



EMPOWERMENT OR INEQUALITY? A FEMINIST POLITICAL ECONOMY ANALYSIS OF WOMEN'S WORK IN THE AI-DRIVEN GIG ECONOMY

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ABSTRACT: *Purpose: This paper analyzes how AI-driven gig platforms affect women's economic empowerment. It uses a feminist political economy framework to move beyond a simple empowerment-versus-exploitation debate and examine the structural forces at play. Design/methodology/approach: A systematic literature review and thematic synthesis of 48 peer-reviewed studies (2010–2024) were conducted to analyze the gendered dynamics of AI-mediated digital labor. Findings: The synthesis reveals a central paradox: while AI-enabled platforms can expand income opportunities and flexibility, they also reproduce and risk amplifying gender inequality through algorithmic bias, wage gaps, structural precarity, and digital marginalization. Research limitations/implications; The review highlights the need for future research to adopt a more intersectional approach, exploring how race, class, and geography interact with gender to shape platform work experiences. Practical implications: The findings call for gender-responsive platform governance, including algorithmic transparency, inclusive system design, and the extension of core labor protections to gig workers to foster more equitable outcomes. Social implications: Without intentional, gender-aware interventions in policy and design, the AI-driven gig economy is more likely to entrench existing social and economic inequalities than to alleviate them. Originality/value: This paper provides a consolidated, theory-driven synthesis of the mechanisms through which AI-mediated platforms simultaneously create opportunities and reproduce disadvantage for women, offering actionable insights for researchers, policymakers, and platform designers.*

KEYWORDS: Artificial Intelligence, Digital Labor Platforms, Feminist Political Economy, Gender Inequality, Gig Economy.



INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into digital labor platforms has fundamentally reshaped global employment. Gig work, the short-term, task-based arrangements mediated by online platforms, has become a dominant labor model in both advanced and emerging economies (Vallas & Schor, 2020; De Stefano, 2016; Kalleberg, 2009). This transformation is not merely technological but structural, reshaping how labor is organized, who gains access to income opportunities, and the conditions under which work is performed (Jain, 2024). For women, this shift presents a paradox: while platform-mediated work opens new pathways to economic participation, it simultaneously risks deepening pre-existing social and economic inequalities (Kasliwal, 2020).

On one hand, platforms like Upwork and TaskRabbit appear to expand women's access to flexible and remote work, which is especially beneficial for those facing mobility restrictions, caregiving burdens, or exclusion from formal employment (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2017). The AI systems embedded in these platforms are often credited with enhancing efficiency and reducing explicit human bias in hiring and task allocation (Sayyed et al., 2024). However, a growing body of literature warns that these same algorithmic systems can perpetuate and even amplify structural gender disparities (Renan Barzilay, 2019). When trained on biased historical data, algorithms can reproduce discriminatory patterns in their automated decisions (Zuiderveen Borgesius, 2018), channeling women into lower-paid, care-oriented, or routinized tasks and thereby limiting their access to leadership roles (Müller & Granat, 2020; Chen, 2024). Moreover, by classifying workers as independent contractors, platforms deny them labor protections, social benefits, and collective bargaining rights—a practice that disproportionately affects women (Cutolo & Kenney, 2021; Cherry, 2021; Elson, 1999).

To reconcile these perspectives, this study adopts the feminist political economy (FPE) framework. Rather than treating platform work as a neutral market transaction, FPE foregrounds how power, social reproduction, and gendered norms shape who benefits from technological change (Ruiz García, 2022). This perspective reveals how platform governance can mask, and sometimes deepen, inequality while celebrating “flexibility.” In this view, algorithmic management and weak regulatory oversight concentrate control with platforms while externalizing risk onto workers (van Doorn, 2023). This lens is particularly valuable for understanding why women remain overrepresented in precarious, lower-paid roles yet underrepresented in the technical and leadership positions that shape how AI systems are built and governed (Graham et al., 2017; Gray & Suri, 2019).

Although research on digital labor has expanded rapidly, no clear consensus exists on how AI-enabled gig platforms affect women's economic empowerment, particularly in Global South contexts. Following Kabear's conceptualization (1999, 2005), economic empowerment is defined here as women's ability to make and act on economic choices, build security, and participate in labor markets on terms that strengthen agency and well-being (Wekwete, 2014). Much of the literature treats platform labor as gender-neutral or examines gig work in aggregate, leaving the gendered implications of AI-mediated platforms underexplored (Wajcman, 2020; Woodcock, 2019). To address this gap, this research asks: How do AI-driven gig platforms shape women's economic empowerment?



