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Digital Labour Platforms and Women's Political Empowerment: A Systematic Review Comparing South Asia and Africa

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<p>Dr. Abdul Rehman Khan* Educationist, Researcher, and Development Professional; Former Pro Vice Chancellor – BUISTEMS Email: arkhan.uw@gmail.com</p> <p>Hajira M. Ali PhD. Scholar – National University of Modern Language (NUML)</p>	<p>Abstract</p> <p>The proliferation of digital labour platforms across the Global South has generated substantial scholarly attention regarding women's economic participation; however, the relationship between platform work and political empowerment remains inadequately theorised. This systematic review synthesises 30+ studies (2015–2025) examining how women's platform work relates to political empowerment in South Asia and Africa. Employing Kabeer's empowerment framework alongside feminist political economy perspectives, three principal findings emerge. First, platform work provides economic agency but rarely translates automatically into political empowerment. Second, digital technologies simultaneously enable algorithmic control and create spaces for political organising, mediated by digital literacy, collective organising capacity, and institutional frameworks. Third, significant regional variations exist, for example, South Asia demonstrates greater formal representation through quota systems alongside persistent patriarchal barriers, whilst Africa exhibits higher organic mobilisation despite variable institutional support. The findings challenge instrumentalist assumptions about economic participation as a straightforward pathway to political voice, suggesting that transformative empowerment requires simultaneous multi-domain changes alongside collective organising and institutional reform. Policy implications emphasise gender-responsive platform regulation, integrated empowerment interventions, and investment in care infrastructure.</p>
<p>Keywords:</p>	<p>Platform Economy, Digital Labour, Women's Empowerment, Political Participation, Pakistan, South Asia, Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Gender Quotas</p>



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Introduction

1.1 Background

The platform economy has emerged as a consequential global economic transformation, with valuations reaching \$250 billion in 2025 (ILO, 2024). In South Asia and Africa, digital labour platforms are restructuring traditional labour markets whilst simultaneously creating new opportunities for women's economic participation. Yet a critical question persists: does women's platform work translate into meaningful political empowerment, or does it merely reconfigure gendered subordination within new digital forms?

Women's political empowerment is a multi-dimensional construct encompassing formal representation, substantive participation in decision-making, political consciousness, collective organising capacity, and policy influence (Kabeer, 1999; Sundström et al., 2017). Whilst a growing body of research examines women's economic participation in platform work (Ghosh et al., 2022; Nair, 2024), the nexus between economic agency and political empowerment remains largely uncharted, particularly in comparative Global South contexts.

Three developments underscore the salience of this gap. First, platform work is expanding rapidly in both regions, with women comprising significant proportions of workers in domestic services, beauty, and microwork sectors. In South Asia, where female labour force participation stands at approximately 22% compared to 77% for men (World Bank, 2024), platform work potentially represents a transformative economic opportunity. African women, moreover, could add over \$300 billion to e-commerce markets by 2030 (McKinsey, 2023). Second, both regions have achieved advances in formal political representation through quotas and affirmative action, yet substantial gaps persist between formal representation and substantive power. Pakistan increased women's parliamentary representation from 2% to 15% between 2000 and 2024 through reserved seats, whilst simultaneously ranking 145th of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index (WEF, 2024). Sub-Saharan Africa has achieved an average political empowerment score of 22.2%, with all 36 assessed economies having women in ministerial positions, though representation varies dramatically, from Rwanda's 61% to Nigeria's 4% (International IDEA, 2024). Third, digital technologies simultaneously engender novel labour control through algorithmic management whilst potentially creating spaces for political organising. Research consistently demonstrates that women's mere presence on platforms does not automatically advance empowerment; rather, platforms have frequently re-entrenched gender inequalities (Kalla, 2022; Nair, 2024).

1.2 Research Questions

This systematic review addresses four research questions: 1) What does existing evidence reveal about women's participation patterns and experiences in digital labour platforms across South Asia and Africa? 2) What pathways, if any, connect platform work experiences to political consciousness, civic engagement, and political empowerment? 3) How do institutional contexts mediate the relationship between economic participation and political empowerment? and 4) What constitute the principal gaps in existing scholarship and priorities for future research?

1.3 Theoretical Framework

This review integrates three complementary theoretical perspectives. Kabeer's (1999, 2001) empowerment framework conceptualises empowerment as the expansion of capacity to make strategic life choices, comprising resources (material and social assets), agency (capacity to define goals and act upon them), and achievements (well-being outcomes). Crucially, resources alone do not guarantee empowerment; transformation depends upon the exercise of agency within social and institutional contexts.

