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Where have all the women gone?

The gender gap in Ghana's gig economy

ABSTRACT

The Ghanaian tech industry clearly shows a noticeable gap between men and women, where men outnumber women by a ratio of 80 to 20 (Digital Times Africa, 2021). As such, the participation of men in the gig economy in Ghana relative to that of women calls for an inquiry. Hence, this paper concentrates on identifying the various challenges preventing women from participating in the gig economy in Ghana leading to gender disparities. A qualitative approach with an exploratory research design was used to conduct this study, and a thematic approach to data analysis was adopted to provide an in-depth understanding. Some challenges identified were social and cultural expectations, and insecurities. One of the significant recommendations is to address cultural stereotypes from the grassroots by engaging traditional leaders and rulers in promoting women's participation in ICT jobs. It is noted that the involvement of women in the gig economy can have beneficial impact on social mobility, productivity, gender equality, job generation, work-life balance, and economic empowerment in Ghana.

KEYWORDS

gig economy, platform work, gender disparity, women, Ghana

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LICENCE

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1 INTRODUCTION

The gig economy is commonly defined as a set of economic activities, often mediated through digital platforms, that enable workers to provide services to clients on a demand basis (Katz and Krueger 2016). Although the term "gig(s)" initially referred to one-time musical performances in the 1920s (Zumbrun & Sussman, 2016), it is currently used in the employment and labour sector to denote short-term project-based tasks that are facilitated by technology and consulted on a temporary basis (Cutter, Litan, & Stangler, 2016; Field Nation, 2016; Kessler, 2014). Rather than committing to long-term contracts, workers are self-employed and independent, engaging with users on a temporary or short-term basis. This suggests that the new generation of gig work is not distinguished by the kind of work or skill set, but by the nature of the underlying work relationship (Friedman, 2014).

The rapid growth of platforms suggests a trend known as the "platformisation of labor and society" (Casilli and Posada, 2019). The terms "platform economy" and "gig economy" are used interchangeably to describe work done on labour platforms, which can be classified into two categories: remote work and geographically tethered work (Anwar and Graham 2022; Graham and Anwar 2018a, 2018b). While remote work can be performed on a global scale, geographically tethered work, such as ride-hailing taxis, must be completed in specific locations (Penu, 2020). Both remote and place-based work have been shown to contribute to gender-based inequalities (Anwar and Graham 2022). Extensive research has been conducted on the working conditions of platform workers, including studies on remote and place-based work in high-income countries like the UK (Cant 2019; Woodcock 2020), the US (Schor 2020), and Australia (Churchill and Craig 2019). Similarly, the platforms' impact on job-quality outcomes has been examined in low and middle-income countries, such as Brazil (Amorim and Moda 2020), India (Samuel 2020), and South Africa (Carmody and Fortuin 2019).

In the context of existing disparities in the local labour markets, in terms of gender, race, and class in Africa, there is an urgent need to engage with the platform economy-development debate. According to the ILO (2018), the overall labour force participation of women on the continent has grown over the years and the rate (53 percent) is above the world average, yet women on the continent are more likely to be in the informal sectors of the economy often characterised by unpaid and underpaid work such as agriculture and care work.

In developing countries, women are three times less likely than men to work in the ICT sector and eight times less likely to work in digital gigs (ILOSTAT 2018). Gender equality and digital development are closely connected. However, there is a significant gender gap in internet usage worldwide, with men being 21% more likely than women to be online. In low-income countries, this gap is even wider, with men being 52% more likely to be online than women (Klingen, Hammond and Sirinivasan 2021).

Similarly, in Ghana, the gender disparity in the ICT sector and digital jobs transcends Ghana's gig economy. Only about 29% percent of women can now access the internet in Ghana. In addition, it is

reported that Ghana has about a 14% gender gap in meaningful connectivity (World Wide Web Foundation 2020). Thus, men are more likely to have internet accessibility for meaningful economic gains. Furthermore, the gig economy is found to be dominated by men more than women. For instance, men are over 29% more likely to advertise or sell products and services online (World Wide Web Foundation 2020). Thus, women are in a disadvantaged position when it comes to accessing the internet for economic gains in Ghana. This disparity denies women crucial access to information, education, and participation in the gig economy. It is imperative that women are empowered with skills and resources to make use of the immense opportunities that come with access to digital technology (World Bank 2020). The increasing digitalization of all spheres of social life requires digital knowledge and skills to make impactful results. This, however, cannot be achieved when countries such as Ghana and other developing economies fail to tackle gender issues in the gig economy. As such, this paper focuses on identifying the various challenges preventing women from participating in the gig economy in Ghana leading to gender disparity. Furthermore, this paper recommends ways to improve gender parity within Ghana's gig economy.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Simple Efficiency Argument: Male and Female

