparency in algorithms, and organise across borders. [20]

6. Root Causes and Structural Barriers

6.1 Structural Barriers

Structural weaknesses in national labour laws and social protection frameworks, as well as in the design of gig platforms, leave women gig workers without the safety nets afforded to formal employees.

1. **Misclassification of Gig Workers:** Workers in gig economy are often classified as "independent contractors," excluding them from minimum wage laws, paid leave, and maternity protections. Only a small number of countries have begun reclassifying gig workers under formal labour categories, such as the *"Gig Workers Bill 2025"* in Malaysia or the *"Riders Law"* in Spain. [21]
2. **Absence of Grievance Mechanisms:** Traditional labour institutions such as trade unions and labour courts largely do not cover platform workers, especially in developing countries, making it difficult for women to report abuse or negotiate better conditions. [22]
3. **Algorithmic Bias**: Gig platforms rely on automated systems, which may magnify biases as they operate on learned data, and can systematically disadvantage women workers. For instance, the algorithm may learn that companies prefer to hire male workers over female ones due to societal bias, therefore amplifying male profiles to potential recruiters more than female ones. [23]

6.2 Educational and Technological Gaps

A major barrier to women's empowerment in the gig economy is the gender digital divide, which restricts women's ability to access and benefit from online labour platforms.

a. **Lower Internet and Device Access:** as of recent global estimates, women are 17% less likely than men to use mobile internet, and in developing regions like South Asia, the gap widens to 42%, severely limiting entry into app-based work [24].
b. **Lack of Digital Skills:** Women disproportionately lack formal digital education and training. Women make up only 35% of the STEM workforce globally, affecting their ability to engage in higher-skilled online freelancing [25].

c. **Affordability Barriers:** The cost of smartphones, data plans, and maintenance is a significant burden that many cannot afford, and in low-income households, men are often prioritized for device ownership, leaving women reliant on shared or outdated technology [24].

6.3 Sociocultural Norms

Decades of gender discrimination in culture and, consequently, employment and labor market, continue to influence women's wages and access to formal work. These inequalities push many women toward gig platforms not by choice, but due to exclusion from secure labour markets, and even here, women face discrimination and inequality.

a. **Occupational Segregation**: women remain concentrated in feminized sectors such as caregiving, domestic work, and clerical tasks. These patterns continue in gig platforms, where women dominate in low-paid service and microwork jobs.
b. **Unpaid Care Work**: Women perform roughly three times more unpaid care work than men globally [26]. This restricts the types of gig tasks they can accept, often confining them to home-based or flexible but low-paying work.
c. **Stigma and Gender Norms:** There are often restrictions on women's mobility in developing countries due to cultural norms or safety concerns, affecting their ability to take on tasks requiring travel, nighttime work, or interactions with male clients. Women also face social stigma or family resistance.
d. **Limited Formal Employment Opportunities:** In many developing countries, over 60% of women are employed in the informal sector, where earnings are unstable, and protections are minimal. The gig economy often mirrors these conditions rather than improving them.
e. **Systematically undervalued jobs:** workers are treated as disposable, flexible labor without proper wages, benefits, or protections. Platforms keep costs low by shifting financial risk onto workers, leading to unstable income and fewer rights compared to traditional employees.

7. Manifestations of the Problem

The gig economy's digital and legal structures often perpetuate and exacerbate existing gender inequalities [27].

7.1 Employment and Wage Gaps

In the gig economy, the pay gap between men and women can be even larger than in regular jobs. In some gig fields, men charge up to 48% more than women for the same work. Data indicates that women on large global platforms quote approximately 10% lower hourly rates than men,

contributing to the "ask gap.” Women are overrepresented in lower-value, feminized sectors such as remote micro-tasking, domestic services, and low-paid local delivery roles, sustaining income disparity [28].

Women account for a disproportionate share of those working 10 hours a week or less (approximately 60% of female online gig workers vs. 50% of men), reflecting the pressure to fit paid work around unpaid care and domestic responsibilities.

7.2 Underrepresentation in STEM and Leadership

Because there are fewer women in tech leadership and product design, some algorithms end up biased. These systems may unfairly punish irregular work schedules (which many women have) or let customer bias affect worker ratings and job assignments.

For example, only 3% of female freelancers in North America work in high-value AI services, compared to 17% of males [29].

7.3 Barriers to Digital Access and Skills

The gap in mobile internet adoption between men and women in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) has stalled. Women in LMICs are 14% less likely to use mobile internet, representing 235 million fewer women connected [30].

Geographical Concentration: This gap is widest in South Asia (15%) and Sub-Saharan Africa [31].

