



Executive summary

- Platform work together with other new forms of employment are gaining ground in the European labour market. Although the share of women platform workers has been rising in recent years, they remain under-represented in platform work. Generally, platform workers tend to be young and highly educated.
- Women are more likely to engage in platform work to gain an additional income and to have flexibility with the specific aim of combining work with family commitments. In contrast, men are more likely to engage in platform work due to opportunities to work globally and expand their client base to different cities or countries.
- Women and men who have children have higher odds of engaging in platform work because it potentially allows them to combine work with family commitments. Women living with a partner are also more likely to engage in platform work because of the possibility to earn an additional income. This association goes against broader labour market trends where living with a partner and having children has a negative impact on labour force participation. Online platforms seem to provide women with a link to the labour market that can potentially prevent a withdrawal from the labour force during different life stages.

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) defines platform work as ‘a form of employment that uses an online platform to enable organisations or individuals to access other organisations or individuals to solve problems or to provide services in exchange for payment’ (1). It distinguishes between digital labour platforms (e.g. TaskRabbit, Freelancer, Deliveroo, Uber or Wolt), which are marketplaces where labour is traded through a matching algorithm, and platforms providing access to non-labour goods and services (e.g. Airbnb or Etsy) or facilitating non-commercial transactions (e.g. LinkedIn, Couchsurfing), which do not constitute platform work. Eurofound notes that the main defining characteristics of platform work are:

- paid work is organised through an online platform;
- three parties are involved – the online platform, the client and the worker;
- the aim is to carry out specific tasks or solve specific problems;
- the work is contracted out;
- jobs are broken into tasks;
- services are provided on demand.

Platform work – new opportunities and (old) challenges for gender equality

Platform work has gained policy attention in recent years because of its expanding and diversifying business models and its growth in terms of employment and revenue. While standard employment currently remains the norm, platform work together with other new forms of employment are gaining ground. Conservative assessments estimate that platform work in Europe accounts for around 1.4 % of total employment (equivalent to about 4.7 million workers) (2). These are workers who spend at least 20 hours a week working on platforms and receive at least 50 % of their income via platforms. Yet other analyses define the scale of platform work in Europe in much broader terms suggesting that the number of workers who have ever engaged in platform work, irrespective of their level of engagement, is about 28 million people (3). Overall, there are more men platform workers and platform workers tend to be young and highly educated (4). However, evidence suggests that the share of women platform workers has been rising in recent years (5), a trend that is replicating developments in the broader labour market where 2 out of 3 net new jobs in the EU over the last two decades have been taken by women (6).

Platform work in Europe



1.4 %
of total
employment

(equivalent to about
4.7 million workers)



20 hours
a week working
on platforms



50 %
of income
via
platforms

(1) Eurofound (2018), Employment and working conditions of selected types of platform work, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2018/employment-and-working-conditions-of-selected-types-of-platform-work>).

(2) Urzı Brancati, M. C., Pesole, A. and Fernández-Macías, E. (2020), New Evidence on Platform Workers in Europe – Results from the second COLLEEM survey, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC118570>).

(3) European Commission, PPMI (2021), Study to support the impact assessment of an EU initiative to improve the working conditions in platform work, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/454966ce-6dd6-11ec-9136-01aa75ed71a1/language-en>).

(4) Urzı Brancati, M. C., Pesole, A. and Fernández-Macías, E. (2020), New Evidence on Platform Workers in Europe – Results from the second COLLEEM survey, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://publications.jrc.ec.europa.eu/repository/handle/JRC118570>); European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) (2021), Artificial Intelligence, Platform Work and Gender Equality, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/artificial-intelligence-platform-work-and-gender-equality-report>).

(5) See footnote (3).

(6) Eurofound and the Joint Research Centre (2021), European Jobs Monitor 2021: Gender gaps and the employment structure, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/report/2021/european-jobs-monitor-2021-gender-gaps-and-the-employment-structure>).

Platform work creates new opportunities for workers, including the self-employed, customers and businesses. These opportunities include additional jobs and income for women and men who otherwise might face difficulties in accessing the labour market. Platform work might also allow those who value flexibility to manage the way in which they organise their work. This is especially the case for highly skilled online workers who provide services through platforms.

However, oftentimes the advantages presumably offered by platform work face structural constraints related to the way in which work is directed, evaluated and disciplined by algorithms ⁽⁷⁾. In addition, many of the jobs generated by the platform economy fall outside current social and employment protection systems, therefore contributing to precarious employment while also having an impact on the sustainability of national social security systems. Although differences exist between various labour platforms and types of tasks that workers perform, on average, platform workers face a higher risk of economic instability, discrimination, exclusion from collective representation, lack of upskilling and lack of occupational safety and health measures than standard employees ⁽⁸⁾. The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to an increase in the uptake of jobs in the platform economy, while also aggravating concerns about working conditions and exposing the vulnerability of platform workers with respect to access to safe working environments and social protection ⁽⁹⁾. While private initiatives undertaken by platforms have sought to address the gaps in protection coverage, existing assessments demonstrate that they have been insufficient both in terms of generosity and effectiveness ⁽¹⁰⁾.