This study makes three contributions. First, it consolidates empirical and conceptual work on women's participation in AI-enabled gig labor, mapping what is known and where evidence gaps remain. Second, it highlights the mechanisms through which platform design and algorithmic management simultaneously create opportunities and reproduce disadvantage, moving beyond a simple "empowerment versus exploitation" framing. Third, it translates the synthesis into actionable implications for platform developers and regulators seeking to make AI systems more inclusive, transparent, and equitable.

Overall, the analysis challenges overly optimistic narratives about flexibility by distinguishing the conditions under which platform work supports women's economic agency from those under which it erodes it. The central implication is clear: without gender-aware governance and intentional design choices, AI-mediated gig work is more likely to entrench existing inequalities than to reduce them.

METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review (SLR) was conducted to synthesize evidence on the intersection of AI, gig work, and women's economic empowerment. The review is framed by feminist political economy, which foregrounds the structural and intersectional character of labor inequality (Elson, 1999; van Doorn, 2023). To support transparency and replicability, the reporting followed PRISMA 2020 guidance (Page et al., 2021).

Eligibility Criteria

To ensure the quality and relevance of the reviewed literature, predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied in line with the research question (Table 1). These criteria guided both screening phases.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Used for Study Selection

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer-reviewed journal articles • Published between January 2010 and January 2025 • Focused on at least two of the following: AI/algorithmic systems, gig work, gender • Included empirical or conceptual studies • Clearly addressed women's economic empowerment, labor inequality, or digital exclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-peer-reviewed formats (e.g., blogs, editorials) • Not published in English • Focused solely on gig work or AI without connecting to labor or gender • Purely technical/machine-learning studies • Superficial mention of gender without analytical depth



Search Strategy and Databases

Searches were conducted in the following databases:

1. Scopus
2. Web of Science
3. JSTOR

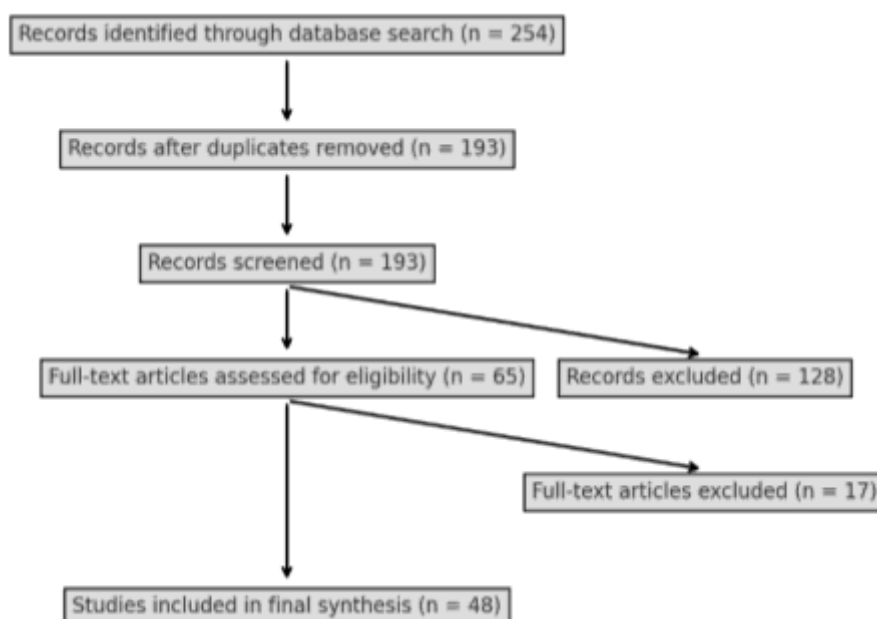
The search was conducted between January 10, 2025 and April 15, 2025, using Boolean operators (Zohuri & Moghaddam, 2017), with the primary query string: ("gig economy" OR "platform work" OR "digital labor") AND ("artificial intelligence" OR "AI" OR "algorithmic management") AND ("women" OR "gender" OR "female empowerment"). Results were filtered to the fields of social sciences, labor studies, feminist technology studies, and digital governance.

Screening and Selection

The initial search yielded 254 records, of which 61 duplicates were removed, resulting in 193 unique articles for title and abstract screening. Of these, 65 articles were retained for full-text assessment, and 48 met the eligibility criteria for inclusion.

