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**Women, Work, and Digital Platforms:
Enabling Better Outcomes for Women in the Digital Age**

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¹ The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

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Introduction

From how we buy groceries and hail a cab, to how we access household services, technology is transforming the way we live and work. Much of this new world is mediated by platforms - digital interfaces that connect consumers to providers of various types of goods, services, or information through a two-sided application. Many platforms are creating new opportunities for work. This emerging ecosystem of digitally mediated work is upending traditional employment models and altering employment relationships (Dewan, 2021).

Against the backdrop of this major restructuring of labour markets, key questions about women's labour force participation and work emerge. *How are women faring in this new labour market? Are there ways to leverage digital platforms, to create higher-quality and gender inclusive work for women? And what must happen to enable women to avail these opportunities, and to ensure better employment outcomes?*

The answers to these questions are imperative to harnessing the productive potential of women as the digital platform economy continues to evolve. Gender equity and increasing economic participation of women are associated with more growth, lower income inequality, and better development outcomes (IMF, 2018). Estimates suggest closing the gender gap in the workforce could add up to \$28 trillion to global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Bigio and Vogelstein, 2018). Yet gender inequality persists. Women have fewer opportunities to engage in economic activity, receive lower wages and benefits than their male counterparts, and are among the worst affected by crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic (ILO, 2021a). The economic disempowerment of women can result in losses estimated to range from 10 percent of GDP in advanced economies to more than 30 percent in South Asia and in the Middle East and North Africa (Dabla-Norris and Kochhar, 2019).

But these facts and figures speak to gender biases in offline labour markets that have long led to suboptimal outcomes for women, their families, and economies. Evidence suggests that online labour markets are at risk of replicating many of the same biases found offline (Dewan, et al, 2022). Arguably, the challenges are even greater in many countries in the Global South where social norms and resource constraints limit women's access to education, skills and/or jobs, and where they are frequently relegated to unfavourable and informal working

conditions in highly segmented labour markets with weaker institutional structures and enforcement of regulations.

This expert paper prepared as an input for the Expert Group Meeting related to the 67th Commission of the Status of Women (CSW67) outlines some key challenges confronting women in the platform economy; it makes recommendations to help ensure that this new ecosystem of digitally mediated work does not replicate the same biased patterns found offline.

Following the introduction, section two explores trends in women's labour force participation and employment. This context is important to understand the many constraints that women face in labour markets broadly, and the backdrop against which the world of platform work is unfolding. The third section examines how women engage with platforms. How do the five dimensions of platform work intersect with women's preferences and their lived realities? Section four makes recommendations to improve opportunities and outcomes for women in the digitally mediated platform economy.

The Macro Picture: Female Labour Force Participation and Employment-to-Population Ratios

Over the last two decades, not only has the world seen significant gains in education, poverty reduction, and economic growth, but also growing digitalisation. It may seem paradoxical then, that globally, female labour force participation rates (LFPR)² and employment-to-population ratios not only remain lower than those of men, but have also declined (Appendix A: Figures 1 and 2). The rates for men have, however, declined even more precipitously, raising overall concerns about the growing capital intensity of labour markets, fewer jobs, and likely discouragement for both women and men.

The global female LFPR declined by 5 percentage points between 1991 and 2021 (ILOStat, 2022). The decrease was driven by the declines in East and South Asia, 8 and 7 percentage points respectively. Though in the last decade, while the female LFPR of East Asia stabilized, South Asia has continued to witness a steady decline (Appendix A: Figure 3). Examining female LFPR by country income groupings, middle-income countries had the largest decline during this period (Appendix A: Figure 4).

² The labour force participation rate is a measure of the proportion of the working-age population that engages actively in the labour market, either by working or looking for work. The male labour force participation rate is a measure of the proportion of the male working-age population that engages actively in the labour market, either by working or looking for work. The female labour force participation rate is a measure of the proportion of the female working-age population that engages actively in the labour market, either by working or looking for work.

The global average female employment-to-population ratio also declined by 5 percentage points between 1991 and 2021 with the largest drop in East Asia, Central and West Asia, and South Asia; 9, 7, and 6 percentage points respectively (Appendix A: Figures 1 and 5). Among country income groupings, upper-middle income countries saw the largest decline of 8 percentage points in the female employment-to-population ratio during this period (ILOStat, 2022) (Appendix A: Figure 6).