Feminist political economy interrogates whether gendered economic participation challenges patriarchal power or merely incorporates women into existing hierarchies on unequal terms (Elson, 1995; Benería, 2003). This perspective emphasises that genuine empowerment requires collective action, institutional reform, and fundamental restructuring of power relations, not simply individual economic gains.

Platform capitalism theory (Smicek, 2017; van Doorn, 2017) examines how algorithmic management shapes worker subjectivity and collective organising capacity, highlighting contradictions between flexibility rhetoric and precarity reality, and between networking potential and workforce atomisation. These contradictions assume distinctively gendered dimensions as women navigate platform architectures designed around historically masculine norms of work and public space.

2. Methodology

2.1 Search Strategy

Comprehensive database searches were conducted across Web of Science, Scopus, Google Scholar, JSTOR, and ProQuest (2015–2025), supplemented by grey literature searches across reports from the ILO, World Bank, UN Women, and International IDEA. Search terms combined: (platform economy OR gig economy OR digital labor) AND (women OR gender) AND (political empowerment OR political participation) AND (South Asia OR Pakistan OR India OR Africa).



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2.2 Eligibility Criteria

Studies were included if they: (1) examined women's participation in digital labour platforms; (2) addressed political participation, empowerment, or civic engagement; (3) focused on South Asia or Africa; (4) were peer-reviewed articles, reports from reputable organisations, book chapters, or dissertations; and (5) were published in English between 2015 and 2025. Studies focusing exclusively on high-income countries, or addressing only economic outcomes without political dimensions, were excluded.

2.3 Study Selection and Quality Assessment

Following PRISMA guidelines (Page et al., 2021), initial searches yielded 247 records. After removing 63 duplicates, 184 titles and abstracts were screened, yielding 51 full-text articles for review. Following quality assessment using adapted Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) criteria, around 30 studies met the inclusion criteria. Quality assessment examined methodological rigour, transparency of reporting, and contribution to knowledge on the research questions.

2.4 Synthesis Approach

Given the heterogeneity in study designs and research questions, narrative synthesis (Popay et al., 2006) was employed alongside thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify patterns, contradictions, and emergent themes across the corpus. This approach accommodates the diversity of methods, i.e. qualitative, quantitative, and mixed, whilst enabling systematic comparison.

3. Findings

3.1 Study Characteristics

The 30+ included studies were from South Asia (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh), Africa (Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Nigeria), including multi-country comparative studies. Methodological approaches included qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods designs.

3.2 Women's Participation in Platform Work

South Asia. Platform work holds particular significance in South Asia given persistently low female labour force participation. Women engage primarily due to economic necessity combined with the flexibility that enables reconciliation of care obligations with paid work (Majid & Mustafa, 2022; Ghosh et al., 2022). In India, platforms such as Meesho have enabled homemakers to enter commerce whilst negotiating social permissions for home-based work (Kumar & Sikdar, 2021). However, occupational segregation persists, such as women are concentrated in domestic work, beauty, and care services, whilst men dominate ride-hailing and delivery (Abraham, 2023). Multiple structural barriers constrain participation, including limited digital infrastructure access, safety concerns restricting night work, gender pay gaps, income irregularity, and the persistent burden of domestic responsibilities (Ghosh et al., 2022; Nair, 2024). Critically, platform work often demands resources from women in ways that prove incompatible with wellbeing, with many experiencing harassment and violence associated with public presence.

Africa. Platform work emerged in Africa against a backdrop of widespread informal employment, with over half of working women engaged in traditional informal sectors lacking wages, legal protections, or social recognition (ILO, 2023). Women's participation is driven by economic necessity and perceptions of platforms as potentially formalising and dignifying labour. However, concerns persist about the reproduction of informal work's precarity in digital forms (Kalla, 2022). Significant variation exists across countries in digital infrastructure, regulatory frameworks, cultural attitudes, and political stability. Platform design choices affect women differentially: safety features frequently malfunction, whilst onboarding fees and punitive rating systems erode worker autonomy (Kalla, 2022; Bailur et al., 2022).

3.3 Algorithmic Control and Worker Agency

Six of seven major platform companies deploy opaque algorithms for work allocation and pay determination, with workers often unaware of their remuneration until a job is completed (ILO, 2024). This black box management model creates profound information asymmetries that raise fundamental questions about exploitation and labour rights. Platform workers experience novel forms of precarity, such as no employment contracts, exclusion from social protection, absence of collective bargaining rights, unpredictable income streams, and limited legal recourse (Ghosh et al., 2022). These conditions prove particularly acute for women who rely on platform work as survival strategies whilst simultaneously managing care responsibilities.

