Tengeru Community Development Journal
ISSN 1821-9853(Print) ISSN 2665-0584(online)
Vol. 10, No.1, 2024

Digital Technologies and Changing Demographic Patterns of Women's Work

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Article History

Received: 2023-September-15
Revised: 2023-December-29
Accepted: 2024-April-15
Published: 2024-June-15

Keywords

Digital technologies, young women, labour demographics, platform-based work, digital skills, socio-economic empowerment

How to cite:

Wandwi, G. & Timothy, N. (2023). Digital Technologies and Changing Demographic Patterns of Women's Work. *Tengeru Community Development Journal*, 11(1)**:** 01-12.

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Abstract

The expansion of digitally mediated work is reshaping labour market participation, creating new economic pathways while intersecting with existing gender inequalities. In this study, digital work refers to income-generating activities organized, accessed, or performed through digital platforms, online marketplaces, remote work systems, and technology-enabled enterprises. These activities may affect women's opportunities, access to employment, digital skills, and work outcomes, though their effects are shaped by broader social and economic conditions. This study examines how digitally mediated work influences the labour market experiences and economic trajectories of young women in Tanzania, focusing on differences in opportunities, access, skills, and outcomes across contexts. A qualitative case study design was employed, using semi-structured interviews with 100 young women from urban and peri-urban innovation hubs in Tanzania. Participants were purposively selected to capture variation in age, digital literacy, work type, and location. Findings show that digital work can expand economic opportunities through flexible income streams, entrepreneurship, and networks, but access remains uneven due to skill gaps, infrastructure limitations, platform visibility, and gendered social expectations. Urban participants often benefited from mentorship, formal training, and innovation networks, while peri-urban participants relied on peer networks and adaptive strategies amid greater constraints. The study concludes that digital work alone does not determine women's outcomes; instead, results reflect interactions among digital resources, gendered norms, support systems, and local conditions. Recommendations include skills development, inclusive access, mentorship, and policies that promote equitable participation.

1.0 Introduction

The expansion of digitally mediated work has introduced new forms of labour-market participation, transforming how individuals access employment, generate income, acquire skills, and develop entrepreneurial activities. Digital work in this study refers specifically to income-generating activities that are organised, accessed, or performed through digital platforms, online

marketplaces, remote-work systems, and technology-supported enterprises. These forms of work include platform-based services, online entrepreneurship, digital freelancing, and other technology-enabled economic activities. While digitally mediated work has created new possibilities for labour-market participation, its effects are not experienced uniformly because participation remains shaped by existing social, economic, and gender inequalities (Huseynli & Huseynli, 2022).

Historically, young women's labour-market participation has been influenced by structural constraints including unequal access to education, limited formal employment opportunities, occupational segregation, and socio-cultural expectations regarding women's roles in households and communities (Jayachandran, 2021). Digital work has the potential to expand opportunities by providing alternative pathways to income generation, flexible work arrangements, and entrepreneurship. However, access to these opportunities depends on several interconnected factors, including availability of digital infrastructure, affordability of connectivity, digital skills, platform visibility, mentorship, and supportive social networks. Therefore, technology should not be understood as an independent driver of empowerment; rather, it operates within broader institutional and social environments that influence whether women can participate, benefit, and achieve sustainable work outcomes (Judijanto & Nurwanto, 2024).

Recent scholarship highlights the complex relationship between digital labour and gender equality. Although digital platforms and online marketplaces can reduce some traditional barriers to labour participation, they may also reproduce existing inequalities through uneven access to resources, differences in digital literacy, informal employment conditions, algorithmic decision-making processes, and gendered social expectations (Ashtikar & Geetha, 2025). Consequently, the impact of digital work on young women's economic empowerment requires examination across four related dimensions: opportunity, referring to the availability of digital work pathways; access, referring to the ability to participate through infrastructure, affordability, and networks; skills, referring to digital competencies and work-related capabilities; and outcomes, referring to income generation, flexibility, entrepreneurial autonomy, and perceived economic agency.