Screening was conducted independently by two reviewers. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Cohen's Kappa ($\kappa = 0.81$), indicating strong agreement between reviewers (McHugh, 2012). Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and re-evaluation against the predefined inclusion criteria. The study selection process is summarized in the PRISMA 2020 flow diagram (Figure 1).

Fig. 1. PRISMA flow diagram





Data Extraction

Data from the 48 included studies were extracted using a structured matrix in Microsoft Excel. Each study was coded across the following fields:

- Author(s) and year of publication
- Country or region of focus
- Type of gig platform (e.g., ride-hailing, freelancing, micro-tasking)
- Research design and methodology (e.g., qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, conceptual)
- Core findings relevant to gender and AI-driven gig work
- Explicit mentions of algorithmic bias, wage inequality, or digital exclusion
- Policy or platform-level recommendations (if available)

To ensure consistency and reliability, both reviewers independently extracted data from an initial subset of 10 studies and compared results. Following a high level of agreement, the remaining studies were divided between the reviewers, with periodic cross-checking conducted to maintain consistency. Any discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Quality Appraisal

Methodological rigor was evaluated using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) (Hong et al., 2018), which is appropriate for reviews incorporating qualitative, quantitative, and mixed-methods studies. Each study was assessed against the MMAT criteria relevant to its methodological design.

For transparency, studies were categorized based on the proportion of criteria met:

- High quality: $\geq 80\%$ of criteria satisfied
- Medium quality: 50–79%
- Low quality: $< 50\%$

Only studies rated as medium or high quality were included in the final synthesis. Quality appraisal was conducted independently by two reviewers, with disagreements resolved through discussion. While no studies were excluded solely on the basis of quality, appraisal outcomes informed the interpretation of findings, particularly in weighing the strength of evidence. A sample of the appraisal outcomes is presented in Appendix A.

Data Synthesis Approach

A narrative thematic synthesis was applied, following Thomas and Harden (2008), through a three-step process:

1. Open coding of all included studies for gendered labor outcomes related to AI-driven gig platforms



2. Clustering codes into higher-order analytical categories based on patterns and recurring concerns
3. Developing overarching themes across the dataset

To enhance analytical rigor, themes were iteratively refined and cross-checked between the reviewers to ensure consistency and to capture both convergent and divergent findings across studies.

RESULTS

The review of 48 peer-reviewed studies identified five interrelated themes shaping how AI-driven gig platforms influence women's economic empowerment. Rather than indicating a linear trajectory toward empowerment or exploitation, the findings reveal a persistent tension between expanded labour market access and the reproduction of structural inequalities. These dynamics are discussed below.

1. Economic Flexibility and Conditional Empowerment

Across the literature, AI-mediated gig platforms are consistently associated with increased labor market access and flexibility for women, particularly in contexts where formal employment is constrained (Barzilay & Ben-David, 2017; Graham et al., 2017). Flexible scheduling and remote work enable women to engage in paid labor while managing caregiving responsibilities, a benefit observed across both Global North and Global South contexts. For example, Foong et al. (2021) highlight how platform-based work enables women in Southeast Asia to participate in income-generating activities within existing domestic constraints.

However, this flexibility is conditional rather than inherently empowering. While some studies emphasize autonomy, others demonstrate that many women prioritize income stability over flexibility. Rahman and Shadid (2024), for instance, show that workers in constrained labor markets often prefer predictable earnings, challenging dominant narratives of flexibility as empowerment. This suggests that flexibility frequently operates as a trade-off, exchanged for income security. Access to these opportunities is also uneven. Women with lower digital literacy or limited technological access are less able to benefit from platform work (West et al., 2019). Taken together, the evidence suggests that gig work expands participation but does not guarantee meaningful or equitable economic empowerment.

2. Algorithmic Bias and the Reproduction of Gender Inequality

A central finding across studies is that algorithmic systems, despite being framed as neutral, frequently reproduce existing gender inequalities (van Doorn, 2017; Barzilay & Ben-David, 2017). Rather than eliminating bias, AI-driven systems often embed historical patterns into task allocation and evaluation processes.

Evidence indicates that women are disproportionately concentrated in lower-paid, feminized roles such as content moderation or administrative support (Gray & Suri, 2019). At the same time, the opacity of algorithmic systems limits workers' ability to understand or challenge these outcomes (Raghavan et al., 2020). This lack of transparency is particularly consequential in



environments where performance metrics and ratings influence access to work (Rosenblat, 2019).

Importantly, several studies frame algorithmic bias not as a technical flaw but as a structural issue rooted in data and platform design (Noble, 2018). This suggests that without intentional intervention, AI systems are likely to scale and reinforce existing inequalities, rather than mitigate them.