These data point to troubling trends for female and male labour force participation and employment. But women are already starting from a lower base than their male counterparts. Several factors impede women's overall economic participation and these trends are getting worse. So far in the aggregate then, advancements in technology have not improved the overall labour market position of women (OECD, 2017).

Several reasons drive these negative trends (Dewan, 2019). For instance, more girls are staying in education longer and delaying their entry into the labour market. Limited access to education and skills that are in-demand in a changing labour market may also lead to discouragement among women and them dropping out. The fact that the declines are most pronounced in middle-income countries could point to a 'middle-income effect' in some countries, or segments of the population, where women drop out because the household income has reached a threshold where women can afford not to work. Or she leaves the labour market because the low wages and other factors such as the commute, safety, or conditions of work, do not constitute a worthy trade-off to being able to stay home and tend to domestic responsibilities.

Demand side-factors are also at play. Many employers continue to discount women's contributions preferring to hire men instead, or relegating women to low-value add jobs. Shocks to sectors in which a large share of the workforce is female, such as apparel and garments in developing countries, may also be responsible for the decline in female LFPR and the employment-to-population ratios, especially since the pandemic.

Many believe that platform-based work, given the flexibility it potentially offers, may circumvent some of these challenges to improve labour market outcomes for women.

Women in the Platform Economy

A Typology of Platforms

“Platforms are to the network age what the factory was to the industrial revolution – the principal site of economic activity around which everything else is organized” (IT for Change, 2018). There are several different kinds of platforms. Digital labour platforms are a subset of platforms that combine technology with human labour to provide various business offerings. These can broadly be classified into cloud-based platforms or geographically tethered location-based ones. E-commerce or social-commerce platforms are also conducive to forms of entrepreneurship that rely on individual labour. Figure 7 provides a typology of platforms.

Definitive data on how many workers are on labour platforms is lacking, but evidence suggests that they constitute a relatively small share of the labour force and there are fewer women than men; though the overall share of workers on labour platforms is growing with renewed impetus from the COVID-19 pandemic as work, entertainment, and purchasing move online (ILO 2021b; ILO 2022).

Understanding how women are faring in the evolving platform economy entails first taking stock of the barriers they confront that keep them from leveraging the opportunities on offer. These barriers include, (i) socio-cultural norms that continue to taint women’s economic participation offline, but also have a bearing on their work online; (ii) a digital divide in access, ownership, and use of technology (Tables 1, 2 and 3); (iii) restricted access to relevant skills for some women; and (iv) fewer women in Science Technology Engineering and Math education, and related professions.