In sub-Saharan Africa, digital labour markets are expanding alongside persistent gender disparities. Existing research suggests that platform-based work can provide flexible income opportunities and new entrepreneurial possibilities, but participation and benefits remain uneven because women often face constraints related to digital literacy, financial resources, social expectations, and limited institutional support (Al Mehdar et al., 2025). Research further indicates that mentorship, training opportunities, and supportive networks influence whether women are able to move from basic digital participation towards meaningful economic outcomes (Al Shuhoumi & Rasheed, 2025; Ahmed et al., 2025). These findings suggest that understanding women's digital work experiences requires attention not only to technology access but also to the social and economic conditions that shape participation.

Within Tanzania, emerging evidence indicates important differences between urban and peri-urban contexts. Young women in urban innovation environments may benefit from stronger connectivity, structured mentorship programmes, co-working spaces, and greater exposure to digital markets. In contrast, women in peri-urban areas may rely more heavily on informal networks, peer learning,

and adaptive strategies to overcome limitations in infrastructure, training opportunities, and market access (Namkesa, 2025; Temu & Ng'atigwa, 2024). However, existing research provides limited understanding of how young women themselves navigate these differences, negotiate gendered expectations, and translate digital participation into economic outcomes.

Despite increasing attention to digital labour and women's economic inclusion, a significant research gap remains regarding the mechanisms through which digital work shapes young women's labour-market trajectories in Tanzania. Existing studies often examine digital access or technology adoption broadly but provide limited empirical insight into how opportunity, access, skills, and work outcomes interact across urban and peri-urban settings. Addressing this gap is important for designing interventions that move beyond technology provision alone and instead support equitable participation through skills development, mentorship, inclusive platform practices, and gender-responsive policy frameworks.

This study therefore investigates how digitally mediated work shapes the labour-market experiences of young women in urban and peri-urban Tanzania. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research examines how young women access digital work opportunities, develop relevant skills, navigate structural and socio-cultural constraints, and experience the economic outcomes of participating in digital labour. By linking empirical experiences to broader discussions on gender, empowerment, and labour-market transformation, the study provides evidence to inform policy, platform governance, and interventions aimed at strengthening young women's agency in digital economies. The study aimed to examine how digitally mediated work influences labour-market participation patterns among young women in urban and peri-urban Tanzania, explore the experiences of young women engaged in different forms of digital work and identify the structural, technological, and socio-cultural factors that enable or constrain young women's participation in digital labour markets.

The study contributes to ongoing debates on digital labour, gendered work patterns, and platform economies by examining how digitally mediated work shapes young women's labour-market experiences within specific social and economic contexts. Existing research has established that digital work can create new opportunities for women through flexible employment arrangements, online entrepreneurship, and access to wider markets (Ding & Shi, 2025; Ahmad et al., 2024). However, much of the existing literature focuses either on technology adoption and digital inclusion or on the potential benefits of platform-based work, providing limited explanation of how women's participation translates into meaningful economic outcomes (Javed et al., 2025; Rani et al., 2022). Other studies highlight persistent inequalities associated with digital labour, including unequal access to infrastructure, differences in digital skills, platform-based vulnerabilities, and gendered social expectations, but often do not examine how these factors interact across different local contexts (Nirmani, 2025; Zindi et al., 2025).

This study extends existing knowledge by conceptualising digital work as a set of income-generating activities organised, accessed, or performed through digital platforms, online marketplaces, remote-work systems, and technology-enabled enterprises. It examines digital labour through four interconnected dimensions: opportunity, referring to the availability of digital work pathways; access, referring to the resources and conditions required for participation,

including connectivity, affordability, and networks; skills, referring to digital competencies and the ability to effectively use technology for economic purposes; and work outcomes, including income generation, flexibility, entrepreneurial autonomy, and perceived economic agency.