The emergence of platform work has gendered effects in terms of access to work and social protection, collective representation, work-life balance, occupational segregation and working conditions ⁽¹¹⁾. Some earlier assessments emphasised the potential of platform work to contribute positively to gender equality, for example, by offering greater flexibility and autonomy that may improve work-life balance and make it easier for women and men to combine employment with family duties ⁽¹²⁾. It was also expected that platform work might help to overcome the cultural stereotypes that lead to gender segregation in the labour market.

However, more recent studies demonstrate that platform work broadly replicates the well-known gender inequalities found in the traditional labour market. For example, women platform workers work less intensively on labour platforms than men and dominate the provision of child-care and elderly care services, while a higher share of men platform workers engage in construction, software development or transportation type of services ⁽¹³⁾.



⁽⁷⁾ EIGE (2021), Artificial Intelligence, Platform Work and Gender Equality, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/artificial-intelligence-platform-work-and-gender-equality-report>).

⁽⁸⁾ See, for example, European Parliament (2017), The Social Protection of Workers of the Platform Economy, ([www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/614184/IPOL_STU\(2017\)614184_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/STUD/2017/614184/IPOL_STU(2017)614184_EN.pdf)); EIGE (2021), Artificial Intelligence, Platform Work and Gender Equality, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/artificial-intelligence-platform-work-and-gender-equality-report>).

⁽⁹⁾ See footnote ⁽⁶⁾.

⁽¹⁰⁾ Eurofound (2021), Initiatives to Improve Conditions for Platform Workers: Aims, methods, strengths and weaknesses – Anticipating and managing the impact of change, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://www.eurofound.europa.eu/publications/policy-brief/2021/initiatives-to-improve-conditions-for-platform-workers-aims-methods-strengths-and-weaknesses>).

⁽¹¹⁾ See, for example, EIGE (2020), Gender Equality Index 2020 – Digitalisation and the future of work, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2020-digitalisation-and-future-work>); Rodríguez-Modroño, P., Pesole, A. and López-Igual, P. (2022), 'Assessing gender inequality in digital labour platforms in Europe', Internet Policy Review, Vol. 11, No 1, pp. 1–23. (<https://policyreview.info/articles/analysis/assessing-gender-inequality-digital-labour-platforms-europe>).

⁽¹²⁾ See, for example, Kuek, S. C. et al. (2015), The Global Opportunity in Online Outsourcing, World Bank, Washington DC (<https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/22284>); Hyperwallet (2017), The Future of Gig Work is Female – A study on the behaviors and career aspirations of women in the gig economy (https://www.hyperwallet.com/app/uploads/HW_The_Future_of_Gig_Work_is_Female.pdf).

⁽¹³⁾ See footnote ⁽⁶⁾.

Platform work remains high on the European policy agenda

Launched in 2017, the European Pillar of Social Rights frames the conversation on the digital transformation of the labour market and gives guidance on relevant issues related to the new forms of employment in its chapters on fair working conditions and access to social protection. In light of the pillar, the European Commission adopted Directive 2019/1152 on transparent and predictable working conditions across the EU, which paves the way to ensuring a better balance between flexibility and security for workers in the digital economy. In addition, the Council of the European Union recommendation on access to social protection for workers and the self-employed, adopted in November 2019, encourages EU Member States to take measures so that all individuals in employment and self-employment can access social protection, including maternity and paternity benefits.

The EU gender equality strategy for 2020–2025 together with several directives ⁽¹⁴⁾ are also relevant in the context of new forms of employment, and especially for platform work as they aim to ensure gender equality and fair working conditions, including work-life balance for working parents and carers. These directives – and particularly the directive on work-life balance – encourage more equal sharing of parental leave between women and men, and address women’s under-representation in the labour market. The EU policy efforts to ensure fair working conditions and access to social protection culminated with the Commission’s legislative package on improving the working conditions of platform workers by the end of 2021. The package includes a proposal for a directive seeking to improve the working conditions of platform workers. The proposed directive establishes a list of criteria to determine the correct classification of employment status of platform workers and defines a set of rights that platform workers should enjoy with respect to the use of algorithmic management and the representation of their interests by trade unions.