Tables 1, 2 and 3

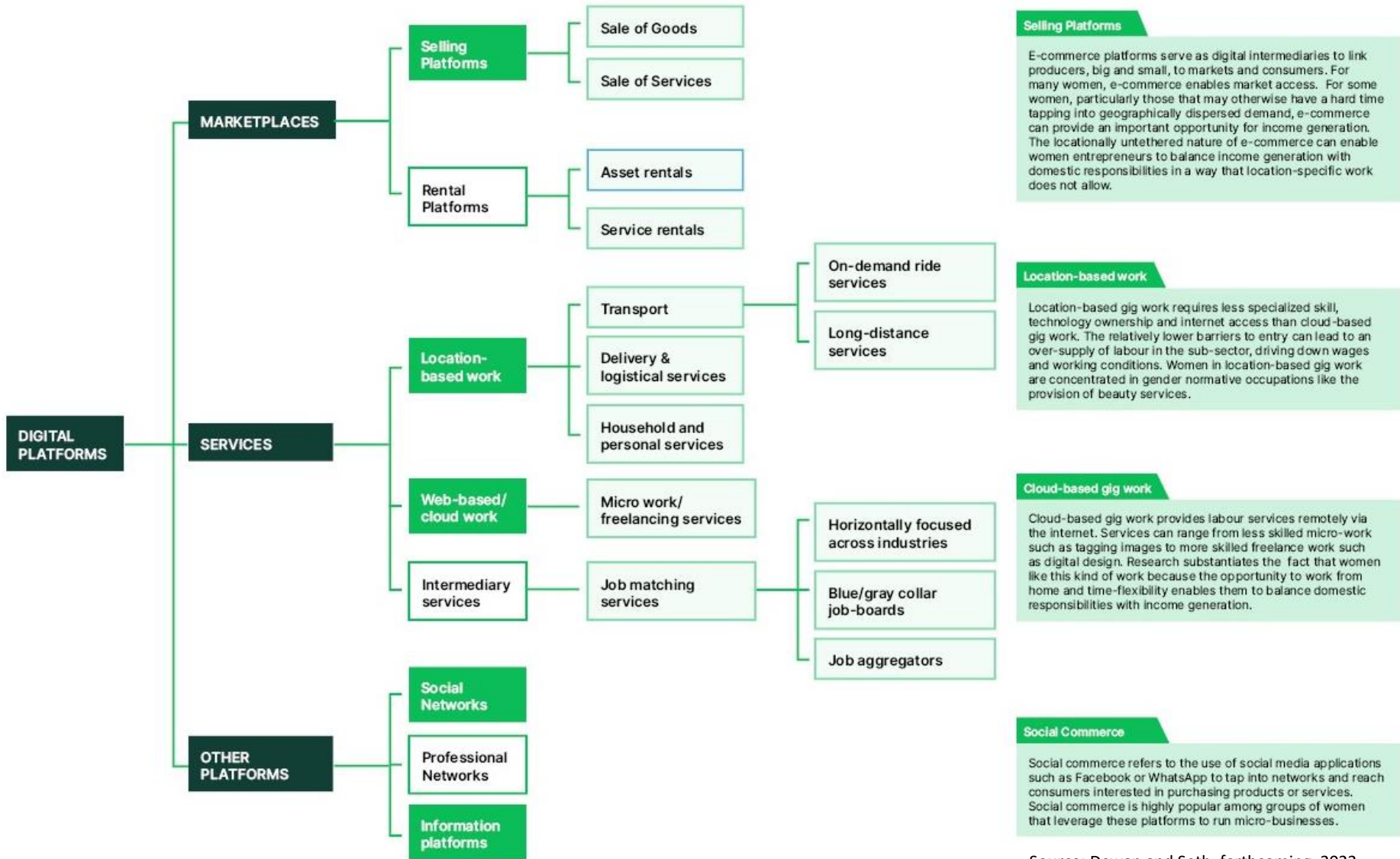
| Gender Gaps in mobile internet use (%), 2017–2021 | | | | | |
|---|------|------|------|------|------|
| Regions/year | 2017 | 2018 | 2019 | 2020 | 2021 |
| East Asia & Pacific | 5 | 4 | 3 | 3 | 2 |
| Latin America & Caribbean | 6 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Europe & Central Asia | 5 | 5 | 4 | 5 | 5 |
| Middle East & North Africa | 17 | 16 | 18 | 17 | 16 |
| Sub-Saharan Africa | 36 | 37 | 36 | 36 | 37 |
| South Asia | 67 | 58 | 50 | 36 | 41 |

| Select Countries | | | | | | |
|------------------|----------------------|-------|------------|-------------------------|-------|------------|
| | MOBILE OWNERSHIP (%) | | | MOBILE INTERNET USE (%) | | |
| | Men | Women | Gender Gap | Men | Women | Gender Gap |
| Bangladesh | 84 | 65 | 23 | 36 | 19 | 48 |
| India | 83 | 71 | 14 | 51 | 30 | 41 |
| Indonesia | 79 | 73 | 8 | 55 | 51 | 8 |
| Pakistan | 76 | 51 | 33 | 36 | 22 | 38 |
| Egypt | 83 | 76 | 8 | 63 | 55 | 12 |
| Kenya | 94 | 88 | 6 | 59 | 36 | 38 |
| Nigeria | 92 | 88 | 5 | 54 | 34 | 36 |
| Senegal | 83 | 77 | 7 | 68 | 57 | 16 |
| Guatemala | 83 | 73 | 12 | 77 | 66 | 14 |
| Mexico | 91 | 90 | 2 | 83 | 80 | 3 |

| Type of Phone Ownership (%) | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-------|--------|---------------|--------|------------|--------|
| | Basic | | Feature phone | | Smartphone | |
| | Male | Female | Male | Female | Male | Female |
| Bangladesh | 19 | 17 | 26 | 25 | 39 | 21 |
| India | 22 | 26 | 8 | 9 | 49 | 26 |
| Indonesia | 16 | 14 | 3 | 2 | 56 | 50 |
| Pakistan | 29 | 22 | 11 | 3 | 39 | 21 |
| Egypt | 18 | 20 | 4 | 4 | 60 | 51 |
| Kenya | 24 | 36 | 15 | 12 | 49 | 34 |
| Nigeria | 22 | 34 | 17 | 18 | 51 | 32 |
| Senegal | 14 | 13 | 5 | 5 | 62 | 54 |
| Guatemala | 9 | 8 | 5 | 3 | 65 | 56 |
| Mexico | 5 | 5 | 6 | 6 | 72 | 69 |