8. Impacts of Gender Inequality

8.1 Economic Impacts

Only 60% of all gig workers are covered by health insurance, and just 35% have a pension plan. This vulnerability disproportionately impacts women due to their historically lower savings and higher financial insecurity. Without basic benefits like paid sick leave, gig workers face a major protection gap. Getting sick can lead to serious financial hardship or even financial ruin. On average, improved gender equality can lead to an increase in GDP of about 12% by 2050 [32].

8.2 Social and Developmental Implications

Safety and Harassment: Women in location-based gig work face increased risks of Gender-Based Violence and Harassment (GBVH) from clients. Platforms typically lack the mandated safety and grievance mechanisms required of traditional employers [33].

The misclassification model is a driver of increased wage inequality and the reduction of workers' collective bargaining power, undermining the principles of the ILO.

8.3 Integrational Effects

The low, unpredictable incomes and extreme time demands of gig work force women into high-stress environments and often limit their ability to invest time and resources in their children's development and education.

9. International Legal and Policy Framework

9.1 Relevant Treaties (CEDAW, ILO Conventions)

A. **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW):** a UN treaty adopted in 1979, considered an international bill of rights for women, obligating member states to end sex-based discrimination in all areas, including political, economic, social, and cultural rights, and ensuring substantive equality through legal reforms, institutional support, and monitoring by the CEDAW Committee [34].
B. **ILO Conventions:** Core principles, including C100 (Equal Remuneration) [35] and C87 (Freedom of Association) [36], provide the mandate to demand fair pay and the right to organize, despite platform resistance.

9.2 UN Resolutions and Declarations

A. ***CSW Agreed Conclusions (E/2017/27):*** This document specifically calls for gender-responsive labor and social policies that ensure women's decent work in new economic fields and strongly urges measures to reduce and redistribute women's unpaid care work [37].
B. ***CSW 61 (2017):*** This session on "Women's Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work" formally addressed platform-based work, automation, and digital inclusion, urging states to extend labour protections to new forms of employment [38].
C. ***CSW 62 (2018):*** Emphasised improving digital infrastructure and economic opportunities for rural women, many of whom rely on informal and gig-based work [39].
D. ***CSW 67 (2023):*** Focused on innovation, technological change, and digital education for gender equality, a direct milestone for addressing the gender digital divide in the gig economy [40].
E. ***Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995)*** calls for the removal of structural barriers to women's participation in the economy, the protection of women workers from exploitation, and the expansion of access to technology [41].
F. ***General Assembly Resolution 78/150 (2023)****:* Emphasizes that gender equality is key to realizing all SDGs and demands structural change by investing in universal care infrastructure and implementing policies to reduce and redistribute unpaid care work [42].

G. ***General Assembly Resolution 78/182 (2023):*** Reaffirms the Beijing Platform for Action (1995) and mandates the full, accelerated implementation of its principles, specifically calling for enhanced gender mainstreaming across global and national policies [43].
H. ***SDGs:*** The debate is framed by the imperative to achieve SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 8 (Decent Work), demanding that technological advancements translate into equitable outcomes.

9.3 National Policy Models

India's Code on Social Security (2020): A groundbreaking model that formally recognizes the status of "gig worker" and mandates that platform aggregators contribute 1-2% of their annual turnover to a dedicated social security fund to cover these workers [44].

EU Platform Work Directive: Proposes creating a "presumption of employment," shifting the burden of proof onto platforms to demonstrate a worker is genuinely independent if certain control criteria are met [45].

Singapore's Platform Workers Bill (hybrid social protection model): Singapore has introduced legislation that creates a new worker category between employee and self-employed, requiring both platforms and workers to contribute to the Central Provident Fund (CPF, the national social security scheme). This grants gig workers access to retirement, healthcare, and housing benefits without fully classifying them as traditional employees [46].

10. Stakeholder analysis

10.1 Governments and Public Institutions

1. Reclassify Work: Legislate a new worker status to grant minimum floor protections without sacrificing operational flexibility.
2. Ensure Security: Mandate platforms contribute financially to portable social protection funds that follow the worker.
3. Fund Care: Invest in and subsidize universal care infrastructure to reduce the economic burden that limits worker participation.

10.2 Private Sector and Tech Firms (Platforms)

Commit to Algorithmic Accountability through independent, gender-sensitive audits to ensure transparent and non-discriminatory assignment, rating, and pay practices. Proactively provide mechanisms for collective worker representation and comply with mandatory social contribution schemes.

10.3 International Donors and Development Agencies

Action: Finance targeted programs to close the digital gender divide in regions like South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa. Develop and promote updated ILO standards and technical assistance to help member states regulate the platform economy in line with decent work principles.