⁽¹⁴⁾ In particular: Directive 2006/54/EC on the implementation of the principle of equal opportunities and equal treatment of men and women in matters of employment and occupation; Directive 2010/41/EU on the application of the principle of equal treatment between men and women engaged in an activity in a self-employed capacity; Council Directive 92/85/EEC on the introduction of measures to encourage improvements in the safety and health at work of pregnant workers; Council Directive 97/81/EC concerning the framework agreement on part-time work; and Directive 2019/1158 on work-life balance for parents and carers (repealing Directive 2010/18/EU), promoting equal sharing of caring responsibilities between parents.

Women are more likely to do platform work to combine it with family responsibilities and to earn additional income

The scale of platform work indicates that this is a relevant phenomenon with potentially disruptive effects for European labour markets. With scarce evidence on why people opt for working on platforms as opposed to seeking employment in more traditional settings, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) launched a survey of platform workers⁽¹⁵⁾ to explore whether systematic differences exist between women and men with respect to motivations to work on platforms.

Table 1 shows the relative probability that a platform worker with certain socio-demographic characteristics has of reporting different motivations to engage in platform work in comparison to a worker who does not have those characteristics. All else being equal, women have higher odds of engaging in platform work in order to gain an additional income, and because platform work offers more flexibility to combine work with household chores or family commitments in comparison to traditional workplaces. Combined, the two dimensions of motivation indicate that platform work replicates some of the gender inequalities already observed in established

forms of employment where women dominate flexible and oftentimes precarious forms of work in order to balance work and family demands⁽¹⁶⁾. Men's motivations are more often driven by the opportunities provided by platforms to work globally and expand their client base to different cities or countries.

The results shed light on the type of flexibility that motivates platform workers. For women, it is not a matter of general flexibility to choose when and where to work, but of a specific type of flexibility that is clearly oriented towards improving the reconciliation of work and family commitments (Table 1). These findings complement the knowledge of previous studies on the topic⁽¹⁷⁾ (18).

Overall, the general flexibility to choose when and where to provide work on platforms is not a significant motivation factor for people across different age or education groups. People with a migrant background seem to choose platform work to enter the labour market, which otherwise might remain inaccessible, but not because of the flexibility it provides (Table 1). The flexible choice of time and place is more relevant for online platform workers compared to people who work on location. **The ongoing debates about the flexibility that platform work affords to workers are overstating the case and should be more nuanced, considering whether the promise of flexibility is indeed a reality and for which socioeconomic groups.**



⁽¹⁵⁾ Findings are based on EIGE's survey of platform workers, aged between 16 and 54, in 10 Member States (Denmark, Spain, France, Latvia, the Netherlands, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Slovakia and Finland), carried out in November and December 2020.

⁽¹⁶⁾ See, for example, European Commission, (2010), Flexible Working Time Arrangements and Gender Equality – A comparative review of 30 European countries, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/13a65488-9cd7-46f5-b9f4-d60e3dd09592>); EIGE (2019), Gender Equality Index 2019 – Work-life balance, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg (<https://eige.europa.eu/publications/gender-equality-index-2019-work-life-balance>).

⁽¹⁷⁾ Churchill, B. and Craig, L. (2019), 'Gender in the gig economy: Men and women using digital platforms to secure work in Australia', Journal of Sociology, Vol. 55, No 4, pp. 741–761.

⁽¹⁸⁾ Berg, J. et al. (2018), Digital Labour Platforms and the Future of Work – Towards decent work in the online world, International Labour Office, Geneva (https://www.ilo.org/global/publications/books/WCMS_645337/lang-en/index.htm).

Table 1. Results of fixed-effects logistic models for motivations to work on platforms

	It is a good way to earn (additional) income	I can combine it with my household chores and/or family commitments	I can choose when and where I work	I can work globally or get more clients from different countries or cities
Gender (reference: men)				
Women	1.216*	1.367**		0.692**
Age (reference: 35–54)				
16–24				1.387*
Education (reference: medium)				
Low				0.562*
Type of platform work (reference: marginal activity)				
Secondary activity (19)	0.750**			1.417*
Main activity	0.492***			1.592*
Migrant			0.659**	1.571*
Online platform workers			1.425**	1.699**
On-location platform workers	0.708***			1.408**
Has children		1.401**		
Lives with partner		1.424**		

NB: The table presents exponentiated coefficients (i.e. odds ratios). Values larger than 1 indicate positive effects; values lower than 1 indicate negative effects; empty cells indicate non-significant effects. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$.

Online platforms allow women to stay in the labour market during different life stages

Although having children and living with a partner are significant predictors for both women and men to engage in platform work due to better work–life balance (Table 1), the marked difference exists along the gender dimension. On average, women with children are 8 % more likely than men with children to engage in platform work because it potentially allows them to combine work with household chores and family commitments (Table 2). Women living with a partner are also more likely than men living with a partner to engage in platform work because of the possibility to earn an additional income (Table 2). This association goes against broader labour market trends where living with a partner and having children has a negative impact on women’s employment. Therefore, online platforms seem to provide women with a link to the labour market that can potentially prevent their withdrawal from the labour force during different life stages.