Rather than treating technology as an automatic pathway to empowerment, this study argues that digital work outcomes emerge from the interaction between digital resources and broader gendered labour-market structures. By comparing young women's experiences in urban and peri-urban Tanzania, the study demonstrates how differences in mentorship, infrastructure, social support, and skill development shape the extent to which digital opportunities can be converted into sustainable economic benefits. In doing so, the manuscript moves beyond technology-centred explanations and provides context-specific evidence on the mechanisms through which digital labour can both expand and constrain young women's economic participation.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design and Methodological Approach

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study approach to examine how digitally mediated work influences young women's labour-market experiences in urban and peri-urban Tanzania. A qualitative approach was selected because the research problem extends beyond measuring employment outcomes and requires understanding the processes through which young women access digital work opportunities, develop relevant skills, negotiate gendered constraints, and experience economic outcomes. Previous studies on digital labour have often examined technology adoption, digital inclusion, or platform participation as separate issues, providing limited insight into how opportunity, access, skills, and work outcomes interact within specific social contexts. Therefore, this study uses a case study design to capture the relationship between individual agency and broader structural conditions influencing digital labour participation (Bunkar et al., 2024).

In this study, digital work refers to income-generating activities that are organised, accessed, or performed through digital platforms, online marketplaces, remote-work systems, and technology-supported enterprises. These include platform-based services, online entrepreneurship, digital freelancing, and technology-enabled micro-business activities. The study does not assume that digital tools automatically produce empowerment; instead, it examines how digital resources interact with gendered labour-market structures, including access to infrastructure, social expectations, skills development opportunities, and institutional support.

The methodological approach is guided by the understanding that young women's participation in digital labour markets is shaped through four interconnected dimensions. First, opportunity refers to the availability of digital work pathways and market opportunities. Second, access refers to the ability to participate through connectivity, affordability, devices, platform availability, and social networks. Third, skills refer to digital competencies and work-related capabilities required to obtain and sustain digital employment. Fourth, outcomes refer to the economic and personal benefits associated with participation, including income generation, work flexibility, entrepreneurial autonomy, and perceived economic agency.

2.2 Study Area and Case Selection

The study was conducted across three purposively selected urban and peri-urban innovation hubs in Tanzania. The sites were selected because they represent contrasting environments of digital labour participation and provide an opportunity to examine how contextual factors influence young women's experiences.

Urban innovation hubs represent environments with relatively stronger ICT infrastructure, co-working spaces, entrepreneurship programmes, formal mentorship initiatives, and greater exposure to digital markets. In contrast, peri-urban hubs represent emerging digital participation contexts where young women often engage through informal networks, peer learning, community-based support systems, and adaptive strategies in response to limitations in connectivity, training opportunities, and market access.

Rather than treating urban contexts as inherently advantageous and peri-urban contexts as technologically deficient, the comparative design examines how different combinations of resources, social networks, and institutional support shape participation pathways. This approach extends previous research by analysing not only whether women participate in digital work but also how local conditions influence their ability to convert participation into meaningful economic outcomes.

2.3 Sampling Procedure and Participants

The study involved 100 young women aged 18–30 years who were actively engaged in digitally mediated work activities. Participants were selected using purposive and stratified sampling approaches. Purposive sampling ensured that participants had direct experience with digital work, including freelance platforms, online entrepreneurship, digital service provision, gig-based activities, or other technology-supported income-generating activities. Stratification was used to achieve variation across geographic location, type of digital work, digital literacy level, and duration of engagement.

The final sample consisted of 50 participants from urban innovation hubs and 50 participants from peri-urban innovation hubs. This distribution enabled comparative analysis of how differences in infrastructure, mentorship availability, social networks, and learning opportunities influenced women's digital labour experiences.