Source: GSMA, The Mobile Gender Gap Report

Figure 7: A Typology of Platforms and Opportunities for Women



Source: Dewan and Seth, forthcoming, 2022

How Women Engage with Platforms: 5 Dimensions

The quality of employment generated in the platform economy differs across location- and cloud-based work, and within these sub-categories as well. Five dimensions of platform work are key to assessing the opportunities and challenges of this form of work for women (Dewan et al., 2022):

Flexibility: When it comes to work, women value flexibility in *when* and *where* they work (Dewan and Jamme, 2021; Berg, et al. 2018). Location-based gig work enables women to choose when they work, though not where they work. E-commerce, social commerce, and cloud-based work also let women have flexibility over where they work. Yet underlying this valuation of flexibility are certain important nuances.

First, many women value flexibility because it enables them to balance income generation with the often disproportionate burden of household responsibilities that falls to them. Research suggests that women's work intensity on platforms is lower than that of men (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022) perhaps pointing to the time poverty they already confront. Second, safety, exploitation, poor conditions of work on the one hand, and patriarchal norms that would rather see women at home than in public spaces on the other, are among the factors that drive women's preference for home-based work. In this sense, a woman's *choice* to work from home is not entirely free; it is a constrained choice contingent on several factors including socio-cultural considerations. Third, there are spatial and mental implications of merging home and work spaces. If the promotion of gig work or e/social commerce comes at the expense of addressing these underlying concerns, then platform-mediated work will continue to fuel, or perhaps even exacerbate, the same biases that women experience offline.

Autonomy: Flexibility and autonomy are often conflated in public imaginations when assessing platformised work. In the hierarchy of autonomy, e-commerce and social commerce offer the highest degree of autonomy. This is followed by web-based gig work; and finally location-based gig work. In all these cases, workers are self-employed, but they are subject to the standards and norms, rating systems, and in many instances, prices set by platforms. Women tend to participate in more 'feminised' tasks on platforms (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022) suggesting the prevalence of norms that still define the roles that women can pursue, or that they see themselves in.

Income: Gig work breaks jobs up into tasks. Some workers avail this form of work as a supplement to their full-time jobs or other economic activity, that adds to their bottom-line income. But when this form of work is a primary activity, workers have to undertake multiple gigs to piece together the income that they might otherwise have in a regular job. In this case, the benefits of flexibility that women prize, are diminished. A lack of regulation means that in many parts of the world, gig work is not aligned to minimum wages (Fairwork, 2021). Given that women tend to participate in 'feminised' tasks, particularly in location-based work, evidence suggests that these tasks pay less. Women, therefore, have lower earnings than men (Rodríguez-Modroño et al., 2022).

Costs of inputs, transport in the case of location-based work, also eat into incomes. Moreover, the barriers to entering gig work, and small-scale e/social commerce are low, which leads to an oversupply of labour that can drive down incomes and working conditions. Finally, this form of work is risky -- as self-employment is, but it doesn't always afford the same degree of autonomy as self-employment. In cases where women are the secondary earners in their households, they may be more amenable to accepting financial uncertainty associated with platform and gig work .

Entitlements and labour protections: Workers affiliated with platforms are considered to be self-employed. This means that they are beyond the purview of labour protections and entitlements. As such, these workers are considered to be in informal employment. Since platforms are not employers, they are not obligated to provide welfare benefits. Self-employed workers are responsible for their own benefits; in reality few spend for it (Dewan et al., 2022).

If higher numbers of women leave regular work arrangements to opt for platform work, largely because it is more flexible, then it is worth acknowledging that not only will the incidence of women in informal work increase, but women will also be left without social security coverage, including maternity and health benefits. Women that are already more susceptible to different kinds of exploitation will have access to even fewer protections in these emerging forms of work (Athreya, 2021). Women providing location-based services would be particularly vulnerable. Even when women are working from home, childcare, or opportunities to upgrade their education and skills still play an important role in their ability to work effectively. Home-based work disincentivises the state to help provide such services, at the same time that there is no employer to provide them.