Paradoxically, experiences of algorithmic control generate political consciousness amongst some women workers, who develop critical awareness of power imbalances, question algorithmic fairness, recognise common interests with other precarious workers, and articulate demands for regulation (Majid & Mustafa, 2022; Abraham, 2023). However, platform work's atomised structure, with workers geographically dispersed, lacking shared workplaces, and competing for assignments, substantially inhibits collective organising. Traditional trade unions, designed for stable workplace environments, prove ill-suited for representing platform workers (ILO, 2024).



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3.4 Digital Technologies as Ambivalent Spaces

Evidence from both regions demonstrates women leveraging digital technologies, particularly social media, to enhance political voice, even as these same technologies enable exploitation and surveillance.

South Asia. Women utilise WhatsApp groups and Facebook platforms to share rights information, organise support networks, discuss political issues, and challenge gender norms (Majid & Mustafa, 2022). Mobile device access varies substantially across work types, with home-based workers demonstrating higher ownership rates and more extensive use of digital tools for networking and information-sharing.

Africa. Evidence regarding social media's political empowerment role proves particularly robust in this region. Kenya's Mzalendo platform connects women with elected officials and provides civic engagement training. Nigeria's SheVotes initiative uses artificial intelligence for voter identification and civic education. South Africa's Code for Africa develops civic technology tools tracking gender equality legislation. Rwanda's Ministry of Gender utilises digital platforms for rights awareness campaigns (International IDEA, 2024). Cross-national research across 48 African nations confirms that social media usage positively correlates with women's political empowerment, though this relationship is mediated by ICT infrastructure, electricity access, political stability, and human capital (Bankole & Adigun, 2021). Digital literacy emerges as particularly crucial. Liberian female politicians who received social media training reported increased voter reach, enhanced visibility of community work, improved campaign effectiveness, and heightened political confidence (International IDEA, 2024).

Notwithstanding these positive findings, the digital divide remains formidable, with rural and lower socioeconomic status women facing severely limited access to the infrastructure necessary for digital engagement.

3.5 From Economic Agency to Political Empowerment: The Missing Link

Platform work may provide some degree of economic independence with potential effects on household decision-making. However, this economic agency faces substantial limitations. For instance, low and irregular earnings that constrain genuine financial independence; continued domestic care responsibilities that limit time and energy for political activities; precarity that generates vulnerability rather than security; and the absence of collective organising spaces that could facilitate mobilisation (Ghosh et al., 2022; World Bank, 2024).

The pathway from platform work to political empowerment appears fundamentally mediated by collective organising capacity. Multiple studies emphasise that individual economic gains alone do not challenge patriarchal structures; collective action and progressive alliances prove essential for transformative change (Ghosh et al., 2022; ILO, 2024). Importantly, traditional unions often exclude women's specific concerns and prove structurally ineffective for platform workers. Ghosh et al. (2022) argue compellingly that empowerment emerges not from platform work itself, but from sustained struggles around women's home lives, collective worker interests, and shared concerns as women occupying public space.

3.6 Institutional Contexts and Regional Variations

South Asia. Pakistan presents a striking paradox. Despite Vision 2025's emphasis on women's empowerment and constitutional provisions for reserved parliamentary seats, cultural and patriarchal barriers severely constrain substantive participation (World Bank, 2024). Reserved seats increased formal representation from 2% to 15%, yet Pakistan simultaneously ranks 145th of 146 countries on the Global Gender Gap Index. The Banking on Equality policy brought 37 million women into formal banking; however, mobility restrictions and barriers to public participation persist. Family support remains critical for women's political careers, whilst men's share of unpaid care work remains below 10%, compared with 27.5% globally (World Bank, 2024). Broader South Asian patterns reveal formal legal advances coexisting with profound implementation deficits. Constitutional gender equality guarantees remain inadequately enforced, quota systems increase numerical representation without necessarily enhancing substantive power, and social norms frequently override formal legal protections.

Africa. The continent demonstrates considerable heterogeneity. Political empowerment scores of 22.2% represent a 12.4 percentage point increase since 2006, with all 36 assessed economies now having women in ministerial positions and parliamentary representation averaging 26% (International IDEA, 2024). Rwanda leads globally with 61% women in parliament, attributable to constitutional quotas introduced following the genocide. Bauer and Burnet's (2013) comparative research on Botswana and Rwanda provides crucial insights. In democratic Botswana, quota campaigns raised awareness but failed to secure adoption, and women's representation remains low and declining. Conversely, in Rwanda's more constrained political environment, constitutional quotas combined with voluntary party quotas have yielded a majority-female lower house, the only such parliament globally. These findings challenge assumptions that democratic institutions automatically advance women's representation.