(19) The operationalisation of secondary and main platform workers follows the methodology used in the second COLLEEM survey (Urzı Brancati et al., 2020). Secondary platform workers are those who spend more than 10 hours a week providing services via digital labour platforms and earn between 25 % and 50 % of their income from platform work. Main platform workers are those who report working more than 20 hours a week via digital labour platforms or earn at least 50 % of their income doing so.

Table 2. Percentage in which women propensity to engage in platform work due to different motivations exceeds men propensity, by socio-demographic groups

	I can combine it with my household chores and/or family commitments	It is a good way to earn (additional) income
Has children	8 %	-
Marginal platform worker (*)	10 %	9 %
Age: 16–24	-	9 %
Age: 25–34	7 %	-
Age: 35–54	8 %	-
Lives with partner	-	8 %
Employed	6 %	-
Unemployed	-	12 %

NB: The table presents average marginal effects of the interaction between being a woman and variables listed on the left column. Significant effects at $p < 0.05$; empty cells denote non-significant effects.

(*) Marginal platform workers are those who provide services through labour platforms at least monthly but spend less than 10 hours a week doing so and receive less than 25 % of their income via platforms.

While women participation in the platform economy seems to have increased in recent years, women are more likely than men to engage in marginal platform work mostly because of the aforementioned reasons. This presents risks both in terms of career fragmentation, upskilling and the potential for platform work to become a stepping stone into more regular and stable employment.

Regularly employed women are 6 % more likely to engage in platform work due to work–life balance reasons, compared with regularly employed men. Unemployed women are 12 % more likely than unemployed men to work on platforms to earn an additional income. The fact that employed women are more likely than men to work through platforms could be explained by broader patterns of segregation in the labour market. As Hurley et al. (2021) demonstrate, 3 out of 4 part-time jobs in the EU are held by women, with sectors dominated by female employment having much higher shares of part-time work.

Looking at age effects, young women (aged 16–24) are 9 % more likely than young men to take part in platform work to gain income while women aged 25 and older are more likely than men to engage in platform work in search of a better work–life balance (Table 2). The findings suggest that platform work motivations are not stable but change depending on age and are linked with more general life cycle events that have an impact on women’s participation in the labour market.

Policy recommendations

Platform work is no longer a novel phenomenon for European labour markets. While currently the platform economy remains marginal in terms of employment rates, its scale and reach are increasing. Given this reality, it is essential to understand the challenges and opportunities that platform work presents both in terms of its wider implications for the European labour markets and gender (in)equalities. Considering the findings described in previous sections and ongoing European and national legislative efforts to regulate the platform economy, the following policy recommendations should be considered.

- Extend working hours regulations and work–life balance measures to women and men platform workers, irrespective of employment status, and promote equal sharing of care responsibilities between women and men. Directive 2019/1152 on transparent and predictable working conditions is a first step towards ensuring a balance between flexibility and security for workers in the digital economy. Its transposition at the Member State level should not exclude platform workers. Similarly, national transposition of the work–life balance directive should ensure that platform workers, both women and men, can benefit from its provisions in relation to flexible working arrangements and access to parental leave.

- Ensure that women and men platform workers can access social protection, irrespective of their employment status. Member States should adopt measures so that all platform workers, whether employed or self-employed, can be included in and benefit from corresponding social protection systems such as affordable healthcare and access to unemployment benefits.
- Address the legal uncertainty in the employment status of platform workers to combat disguised employment. The adoption of the Commission's proposed directive on improving working conditions in platform work would set a list of criteria to determine the employment status of platform workers across the EU.



Where to find more from EIGE and Eurofound?

EIGE (2022), [Artificial Intelligence, Platform Work and Gender Equality](#), Publications office of the European Union, Luxembourg

EIGE (2020), [Gender Equality Index 2020 – Digitalisation and the future of work](#), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg.

Eurofound (2023), [Platform Economy Database](#)

Eurofound (2021), [Initiatives to improve conditions for platform workers: Aims, methods, strengths and weaknesses](#), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg

Eurofound (2018), [Employment and working conditions of selected types of platform work](#), Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg

Gender Statistics Database

Explore [EIGE survey results of platform workers](#) on the Gender Statistics Database.

Contact details

European Institute for Gender Equality

The European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) is the EU knowledge centre on gender equality. EIGE supports policymakers and all relevant institutions in their efforts to make equality between women and men a reality for all Europeans by providing them with specific expertise and comparable and reliable data on gender equality in Europe.

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European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound)

The European Foundation for the Improvement of Living and Working Conditions (Eurofound) is a tripartite European Union Agency established in 1975. Its role is to provide knowledge in the area of social, employment and work-related policies in accordance with Regulation (EU) 2019/127.

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