Knowles et al. (2002) proposed the simple efficiency argument, which states that when perfect substitution between men and women in production is not achieved due to gender inequality, it leads to a misallocation of factors of production and negatively affects the economy. This is because men and women are two distinct inputs among the factors of production, and their participation in the gig economy cannot be substituted for each other. The theory also suggests that when there is gender inequality in education, health, employment, and access to capital, it leads to a reduction in per capita output in the long run. To achieve gender parity and increase GDP growth, it is important to increase the participation of women in education and the gig economy. Women's output elasticity of education is larger than that of men, and investing in female education has positive externalities such as reducing fertility and infant mortality and improving the quality and quantity of their children's education. The underlying argument of Knowles et al (2002) goes beyond education as it extends to health, employment, and access to capital. Thus, the theory explains the link between gender inequality and the economic growth of a country or region which fits the analysis of this study.

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design and Sampling

The research design for this study was qualitative and exploratory in nature. The sampling technique was a purposive sampling of stakeholders from specific relevant sectors of the Ghanaian economy, they included;

the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations, Ghana Innovation Hub, Meltwater Entrepreneurial School of Technology (MEST), Digital Transformation Centre Ghana, German Agency for International Cooperation, Labour Research and Policy Institute (Trades Union Congress), Ghana Drivers' Union and other relevant stakeholders across Ghana. The study employed a combination of semi-structured interviews and group discussions during a multi-stakeholder dialogue as data collection tools.

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection involved field visits to selected stakeholders with the use of an interview guide (semi-structured interviews) and group discussions to gather responses. Questions were open-ended in nature to allow respondents to provide much information on the topic. For instance, why are women less represented than men in Ghana's gig economy? What challenges do women interested in participating in Ghana's gig economy face? Why do factors hinder women in rural areas from participating in Ghana's gig economy? In total 40 participants representative of academia, business, civil society, government, and NGOs were interviewed in person, first at their place of work and later brought into a group discussions facilitated by a trained moderator which allowed for data saturation in the process. Data saturation is the point in research where more data will not lead to more information related to the research questions (Saunders et al., 2017). Responses were recorded with the permission of participants and transcribed for further analysis.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data collected through semi-structured interviews and group discussions were analysed using a semantic thematic analysis. The transcribed data from individual interviews and group discussions were brought together in one document to ensure that none of the data was missing. The data was reviewed to ascertain an overview and general understanding of the context. Some words and phrases such as "internet connects are bad in the rural areas", "internet bundle are expensive in Ghana" and "women are expected to take care of their homes" etc. were highlighted to help in creating codes and themes for analysis. Themes were generated and then compared with the data gathered to ensure consistency in data and themes. The redefined themes and write ups are presented in the results and discussion.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Geography

Geographical differences can widen the gender gap in the gig economy. A stakeholder revealed this in the panel discussion:

"The challenges women go through are even worse when you go to rural or remote communities in Ghana. They have less access to ICT gadgets and those who have even do not have knowledge on how to operate it let alone use it in economic engagements."

This report gathered from stakeholders revealed how geographical differences serve as a hindrance for women to engage in the gig economy. Out of the active population in urban Ghana, 51.4% are females, and 48.6% are males. Despite the active population dominated by women, the 2021 Population and Housing Census (PHC) of Ghana purported that males in urban Ghana who own functional ICT devices are more than females in the same geographical scope, thus, more men engaging in digital economic activities and women having less engagement digital economic activity, other factor such social and cultural expectation in some geographical locations could be accounting for this outcome. In terms of the geographical divide, the report from the population and housing census shows that the active population of rural Ghana is relatively evenly divided (female 49.6% and male 50.4%). However, comparing the internet connectivity, and active ICT communication channel, the urban centres have well-established access at the expense of the rural communities. A detailed interview and/or discussion among stakeholders confirmed that indeed geographical differences contributed to the gender gap created in the gig economy of Ghana. Adding to the woes of women, women are less likely to enrol in school in both the urban and the rural centres compared to their male counterparts (Forsgren et al., 2019). This, therefore, prevents equal opportunity for women who even have access to or own a functional ICT device to adequately take advantage of the gig economy from their location in the rural community.