3. Persistent Wage Inequality in “Merit-Based” Systems

Despite claims of meritocracy, the literature consistently identifies gender-based wage disparities across gig platforms (Heikkilä et al., 2024). Women earn less than men for comparable work, particularly in contexts where compensation is individually negotiated or algorithmically determined (Cook et al., 2018).

Empirical studies point to multiple, overlapping drivers of this gap. For instance, Lehdonvirta (2018) documents a “price penalty” faced by female freelancers in digital labor markets. Structural constraints, including caregiving responsibilities and reduced working hours, further contribute to income disparities (Sundararajan, 2016). At the same time, platform opacity plays a critical role. Algorithmic pricing systems obscure how wages are determined, limiting workers’ ability to assess or contest fairness (Dubal, 2020). This indicates that wage inequality is not incidental but structurally embedded within platform governance mechanisms.

4. Structural Precarity and Gendered Job Insecurity

The literature consistently highlights that the flexibility offered by gig platforms is accompanied by significant employment insecurity. Workers are classified as independent contractors and are therefore excluded from basic labor protections such as maternity leave, health insurance, and income security (De Stefano, 2016; Cherry, 2021).

For women, this precarity is amplified by existing labor market inequalities. Studies show that women are overrepresented in informal and part-time work, making them particularly vulnerable to income instability (Kessler, 2018). Platform-based labor does not eliminate these vulnerabilities but often reconfigures them in digital form. Algorithmic management further intensifies this insecurity by controlling access to work and monitoring performance (Graham et al., 2017; Rosenblat, 2019). In the absence of effective grievance mechanisms, workers have limited capacity to challenge decisions or negotiate conditions. As Zhou (2021) argues, this combination of algorithmic control and regulatory gaps deepens worker disempowerment, particularly for women.

5. The Digital Divide and Layered Exclusion

Access to AI-mediated gig work is shaped by significant disparities in digital infrastructure and skills. Women, particularly in the Global South, face lower rates of internet access, smartphone ownership, and digital literacy (Hunt & Samman, 2019; ITU, 2021).

However, the digital divide extends beyond technical access. Social and cultural constraints also shape women’s ability to participate in digital labor markets. In many contexts, access to technology is mediated by gender norms and household dynamics (UN Women, 2021).



Ndungu (2023) demonstrates that caregiving responsibilities and cultural expectations often limit women's engagement with platform work, even when access is available.

Platform design may further reinforce exclusion. Interfaces and algorithmic systems that are not inclusive or representative can create additional barriers to participation (Noble, 2018). As a result, digital inclusion requires more than access; it depends on both equitable design and supportive social conditions.

Synthesis of Findings

Taken together, these themes highlight a central contradiction: AI-driven gig platforms simultaneously expand women's access to income-generating opportunities while reproducing structural inequalities in less visible, algorithmically mediated ways. The evidence does not support a binary interpretation of empowerment versus exploitation. Instead, it points to a conditional and uneven form of empowerment, shaped by platform governance, technological design, and broader socio-economic structures.

DISCUSSION

This review points to a clear tension at the heart of the AI-driven gig economy. On the one hand, digital platforms have expanded access to income-generating opportunities for many women. On the other, the evidence shows just as consistently that these platforms tend to reproduce—often in less visible, algorithmically mediated ways—the same inequalities they are sometimes assumed to reduce. From a feminist political economy perspective, this is perhaps not surprising: technological systems rarely operate outside existing power structures; more often, they reorganize them.

Flexibility: Opportunity, but at What Cost?

Flexibility is frequently presented as the defining advantage of gig work, and the literature does support the idea that many women value the ability to work around caregiving responsibilities or social constraints. In contexts where formal employment is limited, this kind of access can be meaningful. At the same time, the findings suggest that flexibility should be treated with some caution. It often comes alongside income instability, lack of protections, and limited long-term security. For some women, this trade-off may be acceptable—or even necessary—but it complicates the idea that flexibility is inherently empowering. A more accurate reading of the evidence is that empowerment in this context is conditional, shaped by the broader economic and social environment rather than guaranteed by platform access alone.