The recruitment strategy prioritised information richness rather than statistical representativeness, consistent with qualitative case study methodology. Participants were recruited until thematic saturation was achieved, meaning that additional interviews produced limited new insights regarding opportunity structures, access barriers, skill development pathways, and work outcomes. The final sample size was therefore maintained at 100 participants throughout the study to ensure consistency between the methodology, findings, and conclusions.

2.4 Data Collection Methods

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which enabled participants to describe their experiences, strategies, and challenges in their own words. The interview guide was developed through engagement with existing digital labour, gender, and platform economy literature (Ruslin et al., 2022). Questions focused on four analytical areas: access to digital work

opportunities, digital skills development, strategies for navigating platforms, and economic outcomes associated with participation.

The interviews explored participants' experiences of accessing digital platforms and online markets; acquiring and applying digital skills; balancing digital work with household and social expectations; generating income and achieving work flexibility; receiving mentorship or support from formal and informal networks and experiencing barriers related to infrastructure, affordability, skills, and platform conditions.

Interviews were conducted in participants' preferred languages, audio-recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised. In addition to interview data, contextual observations were recorded to capture relevant information about digital work environments, workspace conditions, and informal practices surrounding digital labour participation.

2.5 Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

The credibility and dependability of the study were strengthened through several qualitative validation procedures. The interview guide was piloted with a small group of participants before full data collection to improve clarity and contextual relevance. Consistency was supported through the use of a structured interview protocol, systematic coding procedures, and comparison of themes across urban and peri-urban cases.

To enhance confirmability, interpretations were grounded in participants' accounts and supported through continuous comparison between emerging themes and existing literature. Attention was also given to researcher reflexivity by recognising how interpretation may be influenced by assumptions about technology, gender, and labour-market participation. Participants provided informed consent and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any stage. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the removal of identifying information and secure management of research data.

2.6 Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using thematic analysis following the approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Analysis involved several stages, including familiarisation with transcripts, generation of initial codes, development of categories, review of emerging themes, and interpretation of relationships between themes.

Initial coding focused on participants' experiences of digital work participation, including platform access, income strategies, skill acquisition, and barriers to engagement. Subsequent analysis examined how these experiences varied across urban and peri-urban contexts. Particular attention was given to the interaction between individual agency and structural conditions, including infrastructure availability, mentorship opportunities, gendered expectations, and institutional support.

Themes were organised around the study's analytical framework of opportunity, access, skills, and work outcomes. This enabled interpretation of not only whether young women participated in digital labour markets but also why some participants were better positioned to benefit from digital work opportunities than others. The findings therefore connect individual experiences with broader questions of gender inequality, digital inclusion, and labour-market transformation.

Through this methodological approach, the study contributes context-specific evidence on the mechanisms through which digital work can both expand and constrain young women's economic participation. Rather than presenting technology as a standalone solution, the study examines how digital opportunities are mediated by skills, social structures, institutional support, and local economic conditions.

3. Results and Discussion

The findings from the 100 young women interviewed demonstrate that digitally mediated work is not a uniform pathway to labour-market transformation but a context-dependent process shaped by the interaction between digital opportunities, access conditions, skills, and socio-cultural structures. In this study, digital work refers to income-generating activities organised, accessed, or performed through digital platforms, online marketplaces, remote-work systems, and technology-supported enterprises. The findings indicate that digital participation influences young women's labour trajectories through multiple mechanisms: it expands some opportunities for economic engagement while simultaneously reproducing inequalities when access to infrastructure, skills, mentorship, and supportive social environments remains limited.

The comparative analysis between urban and peri-urban participants directly addresses the first research objective by examining how digitally mediated work influences young women's labour participation patterns. The results show that location shaped the types of opportunities available and the ability of participants to convert those opportunities into sustainable work outcomes. Urban participants benefited from stronger digital ecosystems, including co-working spaces, mentorship programmes, professional networks, and more reliable connectivity. These conditions enabled greater engagement in diversified digital activities, including freelance services, online entrepreneurship, and content-based work. However, the findings suggest that these outcomes were not produced by technology alone; rather, digital resources became economically valuable when combined with institutional support, skills development, and access to markets.