4.2 Social and cultural stereotype

It was gathered that the burden of care work can result in reduced availability for women, making it difficult for them to take advantage of employment opportunities onsite and even online as women's attention is given to household activities, and can prevent them from taking up work full-time in a male-dominated sector. This is an insight gained from one of the agencies;

“Cultural attitudes towards gender roles play a significant role in perpetuating disparities in the gig economy between men and women in Ghana. Generally, women are expected to fulfill traditional gender roles, such as caring for the household and raising children, which limits their ability to engage in economic activities or even pursue education. (...)

Additionally, care work is not valued or recognized as work, leading to a lack of benefits, protections, and opportunities for career advancement for this reason most women do not pursue careers in ICT which could enhance and/or increase their chances of securing platform work.”

This view suggests that unequal distribution of care work responsibilities between men and women reinforces gender norms and roles, making it difficult for women to enter and progress in male-dominated industries such as IT in Ghana. This, in turn, perpetuates gender disparities in the workforce and perpetuates the gender discrepancies in the gig economy in Ghana. The above situation in Ghana has been emphasised by the Critical Information Systems theory with a focus on the power relations, marginality, and dominant discourses in a broader organisational and societal context and has explicitly been used to understand issues related to women and IT: for example, women's recruitment and retention in the IT field (Trauth and Howcroft 2006). The above revelation is in consonant with the work of Kwapong (2009). Her study reported that in traditional communities where access is provided in public places, socio-cultural

factors that prohibit women from sharing common places with men or impose competing demands on their time prevent them from utilising such facilities. Hence, women tend to have less access than men to ICT facilities that do exist for common use in traditional communities. Such facilities could be information centres or cybercafés. Given gender-defined multiple roles and heavy domestic responsibilities, women's leisure hours are few, and the public centres may not be open when women can visit them, or they may be open in the evenings or at night when it is riskier for women to go out. For some women, the challenge could be obtaining permission from their husbands. This, however, should not sound like women are trying to find a series of excuses to deprive themselves of using existing opportunities. A way out could be drawing schedules that will suit the lifestyle of both women and men so that both sexes can benefit equally.

4.3 Safety

Safety was also found to be one of the main challenges contributing to women's lack of participation in the gig economy. For instance, one of the respondents from one organisation engaged indicated that;

“Women are not so sure about their safety in working in the field of ICT. Most of us feel that cases of cyberbullying, scams, and fraud are very rampant on an online platform and as such we are not ready to go through such an ordeal”.

This submission serves as a demotivation for women to actively participate in the gig economy. This clearly highlights one of the barriers to gender equality in the gig economy from the perspective of Ghana. In addition, it was suggested from the panel discussion that platform work could be the cause of sexual harassment for females. For instance, ride-hailing jobs could be considered by women as side income earning opportunities but taking into account the time a user may hail a ride and the distance to be covered, women would be better off not engaging in such platform work for safety reasons.

4.4 Cost of internet and related ICT resources

Data from the field revealed that the cost of internet and ICT-related devices and services prevented women from participating in the gig economy. In almost all developing countries, communication infrastructure is weaker and less available in rural and peri-urban areas, where the majority of women tend to live (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development 2015). Especially in Ghana, internet connectivity is frequently available only within the capital and major secondary cities. Women in rural areas especially have less access to internet services as well as phones, laptops, etc. Access to the Internet, with sufficient bandwidth, is essential for participating in the gig economy. The lack of broadband connectivity is preventing the widespread use of the Internet in digital skills acquisition in many countries and this in turn limits women from participating in the gig economy. For access to be meaningful, it must also be affordable for both men and women to be able to use it to acquire digital literacy and other skills required to take up platform work.

However, the relatively high cost that comes with access to such infrastructure makes it difficult for women to be able to afford these services, therefore, giving them a smaller chance than men to access new technologies. The 2022 Earnings Inequality Report of the Ghana Statistical Service (2023) indicates that

men have a higher average monthly net salary, of GH¢2,669, whereas women have an average of GH¢2,504, it goes further to reveal that the average monthly net salary of women is lower than that of men in all 16 regions.