Data on the quantity of home-based digital platform workers are unavailable, but oversupply, intense competition for work, low compensation, and lack of labour protections are well-documented issues (Graham and Anwar, 2019). Depending on how individual platforms are set up, home-based platform workers may have only the "Terms and Conditions" agreement as proof of their engagement with the platform. There may be no redressal mechanisms, or avenues for contesting pay, or blocks from the platform; and no sick leave or other traditional social protections. The project of governing such platforms and turning insecure jobs into good jobs cannot be managed at the scale of individual countries; labour governance systems must operate across boundaries (Randolph et al., 2021).

Representation: When workers are self-employed, and especially when they are home-based, the ability to associate and engage in collective action is diminished (ILO, 2021b). Moreover, given that digital platforms are not considered to be employers, the ability to engage in collective bargaining is also constrained. So what recourse do workers have to express grievances and seek redressal? For women that are already in more vulnerable labour market positions, this can disempower them further. Though evidence also suggests that gig workers are now using social media channels like WhatsApp to organize. Moreover, there are also gig worker unions that are emerging to represent the interests of these workers. The pointed impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on location-based gig

workers has compelled increasing numbers of workers to organise and speak out against insecure working conditions.

Recommendations

1. Long-term efforts to address socio-cultural barriers are essential to any and all efforts to improve women's labour force participation and employment outcomes.

Harnessing the potential of digital platforms to improve labour market outcomes for women is contingent on addressing the same socio-cultural norms that have constrained women in the offline world for so long. It is time to make the necessary investments to address them.

The notion that focusing on economic empowerment, and cultivating livelihoods for women, will bring about social change – while not untrue – is like putting the cart before the horse; or addressing the symptom rather than the cause. Economic interventions can in time bring about social change, but social normative barriers obstruct women's ability to effectively engage in economic activities – in or outside the home, online or offline. The discounting of women's economic potential by families or by employers, the pressure to marry early and bear children at a young age, and the disproportionate burden of domestic responsibilities, are all factors that inhibit women's progress. Until we make long-term efforts to address and change these pervasive biases, lasting change, change at scale – online or offline – will be illusive.

2. Create an enabling ecosystem to support women's economic participation and employment.

Specifically, this would include instituting safe transport options, lighting and toilets; investing in childcare and other time-saving measures; and developing women's human capital through equitable access to education, skills, and technology. The longer these reforms take, the higher the opportunity cost will be for women.

Digitally mediated home-based work online is increasingly touted as a solution to women's waning labour force participation and employment. While many women prefer to work from home, it is unclear whether they really have a choice, or whether this option is a function of a number of other constraints women face. Creating an enabling ecosystem overall will enable real choices for women to work at home or outside the home.

3. Institute certain labour regulations and protections for workers in the platform economy. For instance, a minimum wage when the platform decides pricing for services or goods. Stringent enforcement must ensure that women receive the same protections as men.

4. Given the growing incidence of self-employment in many parts of the world, many workers are without social security. This is particularly detrimental to women that then do not get maternity leave and other essential health benefits. Governments must move iteratively toward public provision of basic social security for all with a special effort to ensure that women are registered to receive entitlements.

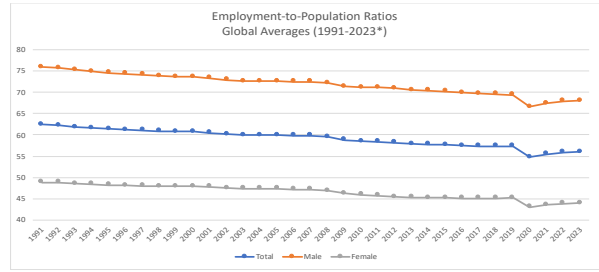
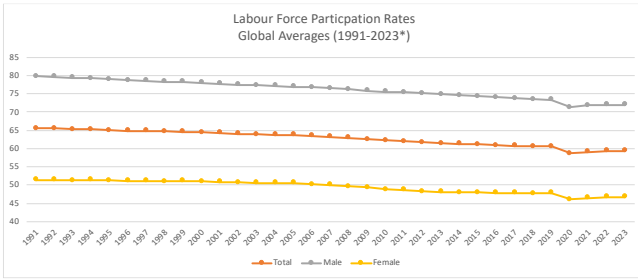
5. **There is a pressing need to collect more gender-disaggregated data** on the incidence, characteristics, and experience of women engaging in digitally mediated work through platforms. From how many women are engaging in this kind of work and the quality of the work to what they were doing before, and where they want to go, data is severely lacking. Moreover, not only is there a need for more data to understand women's work on platforms better, but there is also a need for **data protection, privacy protection, and data rights frameworks**. A new social compact and associated regulation between the government, platform companies, and workers would enable the use of platform data to facilitate evidence-based policymaking. Labour force surveys should include questions to better capture gig work, and other technology-based non-standard forms of employment.