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Kenya presents instructive lessons regarding quota implementation challenges. The 2010 Constitution mandated that no single gender holds more than two-thirds of positions. However, few women won seats in the 2013 and 2017 elections, prompting parties to fulfill requirements by nominating hundreds of women as county assembly members (Bouka et al., 2020). Research reveals that whilst nominated members benefit from attaining office, quota mechanisms do not directly facilitate the cultivation of longer-term political careers. Women politicians practice what Mwende (2022) terms *matronage*, meaning distributing resources to boost visibility and support women's leadership. Yet this practice is frequently rendered invisible or characterised as morally suspect. Nigeria, Africa's largest democracy, presents its own paradox: size and continental influence without corresponding progress on gender equality. Women hold only 4% of parliamentary seats and deeply entrenched cultural and religious practices continue to undermine rights, with piecemeal reform efforts consistently impeded by conservative resistance (International IDEA, 2024).

Comparative Insights. Across both regions, platform work provides economic opportunities but not automatic empowerment. Digital technologies create new spaces for civic engagement, patriarchal norms constrain participation, care responsibilities limit available time, and safety concerns restrict mobility. Key differences include South Asia's greater reliance on formal quota systems; Africa's evidence of stronger organic mobilisation growth; more developed digital infrastructure in urban South Asian contexts; greater variability in political stability across Africa; and more severe cultural restrictions on mobility in parts of South Asia.

3.7 Policy Interventions

The reviewed literature identifies several categories of potentially effective intervention. Regarding platform regulation, these include standard employment terms, algorithmic transparency requirements, minimum wage protections, social security extension, and anti-discrimination provisions (ILO, 2024; Nair, 2024). UN Women's (2019) toolkit for gender-responsive employment in South Asian migrant work provides adaptable models. With respect to digital infrastructure and literacy, interventions include expanding affordable internet access, comprehensive digital skills training, device access subsidies, and functional safety features (International IDEA, 2024). The World Bank (2024) documents that each percentage point increase in preschool enrolment raises women's labour force participation by one-tenth of a percentage point in South Asia, highlighting the importance of care infrastructure investment through comprehensive childcare and eldercare services, paternity leave policies, and formal recognition of unpaid care work.

Regarding integrated approaches, evidence supports explicitly linking economic and political empowerment initiatives, incorporating political literacy into economic programmes, supporting collective organising, creating pathways from economic to political participation, and establishing mentorship connections between women entrepreneurs and political office-holders. Electoral and legal reforms should encompass effective quota design with minimum proportions and robust enforcement mechanisms, party-level implementation requirements, elimination of discriminatory laws, and sustained attention to violence against women in politics.

4. Discussion

4.1 Principal Findings

This review of the selected studies reveals complex, non-linear relationships between women's platform work and political empowerment. Three overarching findings emerge. First, economic agency proves necessary but insufficient for political empowerment. Platform work provides income and potentially improved household bargaining power, yet this economic participation rarely translates automatically into political consciousness or substantive empowerment. Work quality matters profoundly. Precarious, low-paid platform work with opaque algorithmic control may actually reinforce rather than challenge gendered subordination. This supports Kabber's (1999) framework demonstrating that resources alone do not guarantee agency or achievements; the transformation of economic resources into expanded political choices depends critically upon collective organising capacity, supportive institutional environments, and sustained challenges to patriarchal norms.

This finding challenges the instrumentalist development policy assumptions that economic integration automatically empowers women. Merely incorporating women into labour markets without addressing structural barriers, care burdens, and entrenched power imbalances proves insufficient aligning with feminist political economy critiques emphasising that women's economic participation can reproduce rather than transform gendered hierarchies (Elson, 1995; Benería, 2003).

Second, digital technologies embody contradictions that manifest simultaneously as control and potential liberation. Platforms enable novel labour control through opaque algorithmic management whilst creating spaces for information-sharing, networking, and political expression. This paradox reflects broader tensions within platform capitalism (Srnicsek, 2017; van Doorn, 2017). Technologies enabling employers to monitor and discipline workers also enable workers to communicate, organise, and resist. Critically, digital literacy and infrastructure access mediate whether women can leverage these technologies for empowerment. The digital divide operates not merely as a technological problem but as a manifestation of deeper structural inequalities along gender, class, urban-rural, and North-South axes. Addressing these divides requires not simply distributing

devices and connectivity, but challenging the power relations determining who designs technologies, whose needs they serve, and how they integrate into broader political-economic systems.