4.5 Lack of role models

Data gathered revealed that the lack of career mentorship in ICT and technical jobs actively deprives women of venturing into ICT education that can propel them to market their skills. One of the stakeholders purported that;

“.....Most women in the world prefer to engage in less technical jobs than men. I believe this has had to do with the fact that fewer women are found in tech-related jobs which does not motivate other women to be in that venture”.

The account from the stakeholder affirms the report of the Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (2018). The report suggested that the lack of role models has become a huge challenge at times to establish their place in the tech industry. This, according to them, provides less room to inspire young women and girls to explore possible career paths in tech.

“.....Most women in the world prefer to engage in less technical jobs than men. I believe this has had to do with the fact that fewer women are found in tech-related jobs which does not motivate other women to be in that venture”.

To summarise, this paper identifies a number of barriers which inhibit women from actively participating in Ghana's gig economy. No woman experiences just one aspect of these challenges raised but generally a plethora of them. For instance, the expense of internet and ICT-related gadgets and services, according to field data, prevents the majority of women from working in the gig economy. At the same time, women have a lower probability than men to access new technologies because of the comparatively high cost associated with access to such gadgets, which makes it difficult for them to buy these services due to societal constructs that give men leverage over their female counterparts in terms of better job acquisition. The geographical, economic, social, and security and the lack of role models together put women in an unfavourable position in accessing the gig economy in Ghana.

5 POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the identified barriers is crucial for promoting gender equality and increasing women's participation in Ghana's gig economy. The following suggestions are aimed at addressing the low participation of women in the gig economy;

1. Invest in digital skill training

The geographical inequalities may be distinct, but the challenge of low awareness of opportunities for women in the gig economy cuts across various geographical locations. Hence, the government should invest in programs that promote gender equality and women's empowerment. This may include promoting digital skills training for women across all geographical locations, increasing women's representation in leadership positions in the ICT sector to inspire more women to take up ICT courses.

2. Establish mentorship and support programs

Another key recommendation is for the government to create a women's support network focusing on mentorship and peer-support programs. This could build a supportive community for women in the gig economy and provide them with emotional, financial, and practical support.

3. Create training centres in suburban and rural areas

Decentralising training centres into districts could increase the participation of suburb dwellers. This would make it possible for the vast majority of women who reside in rural and peri-urban regions to get training aimed at enhancing their digital literacy to assist them in recognizing and maximising the benefits that using digital technologies may provide. As a result, they will be better able to understand the value of technical expertise and be more motivated to pursue gig-related employment.

4. Expand digital Infrastructure

The government and various digital skills training organisations should liaise with telecommunications companies to extend their cables and/or services to suburbs of districts to increase access to the internet and participation of women in the online labour market. While implementing computer training programs for girls and women leads to bridging the digital divide and providing women with the tools they need to participate in the gig economy.

5. Ensure safety of women online

Despite Ghana's policy framework on cyberbullying and harassment, these phenomena persist as a barrier to gender equality in the gig economy. As a policy implementation, security agencies must reinforce the framework established to protect individuals who intend to leverage ICT positively for economic empowerment. With the assurance of security and protection, women are likely to engage in such economic activity that could transcend into growth in the economy.

6. Promote gender equality

Addressing social and cultural expectations affecting women's participation in the gig economy of Ghana requires a multi-faceted approach. To influence the participation of women, there is a need to engage traditional leaders and rulers to educate them about the relevance of the gig economy in improving the economic welfare of not only women but also the entire community. This can be done through launching

awareness campaigns, engaging with the media, investing in education programs, encouraging female role models, and engaging male allies. The government can help to change cultural attitudes and social norms and promote gender equality. Doing so will create a more supportive environment for women to participate in the gig economy and help to ensure equal opportunities for all.

6 CONCLUSION

Gender inequality has a significant negative effect on women's participation in the gig economy of Ghana. Women in Ghana face barriers to education, technology, and support networks, which limit their ability to participate in the gig economy. Cultural attitudes and social norms also perpetuate discrimination against women, making it more difficult for them to participate in the gig economy. Women's participation in the gig economy has the potential to positively affect Ghana's social mobility, productivity, gender equality, job creation, work-life balance, and economic empowerment.

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