In contrast, peri-urban participants demonstrated alternative pathways of digital participation characterised by informal learning, peer networks, and adaptive strategies. Although these participants accessed fewer formal support structures, they developed locally embedded approaches to overcoming limitations in infrastructure and training opportunities. This finding extends existing research on digital labour by demonstrating that women's participation cannot be understood only through the presence or absence of technology. Instead, participation outcomes depend on how women negotiate access barriers and mobilise available social resources within specific contexts.

The thematic analysis, guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase model (2012), generated three interconnected themes: digital skills as both an enabling resource and a limiting factor, platform accessibility as a determinant of work opportunities and diversification, and socio-cultural negotiation as a moderator of labour-market outcomes. These themes correspond with the study framework of opportunity, access, skills, and outcomes, providing an analytical explanation of how digital work shapes young women's economic participation.

3.1 Digital Skills: Enabling Participation but Producing New Forms of Exclusion

The findings indicate that digital skills functioned as a critical mechanism influencing whether participants could move beyond basic platform access towards meaningful economic participation. Participants described digital literacy not simply as the ability to operate devices or applications but as a form of economic capability that influenced credibility, competitiveness, and income-generating potential. This supports previous research suggesting that digital empowerment depends not only on access to technologies but also on the ability to effectively use digital resources for economic purposes.

However, the findings also reveal that skills alone were insufficient. One peri-urban participant explained, "I can code in Python, but without a reliable connection, it is as if I am invisible to the platforms." This experience illustrates the interaction between skills and access conditions: even advanced competencies may not translate into economic outcomes when connectivity, affordability, and platform visibility remain limited. Thus, the gendered digital labour mechanism operates through unequal conversion of skills into opportunities, where women's capabilities are shaped by the resources available to support their participation.

3.2 Platform Accessibility and Unequal Work Outcomes

The second major finding relates to the role of platform accessibility in shaping labour diversification and economic outcomes. Digital platforms expanded opportunities for some participants by connecting them with freelance markets, online customers, and entrepreneurial networks. Urban participants were more likely to engage with broader digital markets because they had stronger connectivity, greater exposure to digital ecosystems, and easier access to mentorship and training.

However, the findings also reveal that platform participation introduced new forms of vulnerability. Participants reported challenges related to income uncertainty, limited control over platform processes, changing market demands, and difficulties understanding platform-based decision-making systems. These findings suggest that digital platforms may increase opportunities while simultaneously creating precarious forms of employment. Therefore, digital work should not be viewed as a replacement for traditional labour-market inequalities but as a space where existing gendered inequalities may be reproduced in new forms.

For peri-urban participants, digital work was often characterised by smaller-scale activities, informal digital marketplaces, and peer-supported engagement. These pathways demonstrate agency and innovation but also reflect unequal access to high-value digital opportunities. The findings therefore support the argument that meaningful digital inclusion requires attention not only to participation rates but also to the quality, sustainability, and economic value of digital work outcomes.

3.3 Socio-Cultural Negotiation and Gendered Labour-Market Participation

The third theme highlights how digital work remains embedded within broader gender relations. Participants described negotiating household responsibilities, caregiving expectations, and community perceptions while engaging in digital economic activities. These findings demonstrate that women's digital labour participation is influenced by social norms that shape available time, mobility, decision-making power, and acceptance of technology-based work.

Rather than removing traditional constraints, digital work often provided new strategies for managing them. Some participants used flexible schedules, mobile-based work arrangements, and community support networks to balance economic activities with household responsibilities. These strategies demonstrate a form of negotiated agency, where women use available digital resources to restructure aspects of their work participation while continuing to operate within existing social expectations.