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Appendix 1

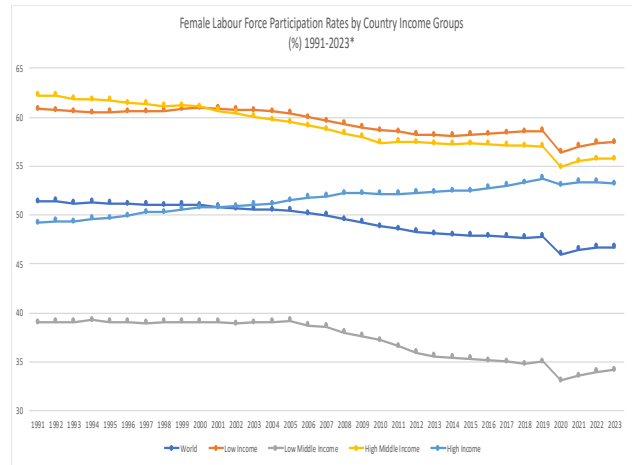
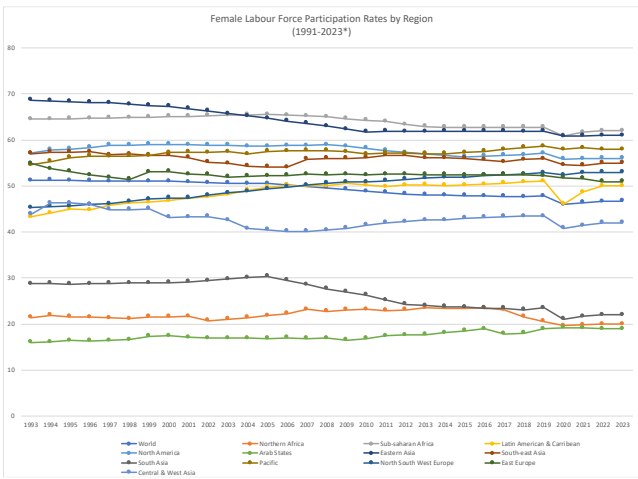
Figures 1 and 2



Source: ILOStat, 2022

*2022 and 2023 are projections

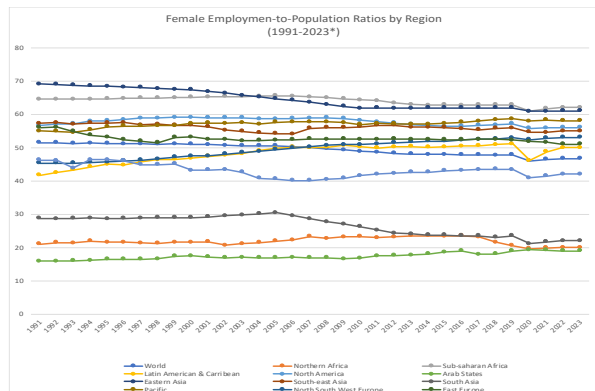
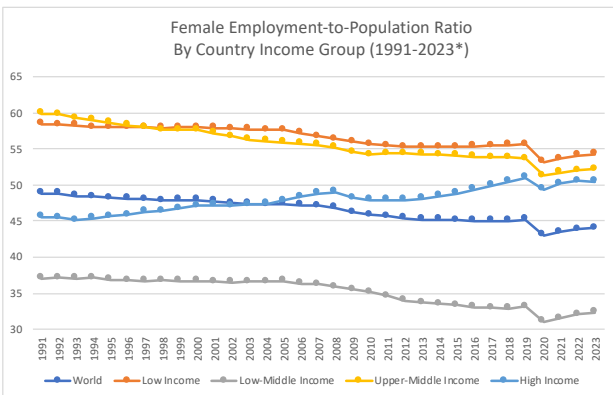
Figures 3 and 4



Source: ILOStat, 2022

*2022 and 2023 are projections

Figures 5 and 6



Source: ILOStat, 2022

*2022 and 2023 are projections