Algorithmic Systems and the Reproduction of Inequality

Another consistent theme across the literature is the role of algorithmic systems in structuring work and opportunity. While these systems are often framed as neutral or efficiency-enhancing, the evidence suggests they can reproduce existing gender biases through task allocation, evaluation, and pricing. What makes this particularly difficult to address is the opacity of these systems. Workers are rarely able to see how decisions are made, let alone challenge them. In this sense, algorithmic management is not just a technical feature of platforms but a form of governance—one that shifts control toward the platform while limiting worker agency. From



this perspective, the issue is less about isolated instances of bias and more about how inequality becomes embedded in everyday platform operations.

Uneven Experiences and the Limits of a Single Narrative

The review also makes it clear that women's experiences of platform work are far from uniform. Access to digital infrastructure, levels of digital literacy, and social norms all shape how—and whether—women can participate in gig work. In particular, the digital divide remains a significant constraint, especially in Global South contexts. But access alone does not resolve the issue. Even where technology is available, cultural expectations, caregiving responsibilities, and platform design can all limit meaningful participation. This suggests that treating “women” as a single category risks overlooking important differences in how platform work is experienced.

Policy and Practical Recommendations

The findings of this review point to several areas where intervention may help address the structural issues identified. These recommendations are grounded in the patterns observed across the literature rather than in isolated cases.

1. Improving Transparency in Algorithmic Systems

Given the role that opaque algorithms play in shaping outcomes, greater transparency would be an important step. This could involve providing workers with clearer information about how tasks are allocated, how performance is evaluated, and how pay is determined.

Just as importantly, there should be mechanisms that allow workers to question or challenge decisions. Without this, transparency risks becoming symbolic rather than meaningful.

2. Designing Platforms with Gender in Mind

The evidence suggests that platform design is not neutral. Decisions about interface, data, and system logic can all have gendered effects, even when that is not the intention. In practical terms, this means involving more diverse users in design processes, conducting regular bias audits, and ensuring that systems are usable across different levels of digital literacy. These are not purely technical adjustments—they are design choices that shape who benefits from the platform.

3. Extending Basic Labor Protections

One of the clearest findings across the literature is the extent of insecurity associated with gig work. Addressing this likely requires policy intervention, particularly around worker classification and access to basic protections. Extending measures such as minimum wage standards, maternity protections, and social security access would not eliminate all forms of precarity, but it would reduce some of the more immediate risks faced by workers, especially women.

4. Addressing the Digital Divide More Broadly

Efforts to improve digital access remain important, but the findings suggest that access alone is not sufficient. Digital inclusion also depends on skills, affordability, and the social conditions



that shape technology use. This points to the need for more comprehensive approaches, including investment in infrastructure, targeted training programs, and policies that address the broader constraints on women's participation.

5. Moving Toward More Inclusive AI Governance

Finally, the review highlights the importance of how data and algorithms are governed. If training data reflects existing inequalities, and if systems are not regularly evaluated for bias, then disparities are likely to persist. A more inclusive approach would involve ongoing monitoring, greater accountability, and the integration of perspectives that are often overlooked in technical design processes. This is less about a single policy solution and more about shifting how AI systems are developed and evaluated over time.

Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. The focus on English-language publications may have excluded relevant research from non-English contexts. In addition, the broad scope of the review limits the ability to explore country-specific dynamics in depth. Finally, much of the existing literature remains cross-sectional, making it difficult to assess how the impacts of platform work evolve over time.

Directions for Future Research

Future research could build on this work in several ways. More context-specific studies would help clarify how local conditions shape platform work. There is also a need for more longitudinal research to understand longer-term outcomes, particularly in relation to economic security and career progression. In addition, further work is needed to explore how emerging technologies, including generative AI, may reshape the dynamics identified here. As platforms continue to evolve, so too will the forms of inequality—

Disclosure statement

The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

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Ethics Statement

This study is based exclusively on a systematic review of previously published, peer-reviewed literature. No primary data were collected from human participants, human tissue, or animals. Accordingly, ethical approval was not required for this research.



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APPENDIX

Sample Extraction Table

Author(s)	Year	Methodology	Gender Insight	Quality Appraisal
Barzilay & Ben-David	2017	Conceptual	Underrepresentation in high-skill gigs	High
Graham et al.	2017	Qualitative	Structural inequality in digital labor	Medium
Mok & Chen	2024	Quantitative	Wage gaps despite equal access	High
Choudhury et al.	2019	Mixed Methods	Platform design shaping female labor access	High
Kricheli-Katz & Regev	2016	Quantitative	Gender-based pay disparity for identical tasks	High
Kasliwal	2020	Qualitative	Safety and flexibility concerns among women gig workers	Medium
Berg	2016	Conceptual	Gig work lacks labor protections, affecting women	High