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A Window of Opportunity: Exploring How Covid 19 Helped Accelerate Gig Economy Amongst Women in Africa.

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1.0 Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on global economies, with repercussions ranging from severe economic disruptions to shifts in employment patterns. In Africa, where the gig economy was already gaining traction, the pandemic served as a catalyst for change. One of the most notable outcomes has been the acceleration of gig work, particularly among women. The crisis created a unique "window of opportunity" for women in Africa to participate in flexible, remote work opportunities.



Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically reshaped global labor markets, compelling economies to adapt rapidly to digital and flexible work models. In Africa, where formal employment opportunities are often limited—especially for women—the health crisis magnified existing inequalities while simultaneously opening new pathways for informal and digital work. Lockdowns, school closures, and the collapse of several in-person industries disproportionately affected women, many of whom are concentrated in informal sectors or unpaid care roles. As a

result, a significant number of women turned to digital platforms and freelance work to supplement household income and navigate the disruptions caused by the pandemic.

The expansion of the gig economy during this period was fueled by increased demand for online services, digital retail, content creation, and delivery platforms. Women who previously lacked access to traditional jobs began leveraging social media, mobile payment platforms, and e-commerce to start small businesses, sell handmade goods, or offer remote services such as tutoring, writing, and virtual assistance. Platforms such as Jumia, Sendy, and Upwork saw increased female participation as they offered a means to earn income while accommodating childcare and mobility constraints. Although digital barriers remained—such as unequal access to internet and devices—women’s engagement with gig work became a crucial coping mechanism during the crisis.

Importantly, COVID-19 served as both a disruptor and a catalyst, highlighting the need for inclusive digital infrastructure and gender-responsive policies across Africa. As women embraced digital tools out of necessity, their presence in the gig economy not only increased but also diversified. This shift underscored the potential of gig work to offer flexibility, autonomy, and new economic agency for women, particularly when supported by targeted training, access to technology, and secure payment systems. Moving forward, the momentum gained during the pandemic presents a strategic opportunity to reimagine women’s economic participation in a post-COVID Africa, especially through inclusive digital platforms and regulatory reform.

This essay explores how the pandemic helped empower African women in the gig economy, examining the factors that facilitated this growth and the implications for women's economic independence and social mobility.

2.0 The Pre-COVID Gig Economy Landscape in Africa

Before the pandemic, the gig economy in Africa was gradually expanding, driven by advancements in technology, increased access to smartphones, and the rise of online platforms offering freelance work. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), gig work refers to short-term, flexible jobs that are often mediated through

digital platforms, such as Uber, Upwork, and Freelancer.com (ILO, 2019). In Africa, where unemployment and underemployment rates are high, the gig economy provided a viable alternative for many individuals seeking income opportunities outside traditional employment structures.

Women in Africa have historically faced significant barriers to formal employment due to factors such as limited access to education, gender-based discrimination, and societal expectations. These barriers have relegated many women to the informal sector, where work is often unstable and underpaid. However, the rise of the gig economy provided a platform for women to earn income flexibly and on their terms, without the need for a formal office setting.

3.0 The Impact of COVID-19 on Women's Participation in the Gig Economy

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 disrupted the global economy, leading to widespread job losses, economic slowdowns, and lockdown measures. For many African women, the pandemic exacerbated existing economic challenges, as many worked in sectors heavily impacted by the lockdown, such as hospitality, retail, and tourism. However, the crisis also presented an opportunity for women to transition into the gig economy as a means of earning income.

1. Increased Digital Connectivity

With the rapid shift to online services during the pandemic, digital connectivity became a crucial lifeline for individuals seeking work. For women in Africa, who were often more limited in their access to traditional employment due to geographic or societal constraints, the rise of online gig platforms provided a new avenue for work. Platforms such as Jumia, Fiverr, and TaskRabbit saw an uptick in users as more people sought flexible and

remote work. According to a report by McKinsey (2020), digital adoption accelerated during the pandemic, with many businesses and individuals embracing online tools for communication, collaboration, and work.

Women, particularly those in urban areas with access to smartphones and the internet, were able to leverage these platforms to provide a range of services, from freelance writing and graphic design to virtual tutoring and e-commerce. The ability to work remotely allowed women to overcome the constraints of location, mobility, and the rigid structures of traditional employment.

2. Flexibility and Autonomy

One of the most significant advantages of the gig economy for women in Africa during the pandemic was the flexibility it offered. Many women, particularly those with caregiving responsibilities, found it difficult to participate in the formal labor market due to societal expectations of domestic roles. The flexibility of gig work allowed women to balance work with family responsibilities, as they could choose when and where to work.