Third, institutional contexts critically shape outcomes in complex and sometimes counter-intuitive ways. Comparison between regions illuminates that formal democratic institutions and constitutional quotas do not guarantee substantive empowerment if cultural barriers remain deeply entrenched, as Pakistan's paradox illustrates. Conversely, less democratic systems may under specific historical conditions achieve higher formal representation, as Rwanda demonstrates (Bauer & Burnet, 2013). These findings caution against simplistic narratives about democracy automatically advancing women's rights, whilst highlighting that authoritarian contexts achieving numerical representation may simultaneously lack the accountability mechanisms necessary to ensure that representatives actually advance women's material interests. Quota effectiveness depends fundamentally upon design features, enforcement mechanisms, political will, and the broader institutional ecosystem within which they operate.

4.2 Policy Implications

The evidence presents several critical policy implications. Gender-responsive platform regulation must address gendered dimensions including worker safety, algorithmic transparency, social protection extension, and anti-discrimination enforcement. Critically, regulation should emerge from meaningful consultation with women platform workers themselves, ensuring their lived experiences and priorities shape policy design.

Integrated programming should explicitly link economic participation with political consciousness-raising, civic education, collective organising support, and pathways to representation. Fragmented approaches that treat economic and political empowerment as separate domains prove consistently less effective than integrated interventions.

Women's political empowerment fundamentally requires addressing unequal distributions of care responsibility. Comprehensive, affordable care infrastructure represents a prerequisite rather than a supplementary concern. Without substantively addressing care burdens, women's time and energy for political participation will remain severely constrained regardless of economic opportunities.

Given the substantial contextual variation documented in this review, context-specific solutions are essential. Pakistan's challenges differ substantially from Rwanda's; urban India confronts different structural issues than rural Kenya. Policy development should meaningfully involve local stakeholders, particularly women from marginalised communities, ensuring that solutions emerge from rather than being imposed upon affected populations.

Finally, rather than individualising empowerment, policies should support collective organising by women platform workers, protecting rights of association and collective bargaining, supporting new organisational forms suited to platform work characteristics, and ensuring regulatory frameworks accommodate rather than obstruct organising efforts.

5. Conclusion

This systematic review provides the first comprehensive synthesis examining relationships between women's platform work and political empowerment in South Asia and Africa. Analysis of the selected studies reveals that whilst platform work creates new economic opportunities, pathways to substantive political empowerment remain circuitous, contingent, and mediated by multiple structural and agential factors.

Neither economic integration through platform work nor formal representation through quotas alone suffices for genuine empowerment. Transformative change requires integrated approaches simultaneously addressing economic, social, and political domains, with particular attention to collective organising capacity, care infrastructure, digital literacy, institutional reform, and sustained challenges to patriarchal norms.

Future research should prioritise longitudinal studies examining how platform work experiences shape political trajectories over time. Systematic comparative studies illuminating how different contexts produce divergent outcomes. Intersectional analyses examining how multiple forms of marginalisation interact with gender. Mechanism studies investigating the processes linking economic agency with political consciousness. Rigorous policy evaluations employing experimental or quasi-experimental designs, research examining sectors beyond ride-hailing and domestic work, studies examining women's resistance and agency strategies, research investigating men's perceptions and responses to women's political participation, examination of generational differences in political engagement; and reflexive scholarship examining researchers' own positionality.

As platform economies proliferate across the Global South and debates about women's participation intensify, understanding the connections between economic participation and political empowerment becomes increasingly urgent. This review demonstrates that platform work carries neither inherently liberatory nor inevitably oppressive implications. Rather, outcomes depend upon, i) the integration of platform work within broader production and social reproduction systems, ii) the institutional contexts structuring opportunities and constraints, iii) women's individual and collective agency, and iv) deliberate efforts to connect economic participation with political consciousness and mobilisation.



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The question confronting scholars, policymakers, and activists is not simply whether platform work empowers women, but rather under what conditions might platform work contribute to broader projects of gender justice, economic democracy, and substantive political empowerment? Answering this question requires moving beyond individualised framings toward structural analyses, beyond technocratic solutions toward political mobilisation, and beyond academic abstraction toward engaged scholarship that contributes to social transformation movements.

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