11. Role of Civil Society, Unions, and Women-Led Advocacy

11.1 Evolution of Digital-Era Organising

Although gig work is often described as too fragmented for collective action, the past decade has produced a quiet but notable shift. Various groups of platform workers have begun to surface in different regions, forming loose networks that operate with a mix of digital coordination and on-ground interaction. These emerging formations complicate traditional assumptions about the limits of organising within informal, task-oriented labour structures [47].
Within these developments, women workers have become increasingly visible. Their participation is shaped by recurring concerns surrounding safety, procedural fairness, and the opaque nature of algorithmic oversight [48]. Digital spaces have provided channels through which workers can synchronise their responses to platform decisions, sometimes leading to coordinated pauses in service, collective adjustments in user feedback patterns, or broader public scrutiny of platform practices [49]. The strategies remain fluid, often experimental, but they reveal a gradual re-imagining of how labour advocacy can function in environments defined by individualised work and mediated interactions [30].

11.2 Feminist Labour Movements

Feminist movements, alongside advocacy groups such as WIEGO and the GAATW, have extensively foregrounded the specific vulnerabilities of women gig workers, including disproportionate exposure to harassment, undervaluation of feminised labour, lack of maternity protection, and barriers to upward mobility [30]; their campaigns simultaneously call for gender-responsive policy frameworks, meaningful social-dialogue mechanisms, and explicit integration of these workers into national labour strategies, with a critical action being the organising of women workers to build collective bargaining power and provide legal support for challenging misclassification in courts based on existing national and international labour laws [47].

11.3 NGO and Civil Society Influence

Civil society organizations contribute through legal aid, research, awareness campaigns, and direct engagement with policymakers [30]. They often serve as intermediaries between platform workers and governments by collecting evidence on wage fluctuations, algorithmic bias, unsafe working environments, or unexplained account deactivations [49]. These organizations also provide digital

literacy programmes and skill-training initiatives specifically designed to bridge gaps for women entering technology-mediated labour [31].

11.4 Cross-Sector Collaboration

Collaborative governance models, linking governments, platforms, civil society, and worker associations, are emerging as viable frameworks for improving labour protections [32]. Partnerships between UN Women, national ministries, and private platforms have tested pilot schemes for safer service provision, income transparency, and social protection portability [31].

12. Policy Pathways for Women's Economic Empowerment

12.1 Social Protection Models

Integrating women gig workers into national social protection systems is a central challenge [49]. Proposed policy pathways include portable benefits schemes, contributory micro-insurance models, and hybrid arrangements jointly financed by platforms and the state [48]. ILO Recommendation 202 (2012) provides a foundational framework for extending social protection floors to informal and platform workers [49].

12.2 Safety and Mobility Enhancement

Efforts to strengthen safety within platform-based mobility services increasingly turn toward measures that acknowledge the particular vulnerabilities experienced by women [31]. Some platforms and regulators have experimented with identity verification systems, more visible journey-monitoring features, and forms of real-time assistance [47]. National initiatives in transport and city design play a quiet but influential role in this equation. Improving things like streetlights, transportation access, and pathways can make areas safer, which helps more than just the apps themselves [31]. When there are many complaints of harassment, government officials want platforms to act faster, which means they might start temporarily kicking off users who cause problems repeatedly [32]. These approaches remain uneven across jurisdictions, yet they illustrate how platform governance, urban policy, and gendered experiences of mobility intersect in practice [30].

12.3 Algorithmic Regulation

Policy proposals increasingly focus on algorithmic fairness [47]. These frameworks draw inspiration from the EU Platform Work Directive and the OECD AI Principles, both of which highlight transparency, accountability, and non-discrimination [32].

12.4 Economic Empowerment

High-impact interventions include subsidised digital skills training, access to credit and micro-finance, and formal recognition of gig-based care work [31]. Platforms may be encouraged to adopt equitable pricing algorithms, transparent commission structures, and systems that reward skill advancement [47]. Women's access to financial identity remains a major determinant of their upward mobility within platform ecosystems [48].

12.5 Strengthening Legal Identity

Revising national labour codes to cover platform work, establishing clear criteria for determining employment status, and imposing minimum standards for worker protection form the backbone of legal identity enhancement [49]. Hybrid models recognizing gig workers as "dependent contractors" have gained traction as a pragmatic compromise [30]. These reforms can be aligned with the ILO Decent Work Agenda and CEDAW standards [32].

13. QARMA: Questions for Consideration

1. To what extent should platforms be held responsible for conditions that expose women workers to harm?
2. How can the state be responsible in ensuring fair labor practices and adequate representation of women in the workforce?
3. How should labour law adapt to algorithmic management?
4. What criteria can be used to assess whether a platform's safety measures meaningfully address gendered risks?
5. How can regulatory frameworks support women's autonomy in the gig economy without reinforcing paternalistic oversight?
6. How can women in digital labour markets lead worker representation in ways that place their voices at the core?
7. What distinctions should be made between safety concerns rooted in platform design and those that arise from broader urban or social environments?
8. How can states encourage platform accountability across borders when services operate transnationally and regulations remain uneven?

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