This flexibility was especially important during the COVID-19 lockdowns, when schools and childcare facilities were closed, and many women took on increased caregiving duties. Gig work enabled them to earn income without the need for full-time commitment or rigid work hours. Research by the World Bank (2021) suggests that the pandemic created an "opportunity" for women to embrace more flexible forms of work, which allowed them to manage multiple roles in their households while still contributing to the economy.

3. Access to New Skills and Opportunities

The pandemic also highlighted the importance of digital literacy and skills development, which were essential for accessing the gig economy. As the demand for online services grew, many women in Africa seized the opportunity to acquire new skills, such as digital marketing, graphic design, and software development. Several online platforms, such as Coursera and Udemy, provided free or affordable courses, enabling women to improve their employability in the gig economy.

Additionally, the pandemic pushed organizations to offer more remote work options, allowing women to participate in international markets and access higher-paying opportunities. By engaging in online freelancing, women could diversify their income streams, increasing their financial independence and reducing their reliance on traditional employment.

4.0 Challenges and Limitations

Despite the opportunities presented by the gig economy, several challenges remain for women in Africa. While the pandemic accelerated digital adoption, a significant digital divide persists in many parts of Africa. Access to the internet and digital devices is still limited in rural areas, where many women reside. This inequality in access to technology disproportionately affects women, preventing them from fully participating in the gig economy.

Moreover, the gig economy is often characterized by precarious work, with no job security, healthcare benefits, or pensions. Although gig work offers flexibility, it can also result in income instability, leaving women vulnerable to financial insecurity. Furthermore, the lack of legal protections and labor regulations for gig workers leaves many women without recourse in cases of exploitation or mistreatment by clients and platforms.

5.0 Recommendations Using Lessons Learnt in Other Developed Countries and In Reference to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

To enhance women's participation in the gig economy in Africa, it's important to draw from both global best practices and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly:

- **SDG 5** (Gender Equality),
- **SDG 8** (Decent Work and Economic Growth),
- **SDG 10** (Reduced Inequalities), and
- **SDG 9** (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure).

Key Recommendations Based on Lessons from Developed Countries



1) Promote Digital and Financial Literacy (SDGs 4, 5, 8)

Lesson from: UK, EU, South Korea

- **Action:** Establish targeted training for women in digital tools, platform navigation, and basic financial literacy.
- **Why:** Many platforms require a baseline of tech

fluency; boosting this widens access.

- **How:** Public-private partnerships with tech companies, NGOs, and educational institutions.

2) Ensure Access to Affordable Digital Infrastructure (SDGs 5, 9, 10)

Lesson from: Estonia, Canada

- **Action:** Improve access to smartphones, internet connectivity, and digital IDs, especially in rural areas.
- **Why:** Digital access remains a foundational barrier for many African women.
- **How:** Expand public Wi-Fi, subsidize devices for low-income women, and develop rural digital hubs.

3) Create Women-Centric Gig Platforms or Features (SDGs 5, 8)

Lesson from: India's women-only platforms like *Sheroes*, UK's *Mumsnet Jobs*

- **Action:** Encourage platforms tailored to women's needs—flexible hours, safe workspaces, remote work, childcare support.
- **Why:** Gender-sensitive design reduces entry barriers and attrition.
- **How:** Incentivize platform companies through tax benefits or grants to create inclusive features.

4) Strengthen Legal Protections and Benefits (SDGs 5, 8, 10)

Lesson from: EU Directive on Platform Work, California's AB5 Law

- **Action:** Introduce policies for fair pay, anti-harassment protections, access to health insurance, and maternity leave.
- **Why:** The gig economy often lacks labor protections, disproportionately affecting women.
- **How:** Work with governments to regulate platforms, and ensure enforcement through gig workers' unions or collectives.

5) Use Gender-Disaggregated Data to Inform Policy (SDGs 5, 10)

Lesson from: OECD, World Bank studies

- **Action:** Regularly collect and analyze data on women's gig economy participation.
- **Why:** Tailored interventions depend on accurate, gender-sensitive data.
- **How:** National statistics bureaus to collaborate with platforms and development agencies.

6) Foster Entrepreneurial Ecosystems (SDGs 5, 8, 9)

