



Digital work, disability, and the Global South: Examining the gig economy's role in inclusive employment

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Abstract

The rapid expansion of the gig economy has transformed labor markets across the Global South, offering new opportunities (PWDs) who face persistent barriers in traditional employment. This study examines the extent to which digital gig work contributes to inclusive employment for PWDs, focusing on accessibility, income generation, and social empowerment. The research combines a survey of 420 disabled gig workers from India, Kenya, the Philippines, and Brazil with 32 in-depth interviews to capture lived experiences. Quantitative data highlight increased access to flexible work schedules (78%) and reduced transportation barriers (65%), while qualitative insights reveal challenges in platform accessibility, payment reliability, and algorithmic bias. The study finds that while digital work can expand economic participation for PWDs, inclusion is often conditional on digital literacy, infrastructure availability, and platform design. Gender dynamics are also notable, with women with disabilities more likely to engage in content creation and micro-tasking, while men dominate ride-hailing and delivery services. The findings suggest that without deliberate policy intervention and inclusive platform standards, the gig economy risks replicating existing inequalities rather than dismantling them. Policy recommendations include mandating accessibility audits for platforms, subsidizing assistive technologies, and expanding targeted skills training. This research contributes to debates on disability-inclusive development by emphasizing the need to integrate accessibility and equity considerations into the rapidly evolving digital labor ecosystem in the Global South.

Keywords: GIG economy, disability inclusion, digital work, global south, platform accessibility, inclusive employment, assistive technology, labor markets

Introduction

The global labor market is undergoing a profound transformation driven by the proliferation of digital technologies and the expansion of platform-mediated work. “gig economy,” this emerging mode of employment is characterized by task-based, short-term, and flexible arrangements facilitated through online platforms such as Upwork, Fiverr, Uber, and local equivalents. While the gig economy is often discussed in the context of flexibility and innovation, it is equally important to interrogate its implications for marginalized groups, particularly people with disabilities (PWDs) in the Global South.

Disability and Employment in the Global South

(WHO, 2022) ^[29], and they remain among the most excluded from formal employment opportunities. In many parts of the Global South—comprising regions in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Pacific—PWDs encounter layered barriers, including limited accessibility of physical workplaces, pervasive social stigma, and inadequate enforcement of anti-discrimination legislation (Mitra, 2018) ^[19]. Employment rates for PWDs in developing countries are significantly lower than those of their non-disabled peers, often less than half in some rural and peri-urban contexts (ILO, 2021) ^[13]. The result is a persistent cycle of poverty, dependence, and social marginalization.

The Gig Economy as a Potential Equalizer

The rise of digital work has been hailed by some as a democratizing force capable of transcending physical barriers to labor market participation. For PWDs, the ability

to work remotely, set flexible schedules, and avoid inaccessible transport infrastructure can be transformative (Kumar & Raghav, 2020) ^[17]. Theoretically, gig work enables skill-based participation regardless of physical mobility, especially in areas like freelance writing, graphic design, online tutoring, transcription, and software development. Furthermore, the gig economy in the Global South is growing at an unprecedented pace. In India alone, the number of gig workers is projected to reach 23.5 million by 2030 (NITI Aayog, 2022) ^[20], with similar growth patterns in Kenya, the Philippines, and Brazil.

Persistent Barriers in Digital Work

However, the narrative of the gig economy as inherently inclusive warrants critical examination. Digital work requires reliable internet access, digital literacy, and often access to assistive technologies—all of which are unevenly distributed in the Global South (Donou-Adonsou, 2019) ^[7]. Platform interfaces are not always designed to accommodate users with sensory, cognitive, or motor impairments, thereby replicating the accessibility challenges of the offline world in the digital realm (Goggin *et al.*, 2019) ^[10]. Moreover, algorithm-driven task allocation systems may inadvertently disadvantage workers with disabilities by favoring high-speed completion over quality or accommodating pace.

Intersectional Considerations

The experience of disability in digital work is shaped by intersecting identities, including gender, age, rural–urban location, and socio-economic status. Women with

disabilities, for example, often navigate a “double disadvantage” in labor markets, facing both gendered and disability-related discrimination (UN Women, 2021) ^[27]. These dynamics are further complicated in platform economies, where task types, pay rates, and promotion algorithms may vary across demographic groups.

Policy and Research Gaps

While there is a growing body of literature on the gig economy in the Global South, empirical research focusing specifically on the disability dimension remains limited. Existing studies have predominantly been conducted in high-income contexts, where infrastructure, social protection systems, and disability rights frameworks differ substantially from those in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). As a result, there is insufficient understanding of how platform-mediated work can be structured to be genuinely inclusive for PWDs in resource-

constrained environments.

Research Objectives

This study addresses the above gap by examining the perceptions and experiences of PWDs engaged in gig work in four diverse Global South contexts: India, Kenya, the Philippines, and Brazil. The research is guided by the following objectives:

- 1. To assess the extent to which gig work enhances employment opportunities for PWDs.
- 2. To identify key benefits and challenges associated with digital platform work for PWDs.
- 3. To explore the role of platform accessibility, assistive technologies, and skills training in enabling participation.
- 4. To provide policy recommendations for fostering disability-inclusive digital labor markets in the Global South.

Table 1: Summary of PWDs in Gig Economy by Country

Country	Avg. Job Satisfaction (1–5)	Avg. Monthly Income (USD)	Internet Access Rate (%)	Assistive Technology Access (%)
India	3.8	420	86	64
Kenya	3.5	390	75	62
Philippines	4.0	650	88	67
Brazil	4.2	780	90	69

Table 2: Common Gig Economy Roles among PWDs

Role Type	India (%)	Kenya (%)	Philippines (%)	Brazil (%)
Data Entry & Admin	28	30	20	18
Graphic Design	15	10	20	25
Digital Marketing	18	15	25	22
Online Tutoring	12	14	15	17
Customer Support	27	31	20	18

Table 3: Main Challenges Reported by PWD Gig Workers

Challenge	India (%)	Kenya (%)	Philippines (%)	Brazil (%)
Unstable income	42	45	38	35
Limited access to assistive tech	28	30	25	22
Poor internet connectivity	20	28	15	10
Lack of training opportunities	37	40	30	28
Payment delays	15	18	10	9

Significance of the Study

The study’s contribution is twofold. First, it generates empirical evidence on an under-researched intersection of disability, digital labor, and the Global South, thereby filling an important gap in development and labor studies. Second, it offers actionable insights for policymakers, platform designers, and development practitioners seeking to enhance economic inclusion for PWDs. By highlighting both opportunities and structural barriers, digital work as a tool for inclusive development.

In sum, while the gig economy offers unprecedented potential to reshape the employment landscape for people with disabilities, realizing this promise requires deliberate, inclusive design choices and enabling policy environments. This research takes a critical yet constructive approach to understanding how such inclusion can be achieved in the varied socio-economic contexts of the Global South.

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