This finding aligns with Sen's capability approach, which emphasises that empowerment is not achieved through access to resources alone but through individuals' ability to convert resources into meaningful capabilities and functionings. In this context, digital tools represent resources whose value depends on women's skills, social support systems, and institutional environments.

3.4 Methodological Alignment and Contribution of the Findings

The findings are consistent with the qualitative case study design adopted for this research. The purposive sample of 100 young women enabled exploration of diverse experiences across urban and peri-urban contexts, different forms of digital work, and varying levels of digital literacy. The use of semi-structured interviews allowed participants to describe their experiences, strategies, and constraints in depth, while thematic analysis provided a systematic approach for identifying patterns across cases.

The analytical approach ensured that findings were interpreted in relation to the study objectives rather than presented as isolated observations. Specifically, the findings demonstrate how digitally mediated work influences labour participation patterns, identify structural and socio-cultural factors affecting engagement, and explain how digital participation contributes to different economic outcomes. By examining opportunity, access, skills, and outcomes together, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of young women's digital labour experiences.

The evidence suggests that digital work can contribute to young women's economic participation, but its benefits depend on the interaction between technology, capabilities, institutions, and social structures. The study therefore contributes to digital labour research by showing that empowerment outcomes are not determined by technological availability alone but by the conditions that enable women to access, use, and benefit from digitally mediated work opportunities.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examined how digitally mediated work influences young women's labour-market participation in urban and peri-urban Tanzania, focusing on the relationship between opportunities, access conditions, digital skills, and work outcomes. In this study, digital work refers to income-generating activities organised, accessed, or performed through digital platforms, online marketplaces, remote-work systems, and technology-supported enterprises.

The study shows that digitally mediated work represents a potential pathway for expanding young women's economic participation, but it should not be viewed as an automatic solution to gender inequality in labour markets. Digital work outcomes emerge from the relationship between four interconnected dimensions: opportunity, referring to available digital employment pathways; access, referring to infrastructure, affordability, and networks required for participation; skills,

referring to digital and entrepreneurial capabilities; and outcomes, referring to income generation, work flexibility, autonomy, and economic agency. Addressing only one dimension is unlikely to produce sustainable improvements in women's digital labour participation.

Based on these findings, several recommendations are proposed. First, digital skills programmes should move beyond basic technical training to include platform navigation, online entrepreneurship, digital financial literacy, and strategies for sustaining digital work participation. Such programmes should be designed to reach both urban and peri-urban young women while recognising differences in existing resources and learning environments.

Second, improving access conditions remains essential. Investments in affordable connectivity, reliable digital infrastructure, access to appropriate devices, and community-based digital support spaces can reduce participation barriers, particularly for women in underserved locations. These interventions should complement rather than replace skills development and institutional support. Third, mentorship and entrepreneurial support mechanisms should be strengthened to help young women convert digital participation into sustainable work outcomes. Partnerships between innovation hubs, training institutions, communities, and relevant organisations can provide guidance, networks, and market connections for women seeking to expand digital enterprises. Fourth, digital labour policies and platform practices should incorporate gender-responsive approaches. This includes improving transparency in platform systems, supporting fair participation conditions, and recognising the challenges faced by women balancing digital work with household and caregiving responsibilities.

The study is limited by its qualitative design and purposive sample of young women from selected urban and peri-urban innovation hubs in Tanzania. Therefore, the findings provide contextual understanding rather than statistical generalisation to all young women or all digital labour markets. Future research could extend this work through longitudinal studies, mixed-method approaches, and broader geographical coverage, including rural communities, to examine how digital work participation changes over time. This study demonstrates that digitally mediated work can contribute to young women's labour-market participation when supported by appropriate access conditions, skills development, institutional support, and enabling social environments. The pathway from digital opportunity to meaningful economic empowerment is therefore not technological alone but depends on the interaction between digital resources and the social, economic, and gendered contexts in which women work.

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