Lesson from: Israel's startup support programs for women

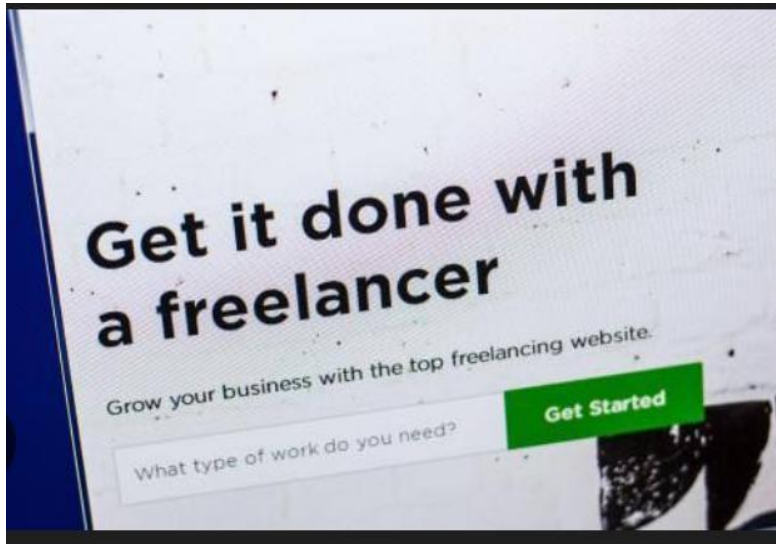
- **Action:** Support women-led digital enterprises and platform cooperatives.
- **Why:** Gig economy growth depends on inclusive innovation ecosystems.
- **How:** Provide seed funding, mentorship, and tax incentives to women entrepreneurs.

7) Enable Access to Childcare and Social Support (SDGs 5, 8)

Lesson from: Nordic countries' subsidized childcare

- **Action:** Provide community childcare services or digital tools for managing work-life balance.
- **Why:** Unpaid care work is a major barrier for women entering the gig economy.
- **How:** Encourage local governments and NGOs to pilot subsidized childcare for gig workers.

8) Build Women's Digital Communities and Advocacy Networks (SDGs 5, 10)



Lesson from: Women in Tech (US/Global), Digital Africa

- **Action:** Facilitate peer support, mentorship, and community learning.
- **Why:** Community engagement helps reduce isolation and builds confidence.
- **How:** Partner with civil society and

platforms to organize regular forums and online groups.

9) Facilitate Seamless Mobile Payments and Microfinance Access (SDGs 1, 5, 8)

Lesson from: M-Pesa in Kenya, Venmo/PayPal in US

- **Action:** Ensure gig workers can access mobile banking, savings, and small loans.
- **Why:** Many women lack formal bank accounts or credit histories.
- **How:** Collaborate with fintech startups to offer gig-specific financial products.

10) Promote Public Awareness and Change Societal Norms (SDG 5)

Lesson from: Gender mainstreaming campaigns in Scandinavia and Canada

- **Action:** Challenge stigmas around women in informal work and tech through media and policy campaigns.

- **Why:** Cultural norms still deter many women from joining tech-driven economies.
- **How:** Use storytelling, national campaigns, and role models to inspire participation.

Summary Table: SDG Linkage and Key Focus

| Recommendation | Linked SDGs |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|
| Digital & Financial Literacy | 4, 5, 8 |
| Digital Infrastructure Access | 5, 9, 10 |
| Women-centric Platforms | 5, 8 |
| Legal Protections | 5, 8, 10 |
| Data for Policy | 5, 10 |
| Entrepreneurial Ecosystem | 5, 8, 9 |
| Childcare and Social Support | 5, 8 |
| Community Networks | 5, 10 |
| Mobile Payments & Microfinance | 1, 5, 8 |
| Awareness & Norm Change | 5 |

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for the growth of the gig economy in Africa, particularly among women. It provided a unique window of opportunity for women to enter flexible, remote workspaces and overcome traditional barriers to employment. It generally accelerated the entry of African women into the gig economy, acting

as a tipping point for digital transformation in traditionally underserved communities. As conventional employment contracted and mobility was restricted, many women sought income through online platforms, micro-entrepreneurship, and remote freelancing. Despite infrastructural and socio-cultural barriers, the crisis showcased women's resilience and adaptability in leveraging digital tools to support their families and sustain livelihoods. This mirrored trend observed in developed countries, where women also shifted en masse to flexible work, though with greater institutional and technological support.

In contrast to their counterparts in countries like the U.S., Canada, or the U.K.—where women gig workers benefited from social protection, digital infrastructure, and targeted policy support—African women often operated in informal and unregulated gig spaces, with limited access to broadband, financial services, or legal safeguards. These disparities highlight the need for Africa to learn from global best practices by investing in digital skills training, gender-sensitive platform design, and social protections that address the unique challenges women face. Aligning with **SDG 5 (Gender Equality)**, **SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth)**, and **SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure)** etc a more inclusive digital economy must ensure that women are not only participants but also leaders in shaping the future of work.

Going forward, governments, development partners, and private sector actors across Africa must seize this opportunity to create a more equitable digital economy. This includes expanding affordable internet access, establishing regulatory frameworks for gig platforms, and ensuring women have access to childcare, digital literacy, and financial inclusion. Drawing from lessons in developed countries covered in the previous sections, Africa can adopt a proactive approach to bridge the gender digital divide and ensure that the gig economy becomes a sustainable source of empowerment rather than a temporary lifeline. By aligning these efforts with the SDGs, the

post-pandemic era can become a turning point in closing gender gaps and building inclusive economic systems for the future.

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